

PREHISTORIC ART AS PREHISTORIC CULTURE

STUDIES IN HONOUR OF PROFESSOR
RODRIGO DE BALBÍN-BEHRMANN

edited by

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and Paul G. Bahn**

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Prehistoric Art as Prehistoric Culture

Primitiva Bueno-Ramírez and Paul Bahn

The retirement of Prof. Balbín, who has played an active part in the changes in the approaches that have occurred in Palaeolithic art research in the last 30 years, is an excellent occasion for a reflection on the value of prehistoric art studies as a factor of analysis in the culture of the human groups who produced the art.

The symbols on the durable surfaces in caves, on rocks in the open air and on portable artifacts are some of the best ways to approach an understanding of Upper Palaeolithic groups. Their social and territorial value is the basis of an analysis of the position of the hunter-gatherers, their preferred terrains, the topography and the uses made of them. This view, that extends outside caves as the sole containers of Palaeolithic art and as the depositary of functionalities separate from everyday life, is one that has most drastically changed the interpretation of the art. Prof. Balbín is one of the promoters of the new interpretations in which art in the open air and nuances to the generalised function of shrine have been developed theoretically and practically, with convincing results.

Our aim is to present an up-dated view of the latest trends in current research. The lines guiding the research of some of the teams that are generating knowledge, and the theoretical and practical proposals they are using, may be deduced through the seventeen papers offered here.

A reflection on changes in Palaeolithic art interpretation

The profound changes that the study of prehistoric representations has experienced in recent years are not exempt from a large part of the ideology that has governed this kind of work from the first discoveries to the present day (Alcolea & González-Sainz, this volume; de Beaune, this volume). Aspects such as the function of shrine or production by shamans form part of the same set of interpretations that tend to describe a past full of mythology and groups with little cultural cohesion. In contrast, expressions like language, symbolic interaction and graphic markers clash head-on with the opinion reigning in Western European society since the 19th century and which strongly rejected the idea of human beings with a high level of social and symbolic development. If there is one thing that should be highlighted about Palaeolithic art research in the last 30 years, it is that some of the old controversies have reappeared, with a clear impact in the mass media, while new debates have also arisen.

It was impossible to include all the studies we would have liked to, but we thought it was interesting to show the various interpretations of some of these controversies.

The most significant aspects of the interpretation of Palaeolithic art in recent years possess a vital point of reference in Prof. Balbín's constant work: chronology, technical applications enabling a reconstruction of the processes involved in the decoration, and the relationship with the territory are three of the fields in which we can divide the new approaches in Palaeolithic art interpretation; each one with its nuances and implications.

The generation of prehistorians trained in the 1970s has spearheaded this transformation. The knowledge taken as granted in the framework of French science, with Leroi-Gourhan's works as its point of reference, has been enriched by the introduction of technical applications, including the systems for the topographic documentation of the surfaces, analyses of the composition of pigments (Hernanz and Paillet, this volume), direct radiocarbon dating and, more recently, dating of calcite (see Alcolea & González-Sainz, this volume). Perfectionism, sometimes exhausting, in documentation in the field and a critical spirit are the tools with which Balbín has succeeded in undermining some of the classic clichés about Palaeolithic art. Above all, the one that restricted these symbols to caves. The confirmation of Palaeolithic art in the open air and its association with the habitat have opened up new lines of research with which to assess the Ice Age hunters (Arias, this volume). The development of his technical and thematic methodology for cave art, his proposals of stylistic chronology now fully confirmed, and his analysis of the connection between

representation and territory, open new perspectives for the study of Upper Palaeolithic groups and their immediate heirs (Bahn, this volume).

The oldest dates have begun to be confirmed through a programme to date calcite deposits in several caves in northern Spain (Pettitt *et al.*, this volume), and have erased the assumed distance between portable and parietal art (Hussain & Floss, this volume). Two points have been derived from this programme. The first is the evidence that, despite difficulties in funding, the Iberian teams maintain a very high level in Palaeolithic art research, with the collaboration of Anglo-Saxon specialists in the introduction and application of new technologies. The second, and perhaps the most important as regards some of the issues affecting chronological interpretations, has been the re-examination of the issues in radiocarbon dating from a new viewpoint. The dating of thin calcite growths has once again made clear the complex casuistry of radiocarbon dating of figures painted on cave walls, whose specific biography is hard to reconstruct, as Balbín pointed out some time ago. The response of some French teams has not taken long: a clear opposition to the technique as it damages the paintings (they never take samples of the paintings) has left radiocarbon as currently the only viable means to date Palaeolithic art.

The ideal situation: a documented archaeological site, a radiocarbon date and dating of calcite, is uncommon but cases like the Passage of the Anthropomorphs in the Cave of Tito Bustillo, where these circumstances converge, provide justified hopes that experimentation with the dating of calcite will be one of the methods for future development.

Chronologies of about 40,000 BP were to be expected in the framework of recent research. In this respect, the radiocarbon dates at Grotte Chauvet are not an exception. They are exceptional in that they are used to justify the representation of movement in the oldest phases of Palaeolithic art. It is the style of the figures that is less coherent and which gives rise to discussions. We wanted this touch of controversy to be seen through the contributions by Delluc, Pettitt *et al.*, and Alcolea and González-Sainz. It is to be expected that continuing research in Chauvet will provide an archaeological context, and direct dates for the paintings and calcite deposits that will add high-quality data to the debate.

