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An Examination of Evidence for Religious Beliefs of Palaeolithic Man

Known facts about palaeolithic man are examined and interpreted. Those that might be given a religious interpretation are: (1) Special Treatment of the Dead, e.g. Cannibalism and Burial; (2) Cultic Figures; (3) Cave Art and other Art. None of these show any real evidence for religion in any fair sense of the term.

Note: In this paper it will be clear that the term MAN is used in a biological sense as the most convenient single term for the tool-using beings from the earliest times.

In the approximate dates I have not always followed Zeuner (*Dating the Past*, 1952), since present indications are that the radio-carbon method will bring about considerable revision of his datings. I have tried to obtain the best information about modern views of the dates.

When the Bible speaks of man, it regards him as a being who stands in a personal relationship to God; that is, to put it at its lowest estimate, as a religious animal. From the moment when, in Genesis ii, it introduces us to a specific man and woman, it gives us a picture of a race of beings who may know the true God, who may obey or disobey Him, or who may turn their devotion to other beings or other ideals which commonly make lower moral and lower spiritual demands upon them. The approximate date from which the Bible begins its record of full man is still a matter of legitimate research. We know that manlike beings existed in many parts of the world for hundreds of thousands of years. In features and in brain capacity many of these beings approximated to modern man; they mastered the use of tools, weapons, and fire; they buried their dead; they left behind them sculptures, carvings, and paintings. The purpose of this paper is to examine possible evidence which might indicate whether they showed any sort of religious response, such as we expect to find in Biblical man.

Treatment of the Dead

So far as is known, man is the only animal that, either deliberately or instinctively, cares for his own dead. Burial beetles and hunting

wasps dispose of dead (or paralysed) bodies underground so that their larvae may feed on them. Mammals and birds are distressed when their mate or young are killed, and for a short time may attempt to treat them as still living, but they have no special way of disposing of the body.

Cannibalism

The earliest evidence for special treatment of the dead comes from skulls and bones found in China. These were fully described, but were lost during the last war; they were apparently on board a ship that was sunk. These relics of *Sinanthropus pekinensis* are now recognised as similar to the Java remains of *Pithecanthropus erectus*. Further finds of this type are now being made in Algeria. No anthropologist at present will seriously attempt to fix a date for these ape-men, and the most that we can say is that they are earlier than 100,000 B.C.

Pithecanthropus used crude tools and made fires. The evidence of the position of the skulls and bones in China suggests that the bodies were decapitated after death, and the skulls broken open deliberately. Professor E. O. James in his *Prehistoric Religion* (p. 18) suggests that the skulls may be those of victims whose crania had been broken open to extract the brain for sacramental consumption; if so, he continues, organised cannibalism may have been an established feature of the cult of the dead, 'in which the cutting off and preservation of the head, skull or scalp was a prominent feature during or after the sacred meal either to extract its soul-substance or as a trophy'. One cannot help feeling that one small fact, namely, the deliberate breaking open of the skull, has been used to carry the argument a very long way, even to the introduction of such significant words as *sacramental*, *cult*, *sacred meal*, and *soul*.

A Neanderthal skull from Monte Circeo not only has the marks of a wound above the right eye, but the *foramen magnum*, which connects with the spinal cord, has been enlarged after death, probably to extract the brain. It should be noted how much later this is than Pekin man. We are now within the period for which the radio-carbon method of dating can be applied, and, although the method has not been applied to this skull, no Neanderthal skull with such extreme features is known to fall outside the period 50,000 to 30,000 B.C. In a rather earlier deposit at Krapina, in Croatia, some human and animal bones have been split open, presumably to extract the marrow.

This scanty evidence certainly suggests that two groups of early hominids, separated in time by something over 50,000 years, ate their fellows, as indeed they ate the animals that they hunted. The Monte Circeo skull was found in a cave that was heaped with the bones of all kinds of animals, though it was placed in the centre of the cave. To say, however, that such cannibalism was in any sense a ritual or sacramental act would be to run far beyond the evidence. Cannibalism may occur at any time among flesh-eating peoples, and it need not be part of a religious ceremony. Cannibals have rationalised their practice in every sort of way, as can be seen from the article in Hastings' *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* and in Funk and Wagnall's *Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend.*

Perhaps at this point we should note the relationship that Professor James makes between the brain and soul-force. To us this connection seems obvious; but it was not obvious in early times. Heart and liver were the vital centres. As philosophers, Democritus and Plato thought that the brain was the seat of higher thought. Aristotle emphatically repudiated this idea. Galen traced the nerve system to the brain, but the real function of the brain was not understood until the seventeenth century. Shakespeare is apparently writing of a novel idea when he speaks of 'His pure brain, Which some suppose the soul's frail dwelling-house' (*King John*, v. vii. 3). It is likely that primitive man ate the brain because it was tasty, and likewise the marrow. There is no need to bring in metaphysics.

