

ROCK ART AND ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

The natural and cultural stratification present in a specific area over time, from the last Ice Age to the emergence of complex human action, assumes characteristics and aspects that permit us to classify, to line up chronologically and to distinguish the several types of landscape. There are parts of the landscape that have been modified to a much greater extent by anthropic factors than by natural agents. For each part of the landscape, earth sciences - and archaeology in particular - give us all the information we need to describe landscape evolution. These 'thematic territorial evolutionary maps' provide a backdrop, a background against which to collocate the particular phenomenon of rock art, which we want framed in the more complete way, by considering dependent and independent variability and the correlation between all data.

ROCK ART AND ENVIRONMENT

Rock art presents itself as an element strictly connected to the environment; more, it is so linked to its context as to be impossible to consider in an autonomous and separate way. For an ancient methodological error connected to the prevalence of a classificatory and typological study does not consider the referring global context. Rock art has long been considered outside of reality, banished to an absurd autonomous universe, as a metaphysical and physical monad, according to a philosophical outlook that begins with the Pythagorean school and continues through Leibniz and Newton to the present day. As scientific observation is always able to change the perception of reality during the study, the subjective factor of the researcher or of the team is to consider this independent variability working with 'restrictive' objective data.

The perception of reality is a bio-cultural phenomenon, as it depends on the physiological condition of the observer and the complex of his cultural background (individual and social). In this reality, rock art discernment is the result of comparison with the global model of the investigated area. Attention paid to 'environment' in the field of the archaeo-ethno-anthropological research is a recent approach to interpreting landscape and is intended to act as a 'reservoir', for social complexity.

METHODOLOGICAL PROPOSAL

When considering palaeoethnological research, the field related to rock art is still vexed and captivated by a multiplicity of approaches and methodologies. The interpretations that have been handed down by antiquarians who had noted and clarified the petro-pictographs, have continued to be of prime concern to modern archaeologists of this century.

As a matter of fact, one does witness some typological lists in various forms which are assumed by rock art researchers

to be adequate instead of being aesthetic labels. Although different, these representations carry with them induced arbitrary meaning. It is therefore necessary to build for each rock art district a series of typological patterns which consider iconography types, introducing formal structures of composition, spatial relationships between designs, as well as environmental concerns (in relation to the other archaeological data). This will allow an interpretative and exclusive examination of the available historical cultural stratification of each region. Surveys in the field concern the genesis of documentation that reproduces the prehistoric monument and influences every following study. Every reproduction is a reduction and conventionalisation of reality: it is a synthesis and an arbitrary simplification. For this reason, procedures, methodologies, techniques must be unique if we do not want to risk that documentation coming from different research is not comparable and causes chaos of methodologies.

Today, as archaeological excavation techniques impose severe planigraphic and stratigraphic methods that try to include any significant element for the studies and a rigorous examination of the context in which finds are placed, analogous criteria on the research of prehistoric art are becoming popular. The works of prehistoric man were considered objects of aesthetic contemplation, while the late archaeo-anthropological research has pointed out that art, at those levels, is characterised by a functional and symbolic role dependent on social and religious structures and on economic organisation. Even today, art, religion and rite are, among peoples with simple technology, inseparable and lie on a substratum of beliefs that give the artistic fact shape and strength. Engravings and pictures, through a deliberately abstruse symbology, suggest a vision of the world, a cosmogony with all the celestial and earthly paraphernalia. The prevailing approaches today, criticising the ethnographic comparison, forbid its use as far as interpretation is concerned. It is possible to resort to ethnographic information only when we want to enlighten artificially the cognitive horizon of the phenomenon.

It is possible to try to organise and arrange other data derived from the context in which the manifestations of rock art are placed. It is possible to determine, considering the quantitative datum statistically elaborated, whether the rock activity was a particular one, with specific purposes, or whether it represented activity with undetermined purposes. With the analysis of the data we can consolidate the hypothesis that rock activity was not of the public domain, but was addressed to socially relevant purposes and was part of more important phenomena. The symbols, schematisations, particular attributes of many figures of the most important complexes of rock art allow us to ascribe to artifices a deep knowledge of the traditional cultural heritage, an expressive and narrative capacity that could not have been possessed by all members of those prehistoric societies. We can evaluate the importance that rock art and its places/and its locations had in determined prehistoric contexts. Only by admitting the ideological complexity of those cultural phases, is it possible to avoid failing into simplistic explanations of rock art.