One of the most interesting facets of chronology in recent years is that the oldest phases are very widespread geographically and are not concentrated in the Upper Palaeolithic of southern France. Balbín had already noted this as regards the south and west of the Iberian Peninsula, and new documentation is now available for northern Europe and Africa (Bahn, this volume). The ongoing research in Portugal (Santos *et al.*, this volume) and Andalucía (Cortes *et al.*, this volume), and the discoveries in Galicia (Fábregas *et al.*, this volume) consolidate these new areas for research on Upper Palaeolithic hunters. The symbols are the most visible evidence of human groups in areas where it used to be thought they had not been present.

Leroi-Gourhan's theories seem to have become reduced to characterising an archaic Palaeolithic art and a recent Palaeolithic art (see references in Alcolea & González-Sainz, this volume). Speaking of styles is convincing as a way to overcome the cultural attributions that only function in Europe and only in certain parts of the continent. Some nuances, like the long chronology of archaic symbols, especially the claviforms, hands and venuses, are being confirmed thanks to the studies carried out in the Iberian Peninsula (Pettitt *et al.*, this volume) and other parts of Europe (Hussain & Floss, this volume). The continuance of these during millennia fortified graphic traditions deeply rooted in the collective imagination of Palaeolithic hunters, projecting a picture of greater ideological continuity between the contents of the archaic and recent phases, an idea that also lies in Leroi-Gourhan's hypotheses.

The *floruit* of Palaeolithic art is the time of the densest human occupation (Vialou, this volume), associating human groups and graphic markers in an interesting point of analysis to assess the parietal ensembles in the framework of their social construction. Together with evidence for the long temporal duration of these systems for marking inhabited spaces (about 30,000 years, which is 150 times longer than the 2000 years of our culture), this should stimulate new reflections on the establishment of consolidated codes among Upper Palaeolithic hunters, the social systems that maintained them over the generations, and the gradual transformation of the codes towards new ways of marking the same spaces.

The discussion about the more or less sudden disappearance of this collective imagination is really the debate between a diffusionist history and the perspectives of a social history that locates one of the cultural foundations of the way to production in the tradition and persistence in the sites. This interpretation is in vogue

again with the hypothesis of a Style V dated directly in archaeological contexts in the Iberian Peninsula, attesting longer chronologies in the process of the transformation of the contents of Upper Palaeolithic art. This hypothesis is another of Prof. Balbín's achievements, as he took part in the development of the arguments supporting the continuation of parietal and portable art in a time after 8000 BP. The definition of a Style V, incorporating Leroi-Gourhan's stylistic theory, and adopted by Rousot for this phase, is still a cause for discussion among prehistorians. Some of the comments in the papers by Fullola *et al.* and Santos *et al.* give an idea of this debate. Its verification in Cova Eirós adds a cave parietal ensemble with direct dates to the site of Cueva Palomera in Ojo Guareña, Burgos, which is well-known and dated directly. In the Iberian Peninsula, it may be noted that, by accepting a Style V, some of the representations in Spanish Levantine art would have been produced at the end of the Ice Age, moving back the chronology of the Neolithic that most researchers have accepted since the second half of the 20th century. It is very likely that, as the direct dating systems known for other European areas are extended to Levantine art, the confirmation of this hypothesis will become more definite.

The increasingly well documented sites in the west of the Iberian Peninsula (Fábregas *et al.*, this volume; Santos *et al.*, this volume) confirm a line of research that will contribute high-quality data to the study of the processes of the transformation in the contents of Upper Palaeolithic hunters' art. Indeed, the Iberian Peninsula is an excellent laboratory for research programmes in this field, as the abundant post-Ice Age art is powerful evidence for the weight of tradition in marking travelled areas ever since the earliest times.

In conclusion

As stated above, the most important aspects of the interpretation of Palaeolithic art in recent years find a key point of reference in Prof. Balbín's ceaseless work. They are current topics in a discipline that accepts new approaches with some reticence, but which has finally validated a panorama of Palaeolithic art assemblages in different types of locations, including in the open air. The discovery of open-air Palaeolithic art impacts directly on the location of the hunter-gatherer groups. From the traditional concentration on the plains of Europe to the wider interpretation resulting from chronologies and references to open-air decoration in the west of the Iberian Peninsula, Africa and northern Europe, the present situation requires a reflection on the demography of the Upper Palaeolithic in Europe and its prolongation both in earlier times and in more recent moments.

The total visibility, together with proximity to the habitat, are some of the most outstanding facets of the new lines of interpretation that Balbín's research has opened up. Equally, a better knowledge of pictorial applications and the assessment of radiocarbon chronologies have contributed to the design of interpretations in better accord with a full appraisal of the activities of those groups. Prehistoric art is a basic factor in territorial studies and the reconstruction of exchange networks among hunter-gatherer groups, as it deals with unique documents fixed in the landscape on solid surfaces, which make explicit their widespread presence over large geographical areas, extending beyond the boundaries traditionally accepted.

The constant use of the same territories and even the same surfaces, on which techniques in use over very long periods of time depicted symbols on the stones, adds elements to be studied in an analysis of tradition and the learning of the hunter groups' references among their immediate heirs.

No human culture can be understood without the symbols that identify it and characterise it. Without the documents that prehistoric art represents for the overall comprehension of the groups of the past and, above all, without a perception in which this facet of culture occupies the place it deserves, our knowledge of the Upper Palaeolithic would be poorer and our capacity for interpretation would be noticeably smaller. Professor Balbín always encouraged this type of study in the course of his research and his teaching. His colleagues have expressed their appreciation by generously contributing to this tribute on the occasion of his retirement.