Burial

If we except the possibly deliberate preservation of skulls by *Pithecanthropus*, the first formal burials occur amongst Neanderthal men. These burials are found in several places, notably at Le Moustier, La Ferrassie, La Chapelle-aux-Saints, and on Mount Carmel (if these last are truly Neanderthal). The burials at La Ferrassie are particularly interesting, since they are probably those of a complete family, the man in a natural recess in the rock-shelter, the woman in an artificially deepened cavity, and the four children in graves in the floor under flat stones with hollowed cup-marks on the underside. The bodies are in the attitude of sleep, except that the man at La Ferrassie has had his head cut off after death, and is in a constricted position. Neanderthal graves contain flints and bones, the latter being of considerable quantity, i.e. more than would have been consumed at a single funeral feast.

There is some evidence that food was buried with the body. At La Chappelle the leg of a bison was apparently buried with the flesh still on it, and one of the Mount Carmel skeletons clasped the jaw of a boar.

Burials of the Upper Palaeolithic period, commencing at about 30,000 B.C., are of various types. We now encounter races whom anthropologists definitely classify as *Homo sapiens*. Burials still occur in caves or rock shelters. The bodies are either in a straight position, or slightly curved, or tightly flexed; in the last instance it is believed that the body was bandaged in position before *rigor mortis* had set in. Sometimes slabs of stone are used at the sides and above to form a rough tomb. Ornaments are worn by men, women, and children, made of shells, or of beads cut from tusks and teeth of animals. Weapons and tools are buried with the bodies, and shells in large numbers are often strewn in the grave. The skeletons are almost always intact, not decapitated. A striking feature is the frequent use of red ochre, covering the body, and placed in lumps in the grave. Probably the earliest recognised discovery of a burial of this type was in a cave on the Gower Coast in Wales, where Dean Buckland in 1822 found the 'Red Lady of Paviland'.

There is no need to come further down in time, since henceforth the custom of burial is well known. How are we to interpret these early burial customs? As with cannibalism, it is possible to make several suggestions. First of all, however, we may wonder what happened to the vast proportion of those who died. These cave shelters were inhabited for many generations, yet only rarely, as at Grimaldi, does it appear that a grave was reopened to receive another body. At La Ferrassie a whole family may well be buried, but otherwise the burials are of individual bodies or of a small group, who may or may not have constituted a family or unit. The vast majority of these people have vanished completely. This means, either that they were buried away from the cave in shallow graves or that they were simply placed outside. In either case they would soon be eaten by animals. This absence of any serious attempt to preserve the bodies is as important as the deliberate preservation of a very few, when we come to assess any religious significance in the burials.

Does burial involve a belief in the after-life? And is belief in the after-life necessarily a religious concept? If the answer to the first question is yes, then certain of the Palaeolithic men selected a very, very few of their number for immortality. Although I myself do not

favour this interpretation, it is not as absurd as it might sound. It would be possible, if Palaeolithic man had not yet discovered the art of language. No one knows when language first appeared, as distinct from a variety of cries to indicate emotions and needs. Professor Le Gros Clark in *The Fossil Evidence for Human Evolution* (p. 89) discounts attempts to deduce functions, such as speech, from endocranial casts, pointing out that in hominids and the larger anthropoid apes the folds of the brain do not impress themselves clearly on the endocranial aspect of the skull except near the frontal and occipital poles of the brain and in the lower temporal region. If, then, language had not yet been discovered, it might be possible for men here and there to have an idea of the after-life, and to insist on preserving the body in a way that might fit it for a further existence. Yet, without language, these individuals could not communicate to their fellows what they felt and what they were doing when they buried the body. The most that they could convey would be an invitation to a funeral feast, and there was no reason why others should follow their example and bury their dead every time a member of the group died.

A reader of this paper has rightly pointed out that this argument must not be overpressed. We cannot conceive of the caves being inhabited all the time by static groups. Families and groups would travel about in pursuit of game, following the herds as they moved. Thus they would be living in open sites for much of the time, and, if they buried their dead in the open, the bones would not survive since they would not become fossilised. However, one imagines that, as further open sites are excavated, stone slabs could reveal the presence of graves. Meanwhile I do not think that we need to postulate continuous travelling after game. Hunting tribes today may go out from one centre and bring back the game. Extensive travelling would only be necessary when the game became rare. Meanwhile it remains a fact that, although the caves were often visited, if not lived in continuously, only occasional burials were made in the caves. These must have been made while the caves continued to be lived in, since otherwise the bodies would have been dug up by animals.

