

the empirical data to ground social and cultural structural models of fully symboling humans—using not only the utilitarian artifactual material of the Upper Palaeolithic but also the more explicitly expressive iconic materials, from body ornamentation to the great cave depictions.

## Comments

ROBERT G. BEDNARIK

*International Federation of Rock Art Organizations,  
P.O. Box 216, Caulfield South, Victoria 3162,  
Australia. 4 IV 94*

Byers's paper is about "strengthening and vindicating" previous confirmationist interpretations of certain data. No attempt is made to render its propositions refutable, no evidence is offered or discussed, and the archaeological framework referred to remains obscure. Some reference is made to the perceived transition between the Middle and Upper Palaeolithic of southwestern Europe and its asserted significance to the question of early symbolic-behaviour traces. That "transition" is about as relevant to the subject at hand as the Australian transition from the "Stone Age" to the "Steel Age" is to the question of metallurgical beginnings: "symbolic behaviour" originated in southwestern Europe no more than metallurgy did in Australia.

White's (1989:385; cf. 1992, 1993) belief, cited by Byers, that "the Aurignacian body ornamentation explodes onto the scene" and "remains one of the greatest explanatory challenges in all of hominid evolution" is a taphonomically illiterate confirmationist construct the explanation of which presents no great challenge (Bednarik 1994a). Not only is there ample evidence of probable body ornamentation from the Middle Palaeolithic (including many small drilled objects, presumably beads or pendants) but most forms of body ornamentation are unlikely to be detected by archaeology (e.g., tattoos, body painting, cicatrices, infibulations, deformations, coiffures, most forms of decorative objects). We know that haematite and ochreous minerals were widely used in the Acheulian of three continents and occur as manuports reportedly up to 900,000 years ago (Bednarik 1994b); we have no evidence that they were *not* used for body painting or for any other "symbolic" behaviour involving the use of pigment. Petroglyphs were produced in the Acheulian of at least one region (Bednarik 1993), and much more recent rock art elsewhere has been direct-dated to over 45,000 years B.P. Middle Palaeolithic people crossed the open sea to reach the continent of Sahul more than 60,000 years ago. Even Noble and Davidson (1993) accept that these seafarers possessed symbolic capacities at least 30,000 years before the disappearance of the French Neanderthals. Where, then, is this much-discussed transition located in time? And how is it supposed to relate to the advent

of symboling or to the appearance of modern humans? The "shift from archaic to fully modern human anatomy" did not coincide with Byers's transition in lithic typology; essentially modern humans existed perhaps 70,000 years before the demise of the French Neanderthals.

The terms "Middle" and "Upper" Palaeolithic are themselves artifacts of archaeologists, as is the perceived transition. In most parts of the world there is no "abrupt" transition. The Howiesons Poort phase, with its geometric microliths and engraved ostrich eggshells, is hardly a typical Middle Palaeolithic assemblage, being over twice the age of Byers's transition, while essentially Middle Palaeolithic typologies continued into modern times in some parts of the world. Most known Palaeolithic beads (over 12,300) are from just three burials of the Streletsian (at Sungir), an industry of Middle Palaeolithic origin. Even in France, the evidence of ochre use is much more common in the Châtelperronian of the Neanderthals than in the contemporary Aurignacian (Harrold 1989: table 33.8). Conversely, there is no evidence that all Middle Palaeolithic traditions are attributable to Neanderthals, not even in Europe.

The conceptual dichotomies Byers creates on the basis of his archaeological bias (e.g., with his effortless vs. effortful reflexivity) serve better to differentiate his "non-utilitarian forms of material expression that are erratic in patterning" from those attributable to his "symboling human populations." If these two reflexivities were mutually exclusive, which he insists they were, how does he propose to explain the advent of "effortlessly reflexive humans"?

Byers is certainly on the right track when he postulates that meaning is not an inherent property of things but imposed on them by mental processes. Unfortunately, precisely the same applies to the "meanings" archaeologists impose on their "data." Even if they are as eloquently articulated as Byers's social behaviourist contemplations they remain "fiction" (Bahn 1990) until we have learned to temper archaeological interpretation with taphonomic logic (Bednarik 1994a). The "demonstration" of patterning in the "archaeological record" that Byers advocates is not a recipe for such rigour in archaeological interpretation. His assumption that style is recognizable by the archaeologist speaks for itself (see Conkey and Hastorf 1990, Lorblanchet and Bahn 1993), and his definition of humans as "symboling animals" implies that he assumes all other species to be bereft of any symboling abilities. Before delving further into the role of "Aurignacian" beads as the first "fully iconic warrants," I think that Byers needs to reflect on how various symbolic capacities might relate to human ethology and evolution. A blanket definition of symboling is of no avail here, because different expressions of such behaviour refer to different cognitive functions. Therefore this cannot be some human capacity that suddenly appeared with the French Aurignacian—nor does the available archaeological or neurological record support such a naive dichotomy (Bradshaw and Rogers 1993).