WHAT IS LANDSCAPE?

Landscape, in subjective terms, is a part of a territory. More importantly, it appears as a number of different physical forms when observed by different people and is perceived in different ways. Landscape is very much a cogitate process of transforming visual memory such as lakes, mountains, valleys etc. into physical entities. From a geographic point of view, it's a resort, a territory with all its physical and anthropic characteristics - created and embedded in our minds.

NATURAL LANDSCAPE AND CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

Today, there are no completely natural environments. Human action on the environment has diffused in every area, including the desert and the poles.

From Homo erectus' fire-taming, more than 500,000 years ago, through the Neolithic revolution to our own atomic and interplanetary age, the entire earth bears, more or less clearly, anthropic signs. Rock art is one of these signs - the most ancient one, the first perceivable symptom, the trace of human spirituality and of the development of cognitive capability, the limited assemblage of activities not directly connected to daily survival.

Landscape presents itself to humans as a place recognisable by the signs it gives out, by the daily life we live in it. It is shelter, protection, source, food; it is also death, the ancestors land; at least, it is the myth, the legends of the land and so the sacred and the after world. The sacred and the profane are two categories that blend inextricably. They are ever present in the landscape, which is made by presence and absence, by real and virtual, by conscious and unconscious; correspondences are at a cultural level. It is humans that imbue landscape morphology with symbolic significance. By building mental and psychic maps that become the substrata on which the life project of the individual and the group is founded.

These mental environments are the theatre in which humanity realises its culture. The antinomy nature/culture finds in the concept of landscape the foundation of civilisation, with the evident signs of the anthropic changes that redesign the environment. Rock art is exactly on the top of this antinomy:

with little intervention, few superficial modifications on the faces of caves, shelters, open-air rocks, man has transformed the landscape, creating a sacred view. Today, rock art is a limited resource, the surviving data of a complex cultural construction that time and memories oblivion have deleted in almost all its components. The rituals, the sounds and the singing, the mimic actions have not left any trace, as oral tradition and sign language do not fossilise. Iconography drawn on sand or on the ground, on skins or barks, on wood and leaves, on drapers, on plasters, have not resisted times wear and are irremediably lost. Only rock art, as 'rock', has preserved itself and it gives us data for more than 30,000 years - on an aspect of the cognitive activity and symbolic thought of man. But few surviving signs on the rock are sufficient to promote culturally landscape.

CULTURAL AND SOCIAL STRATIFICATIONS : THE CONSTRUCTED LANDSCAPE

Rock art is the clear expression of the socio-economical, technical and technological, cultural and spiritual complexity of the prehistoric communities that have created it. Rock art is to be considered the tip of the iceberg of the great category of the sacred. Unfortunately, almost all the other parts of the iceberg have melted and today we are imprisoned by the consciousness that there exists a diaphragm between our ancestors, whose thought is lost forever, and us. But, by linking rock art and landscape we can go a little further towards understanding the societies that produced it. There are practical and technical reasons that induced the artists to chose one area rather than another. It was probably symbolic rather than technical motivations that determined the choice of a particular site: the dominant position over the surrounding territory, astronomical orientation, or perhaps 'special effects', such as brilliance of colour or the acoustics of the rock and the site, which may be in relation to particular springs, waters, shelters and paths. These elements constitute a real geography of the spirit (and of the spirits).

The complexity of the human communities that produced rock art is characterised also by the cultural and social stratification that creates hierarchies, the subdivisions of power and knowledge. It is probable that creating rock art and associated rituals was the prerogative of certain members of the group (chiefs and initiates, or sacred specialists, such as priests, shamans and gurus). They were able to interpret the landscape's geography by recreating in it clear signs, the ethnic roots of the group, the nucleus of the concept of the fathers earth, of the Mother country, and fixing a centre which organised the territory and so ordered the universe from chaos. The persistence of sacred signs over time is confirmed, for example in Europe, by the fact that rock art sites are, in some cases, associated with classical temples and, in the same area, Medieval churches.

The 'power places' indicated by the presence of rock art - here intended as 'genius loci' - let us organise the data of this fundamental phenomenon of human culture. Thus, landscape, by the considerations we have here developed, is not simply a part of territory or a geographical notion, it assumes the valence of the most important construction of human spirituality. The curtain has fallen on the scene of prehistoric

man: scientific research cannot raise it, but it can make it a little more thin and transparent, as in a shadow theatre.

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