Such burial among one's own people suggests something other than belief in an after-life. It would seem to express a clinging affection, which manifested itself in this way sporadically. The purpose behind the burial would then be to maintain the link with the dead person as long as possible. The body was therefore placed in the floor of the home, with the possessions that belonged to it, and covered with red

ochre to try to replace the pallor of death with the redness of life. Large stones might be placed on top to thwart the attacks of scavenging animals when the owners of the cave were temporarily absent. Such a situation appals us, but doubtless the stench of rotten animal flesh was already bad enough in these shelters.

This seems a reasonable alternative to the after-life theory, even though it does not explain, any more than does the after-life theory, the constriction of some of the bodies and the cup-marks on some of the covering stones. Yet, if the after-life theory is felt to be more reasonable, we are still not entitled to classify this belief as religious. Even today there are some spiritualists who believe in survival without believing in God; and if dreams, ghosts, or imagination led to the idea that the dead continued to live, this is no more religious than the belief that the living who have gone to visit a neighbour still continue to exist.

Venuses and Mother Goddesses

From about 30,000 B.C. there appear small sculptured figures and rock carvings of female figures that anthropologists call *Venuses*. The term in itself is not intended to have any religious significance, but denotes nude figures with prominent indications of pregnancy and motherhood. One of the most famous is the Venus of Willendorf, whose face, like almost all these figures, is scarcely delineated, though her hair is coiled round and round in an unending plait. Fallen from the wall of a rock shelter at Laussel there is a depiction of a female figure holding (probably) a bison horn in her right hand, while another figure from the same site is less clear, and has been variously interpreted either as a man and a woman clasped together, or as a woman giving birth to a child, though it is equally possible to see the figure as simply that of a woman alone, as depicted by G. R. Levy in *The Gate of Horn*, page 60 and Plate 7. From the same cave also comes the figure of a headless man with a girdle, often regarded as a hunter.

These Venus figures are associated with the Gravettian culture, and have not so far been found in the Solutrean and Magdalenian cultures that succeeded the Gravettian. A strange series of small stylised figures, carved from coal, come from Petersfels, and belong to the Magdalenian culture. Maringer and Bandi describe them as seated female figures, and indeed they appear to be nothing else except 'seat', no other portion of the anatomy being depicted or shaped at all. They are

pierced at the top, presumably for wearing as ornaments, but it would be hard to say that they were religious emblems in any sense of the word.

It is not until Neolithic times that exaggerated female figures appear again. Roughly speaking, there is a gap of perhaps 15,000 years during which figures of women are depicted without exaggerated sexual features. It is easy to overlook this gap, and thus to read back ideas of a mother goddess into palaeolithic times, whereas there is simply no evidence at all for continuity of development. Once the mother goddess figures appear from about 3000 B.C. in centres of civilisation like Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Indus Valley, erotic cults become associated with them. Yet there is nothing that can fairly be adduced as evidence for eroticism, or deliberate exploitation of sex, in the Palaeolithic carvings. The figures suggest that these people were 'naked and unashamed'; they did not worship sex nor any mother goddess; but they depicted motherhood as the supreme element in the mystery of life.

Those who have not seen a picture of the woman from Laussel might jump to the conclusion that the bison's horn which she is holding is a phallic symbol, but the shape and the direction make this impossible. Levy in *The Gate of Horn*, page 59, speaks of it as 'the horn through whose point, in later religious cults, the creative force of the beast was thought to be expelled'; but later religious cults are not a safe guide here. If only we can rid our minds of the need to search for some deep symbolism, the carving resolves itself into a straightforward picture of a woman just about to drink from a curved horn; she is, in fact, in the act of raising it to her lips.

Although we shall be considering cave paintings in the next section, it is worth mentioning here the so-called 'fertility dance' painted in a rock shelter at Cogul in Spain. Professor James reproduces it on page 149 of *Prehistoric Religion*. In this scene nine women are said to be dancing round a little man. It is a pity that James reproduces only the grouped human figures, and not the whole picture, which may be found in Levy's book opposite page 17. So far from dancing round the man, the women on the left appear to be watching a group of animals, one of which is threatening them with its horns. Two small animals actually appear in the group of women, which would be rather demoralising for ritual dancers! To clinch the matter, Professor James admits on page 150 that the little man was added subsequently to the picture of the women. Levy (p. 81) is emphatic that this is no ritual dance, and we may well agree with her.

