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Pleistocene Palaeoart of the World

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PLEISTOCENE PALAEOART OF THE WORLD
INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

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The symposium "Pleistocene palaeoart of the world" was held on Saturday 9 September 2006 at the XVth UISPP Congress, in Lisbon. Chaired by Robert G. Bednarik (Australia) and Derek Hodgson (United Kingdom), its purpose had been to present recent advances in the study of human evolution that have shown the need for greater attention to the cognitive and cultural development of humans. Traditionally, the study of hominin evolution is dominated by skeletal morphology, especially cranial architecture, and recently, to a lesser degree, by genetics. In both these approaches it is completely ignored that being human is not so much related to skeletal or genetic indices, but to cognition, intellect and culture, the factors that have made us human. This imbalance is at last being addressed.

In the Pleistocene record, cognition and culture are primarily accessible through the study of palaeoart, which consists of rock art and portable art-like productions. Cognitive evolution, informed by recent advances in neuroscience and psychology, is increasingly becoming relevant to the understanding of Pleistocene palaeoart. The potential for gaining new insights into the significance of these surviving materials from the perspective of cognition is therefore most promising. Correspondingly, archaeological finds from this period can provide evidence that may help substantiate particular models as to how human cognition may have eventuated. Collaboration between these disciplines can be viewed as mutually beneficial and sustaining. As research into cognition and brain functioning continues apace, the need to assimilate the various findings in relation to palaeoart becomes all the more imperative. Where Pleistocene artefacts are subjects of controversy, cognitive studies can supply useful suggestions as to interpretation, thereby providing the proper context for the determination of such items. It can also help to disentangle the complex ways by which culture and evolutionary factors interact so that a clearer understanding of their respective roles and influences can be gauged in relation to Pleistocene artefacts.

To render Pleistocene palaeoart scientifically useful, evidence needs to be studied as global rather than regional phenomena. Underlying principles and universals need to be identified, and the material of the Middle and Early Upper Pleistocene requires much more attention than has been evident in the 20th century. This symposium was therefore intended to bring together some of the latest key evidence deriving from the archaeological record, cognitive studies and neuroscience to reflect the current change from traditional preoccupations to new approaches. It was endeavoured to place Pleistocene palaeoart into the context of cognitive evolution, explore its semiotic dimensions, consider implications for technology and culture during the Palaeolithic periods, and present new empirical evidence of Pleistocene palaeoart.

The main results of this symposium appear in the following small but valuable collection of papers. It is immediately evident that most of the key objectives were successfully met. Semiotic and neuroscientific data were presented, some of the most important empirical evidence of relevance to the cognitive status of early hominins was contributed, and highly innovative analytical and baffling information on early cognition was offered for consideration. In fact it is amazing that so much new and signifycant material could be crammed into such a relatively short session and volume.

Perhaps the greatest surprise came in the shape of a presentation by John Feliks, whose unconventional approach to research questions caused him to investigate the geometric properties of some of the world's oldest engravings we currently know of. Feliks noted mind-boggling regularities which, if valid indicators, would suggest that some Lower Palaeolithic hominins possessed concepts of spatiality significantly different from ours, and apparently much more sophisticated.

Derek Hodgson presented a neurovisual perspective of Pleistocene palaeoart, a general subject he has excelled in before. He contended convincingly that there must be a connection between the visual cortex of hominins and the initial markings they produced. His work connects neatly with that of Feliks, even though his approach is very different.

In terms of new relevant empirical evidence, the two directors of the Early Indian Petroglyphs Project presented a summing up of their research at the two oldest rock art sites currently known, both in central India. One of them, Giriraj Kumar, also gave a separate paper on one of these two sites, Daraki-Chattan Cave, reporting the results of the ongoing excavation that is recovering petroglyphs from well below Lower Palaeolithic occupation strata.

A key issue in the question of art beginnings in Europe concerns the identity of the producers of Aurignacian palaeoart of that continent. Robert G. Bednarik reviewed the current palaeoanthropological evidence, arriving at the conclusion that the Aurignacian was probably a tradition of Neanderthaloid humans. Another paper addressing an important issue in rock art research is by Yann-Pierre Montelle, dealing with the possibilities of behavioural

studies through the analysis of the tools used in making rock art. Like the approaches sketched out by Feliks and Hodgson, Montelle thus offers one more unique and new way of exploring palaeoart. Paul Bouissac, who represents the semiotic approach to rock art, focuses on an evaluation of the work of two pioneers of palaeoart and semiotics, Edouard Piette and William Flinders Petrie. He poignantly notices that the debate the former experienced a century ago is now being replayed under surprisingly similar conditions. Indeed, history often does repeat itself in archaeology.

The advent of the 21st century has brought with it noticeable changes in the way the palaeoart of the Pleistocene is perceived and studied, and the proceedings of this symposium bear witness to these changes. The first aspect we notice of this collection is that there are no papers about the traditional obsession of Palaeolithic "art" specialists, with meaning and the cultural role of the art. Simplistic interpretation of this corpus of evidence has been the discipline's hallmark throughout the 20th century, and even the more realistic question of antiquity is not much dwelt on in the papers in this collection. Rather, we note a distinctive heterogeneity in research approaches, an acceptance that there are more ways than one to skin a cat. The most obvious change in research direction, then, is away from the monomania with meaning to a tacit acceptance that the science has to come first, and that science involves refutation, deep probing and methodological pluralism. Despite a number of precursors in such areas, this development is rather new and probably in its very early stages, but already it illustrates the benefits of such a more inclusive and multifarious approach. It is clear enough from this collection of papers that an outdated model of palaeoart is now under sustained challenge, and that some of the most cherished ideas of the past will have to fall by the wayside. Much of what we have come to think the palaeoart of the Pleistocene tells us about the people who made it could well be false. The probable corollary is that much of what has during the 20th century become the received dogma of Pleistocene history will need to be challenged.

These are exciting times in the study of Pleistocene palaeoart!

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