Cave Art and Other Art

Few people are ignorant today of the great wealth of cave paintings and carvings that have come to light, especially in France and Spain. The wonder of the caves must not blind us to the fact that very many examples of similar art have been found on bone and ivory, and in shelters that do not run far back into the rock. This must be taken into account in building up interpretations of secret magic and mystery in the depths of Mother Earth. Was there intended to be a greater sense of the numinous, and of dark religious mystery, in the recesses of the caves?

Several of the more important caves have today been made easily accessible to the public. Others are still difficult to penetrate, and necessitate crawling through tight passages and descending difficult holes before reaching the chambers where the pictures are found. Those of us who have done some caving, and who have crawled through wet and narrow passages and up and down steep climbs lighting our way with lamps on our helmets, must be amazed at the caving exploits of these Palaeolithic men who made their way along, holding their little clay lamps, probably primed with moss and fat, until they came to the place where they drew and painted huge pictures of beasts on the walls and roof, sometimes lying on a shelf with the roof low over their head, sometimes standing on the shoulders of one of their fellows or using long poles to reach higher up the walls. And what pictures they produced! In vivid action, grace, and movement, they rival any art that has ever been produced. It would be incredible if it were not true. Admittedly there may be a few forgeries, but there are pictures that have been coated with stalagmite deposits since they were drawn, and beasts are depicted that have been long extinct.

Yet we must not read our own feelings back too much into this early period. Claustrophobia in tight passages, and fear of descending and climbing tricky holes, were probably non-existent. The ability to sense obstacles and to remember the way even in complete darkness was probably highly developed. Today we find caves cold; but the bodies of these men were probably capable of standing considerable ranges of heat and cold and, indeed, in winter time they could well enjoy the higher temperatures of these caves, which remain fairly constant throughout the year. The air temperature of a cave is somewhat less than the mean annual surface temperature for the region

in which the cave lies. Today the temperature of Yorkshire caves between 600 and 1400 feet above sea level is between 48° and 50° Fahrenheit. (See e.g. *British Caving*, ed. C. H. D. Cullingford, p. 146.)

The cave art in France and Spain extended over a considerable period of time, though it is impossible to speak definitely about the actual dates. There are technical difficulties in the way of obtaining radio-carbon readings for the paintings themselves, and an early attempt to date the Lascaux paintings by this method is not now regarded as reliable. We may regard them as falling between 20,000 and 10,000 B.C., and in some places overpainting indicates a succession of artists.

Most of the great animals of the day were depicted, including the mammoth, woolly rhinoceros, bison, reindeer, lion, and bear. They are shown in various positions. A few have what may be arrows or boomerangs upon them or beside them, while an occasional superimposed object may be a trap. In the cave of Montespan there are clay models of wounded animals, including a model of a headless bear with the skull of a real bear between its paws. Only occasionally are the animals depicted as pregnant and, to the best of my knowledge, there is only one scene which can be interpreted as the mating of two animals; this is the model of the two bisons in Tuc d'Audoubert, where the male stands behind the female.

The depiction of the human figure is rare in the pictures that occur in the depths of the caves. There are only three known ones that are of any consequence. At Lascaux a man, drawn as a child of five might draw him, is apparently being killed by a charging bison, which is magnificently drawn. From Les Trois Frères comes the famous picture that is commonly called 'The Sorcerer'. It is the figure of a man, with his body slightly leaning forward, and his arms bent at the elbow so that his hands come together in front. His round eyes peer out through a bearded mask, and he has a pair of antlers on his head. There is another human figure in the same cave, wearing a different disguise consisting of the skin and horns of *bos primigenius*, or a bison. There is a mysterious object like a slender bow with the 'bowstring' towards the man; the top point is against the nostrils of the skin-disguise, while the lower end is laid across the man's arm, which is draped with the leg and hoof of the skin. He is standing behind a *bos primigenius* or a young bison, which is looking back at him over its shoulder, while in front again a stag is running away at speed.

It is obvious that the interpretation of these last two human figures is important for any religious significance that cave art may have. Margaret Murray, in *The God of the Witches*, boldly declares on page 23, 'The earliest known representation of a deity is in the Caverne des Trois Frères in Ariège. . . . It seems evident from the relative positions of all the figures that the man is dominant and that he is in the act of performing some ceremony in which the animals are concerned.' The reference here is to the position of the 'Sorcerer' high up in the roof, and not to the second figure behind the animals. Margaret Murray's book is an attempt to trace this horned deity from Palaeolithic times to the witch cult of the Devil in the Christian era. There is, however, a big gulf in time between this Palaeolithic representation and the horned deities of Egypt and Mesopotamia.

The more usual interpretation is that the 'Sorcerer' represents the high priest of the caves, who exercised his magic arts in order to bring success in the chase. The pictures and the pierced models are examples of sympathetic magic. On occasions he may have led ritual dances; for example, in Tuc d'Audoubert, where the two clay bison occur, there are still heel prints on the floor, curiously enough of very small feet, perhaps children's, and the pattern has been interpreted as the marks of a dance. This interpretation of the 'Sorcerer' may well be true, and it would be in line with sacred animal dances among primitives in recent times. The sense of kinship with all life is acute among many primitives, as Levy, Bruhl and others have shown, and it is difficult for us to realise it. Yet it is possible to accept this explanation without taking it as an example of religion. Everything depends upon one's definition of religion and one's belief about its origin. Did religion develop from magic or by way of magic? At times the two may be mingled, but the steps from a sense of oneness with all creation to a belief in devotion to a Creator have not been traced. If sympathetic magic to draw the animals to the hunter's arrows is religion, then in the cave art we may have the beginnings of religion.

There is, however, yet another possibility. The cave art may be celebrations of past victories rather than magic for the future. The two 'sorcerer' figures in this case are hunters disguised in animal skins. This is a fair interpretation of the figure disguised in an ox skin. The object like a bow is not some musical instrument to lead a sacred dance or to charm the depicted beasts, as some suggest, but is an actual bow, which the artist has had some difficulty in depicting in a natural position owing to the skin disguise. Even the single 'sorcerer' may be

a man disguised for hunting, this time in the skin of a stag. We know that such disguises were adopted, and an engraving on a reindeer horn from Laugerie-Basse shows a hunter, wearing horns, crawling after a bison. Thus we may surmise that in the cold winter days or nights Palaeolithic men gathered in these painted halls and lived over again the triumphs of the chase. The spectators grunted and shouted approval of the beasts that they knew so well, as the flickering lamps moved from scene to scene in the portrait gallery. Every so often an artist added a new scene, painted over an old one, or strove to outdo previous painters by reaching up to fresh heights. Where there were clay models, some mimed over again the attacks on the beasts, or if at this date they had the gift of coherent speech, they related the stories of their mighty deeds.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to show that there is no evidence of religion, in any fair sense of the word, nor of the beginnings of religion, in Palaeolithic times, say down to 10,000 B.C. Indeed it would be safe to come down several more thousand years.

Expressed in Biblical terms, this can mean one of two things. Either these men had the knowledge of the true God, and worshipped Him without any image, picture, or visible means; in which case they are 'Adamic' men. Or they had no awareness at all of the spiritual world and spiritual claims. They may have had a sense of kinship with other animal life, but the concept of God was beyond them, and they had no revelation of God; in which case they are 'pre-Adamic', and do not have the status of men in the Biblical sense.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The fullest reproductions of early art will be found in *Art in the Ice Age*, by J. MARINGER and H. G. BANDI (Allen & Unwin, 1953), a sumptuous volume costing 45s.

There have been a number of other books in recent years, describing and interpreting this early art. The following are the chief ones consulted for this paper:

R. R. SCHMIDT. *The Dawn of the Human Mind.* Sidgwick & Jackson, 1936.
G. R. LEVY. *The Gate of Horn.* Faber, 1948.
HERBERT KÜHN. *The Rock Pictures of Europe.* Sidgwick & Jackson, 1956.

E. O. JAMES. *Prehistoric Religion.* Thames & Hudson, 1957.

E. O. JAMES. *History of Religions.* English Universities Press; Teach Yourself Series, 1956.

MARGARET MURRAY. *The God of the Witches.* Faber, 1931.

GEORGE EVERY. *Lamb to the Slaughter.* James Clarke, 1956.

This is an attempt to link the ideas of palaeolithic man with the sacrifice of Christ; but the author accepts uncritically such ideas as the palaeolithic mother-goddess.

To get the feeling of penetrating some of the harder caves, there is no book to surpass *Ten Years under the Earth*, by the greatest living caver, NORBERT CASTERET who, among other things, describes his discovery of Montespan, referred to in this paper. The book has been available in a Penguin edition since 1952.

Unfortunately I only came across LESLIE PAUL'S new book when this paper was completed. In *Nature into History* (Faber, 1957) he includes an interpretation of the cave art in terms of the developing religious sense of man. It is a dynamic book, but some of the criticisms made in this paper would be valid to a considerable extent.