

Palaeolithic open-air art: the impact and implications of a “new phenomenon”

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The discovery of what are believed to be surviving palaeolithic images in the open-air has opened a new chapter in the study of Ice Age art. Yet at first the phenomenon was met with an apparent mixture of disbelief and complete indifference, even among the majority of specialists. Although common sense had always suggested that much palaeolithic parietal art must have been produced in the open air like the portable art of the period, it was also assumed that none of the parietal images could possibly have survived for so long in the open. This certainly seems true of painted images, but not necessarily of engraved or pecked figures.

The first major claim to be made for palaeolithic figures in the open air came from Siberia, where Okladnikov’s work at the site of Shishkino, by the river Lena, led to his belief that several of its bigger images dated to the Palaeolithic (Okladnikov, 1959; Okladnikov and Zaporozhskaya, 1959) — a huge horse (Fig. 1), a smaller horse nearby (Fig. 2) and a bovid. What were his reasons? Unfortunately, his reasoning in this case was extremely poor. First, despite the bovid being a considerable distance from the two adjacent horses, he considered these three figures to form a separate group, the oldest figures at Shishkino, on the basis of their size, their technique and style, and the treatment of their front legs (Okladnikov and Zaporozhskaya, 1959, p. 89). He also felt that, since horses and bovids dominate Upper Palaeolithic art, this was a further supporting factor, as was the existence of palaeolithic settlements in the area. He claimed that horses and wild bovids died out in the area at the end of the Palaeolithic. He saw the figures’ style as being palaeolithic, and hence also their meaning. In particular, the small oval shape beneath the big horse’s belly was compared with the so-called “vulva signs” in French palaeolithic art, and the existence of this sign next to a stallion with an erection suggested to him some link with hunting magic (this was before Leroi-Gourhan’s theories had become widely known), while the

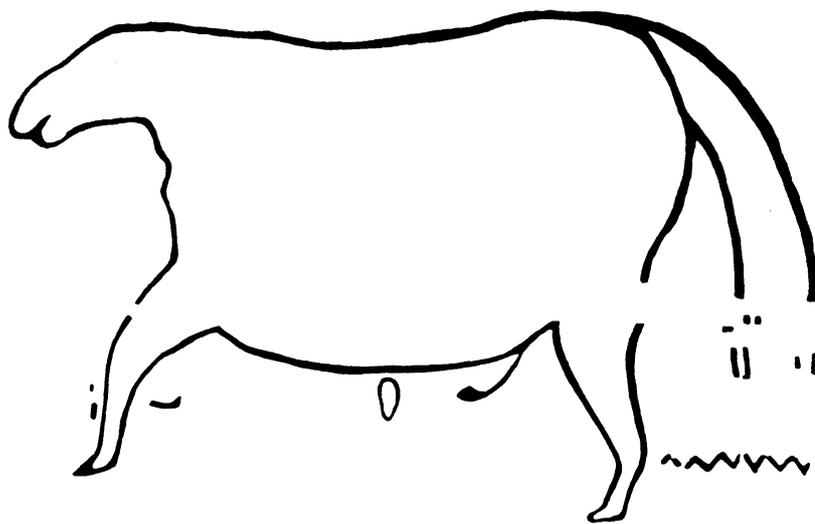


FIG. 1 – The large horse of Shishkino, after Okladnikov.

zigzag sign under the big horse's tail was seen as an image of water (Okladnikov and Zaporozhskaya 1959, p. 90).

Needless to say, none of these factors can really withstand scrutiny. The presence of palaeolithic settlements in the area in no way provides a date for these images. The front leg of the smaller horse overlaps with a small anthropomorphous figure, probably of the Bronze Age, but the leg is so lightly abraded and so much damage has been done to this panel that it is impossible to tell which figure overlies which. The bovid — which unfortunately was painted white in Okladnikov's time or shortly after so as to stand out in photographs — does not bear the slightest resemblance to the known palaeolithic bovid figures of western Europe. The horses have some features that could pass as palaeolithic, though the head of the big one resembles that of a moose. The problem here is that, unlike that of Europe, Siberian palaeolithic portable art consists almost entirely of human figurines, so that we simply do not know what the local styles of animal depiction were in this part of Asia in the Ice Age, and hence we have nothing with which to compare the Shishkino images. The large horse is especially troubling, being by far the biggest figure not only at this site but in the whole of Siberian rock art. However, the most crucial factor against there being any surviving palaeolithic figures at Shishkino is that the rock here is a somewhat friable sandstone, which is constantly deteriorating, and none of its surfaces could possibly have withstood ten thousand Siberian winters intact.

All of Okladnikov's claims were soon opposed, justifiably, by Formozov (1969), who pointed out that horse bones had been found by Okladnikov himself at the site of Kullaty in Yakutia, dating to the 3rd/2nd millennia BC, while at another site of the same period he found bovid bones which he assumed to be domesticated — but of course we do not know if the big bovid image at Shishkino is wild or not, and it is surrounded by other images of similar size and style which Okladnikov attributed to the Bronze Age. Formozov also pointed out that the stylistic analogies claimed by Okladnikov between the three Shishkino figures and palaeolithic images are far from decisive; better analogies can be made between the bovid and images of the Bronze or Iron Age, while there is no equivalent known in palaeolithic art for the way the giant horse's hooves are depicted. Moreover, only the giant horse is really big — 2,8 m long — while the smaller horse is only 1,2 m and the bovid 1,1 m. Many other figures of this smaller size were attributed by Okladnikov to later periods (Formozov, 1969, p. 93-101).

What began as a simple supposition by Okladnikov eventually became a conviction, and he and his followers began to attribute figures at other sites in Siberia and even Mongolia to the Palaeolithic simply because the Shishkino figures existed; and other people also started to make claims for palaeolithic open-air art in other parts of the USSR (see Bahn and Vertut, 1997, p. 215, note 90), including even open-air paintings in Yakutia! For the most part, the reasons given were the large size of some figures, or some unusual feature, or the species involved (rhino, horse, bovid), or simply that the figures “looked archaic”. The exercise became self-perpetuating, and as more images were attributed to the Palaeolithic, the more it appeared to be true. The phenomenon came to a head in the 1970s when it was the subject of fierce debate in publications by several leading specialists. Since then, more images that could conceivably be palaeolithic have been found in other regions, and in particular some Russian specialists harbour a cautious suspicion that what has been dubbed the naturalistic “Minusinsk style” petroglyphs in the open-air rock art of the Yenisei region and the Altai may indeed belong to the end of the Ice Age. As yet they have no proof of this, but they have found comfort in the discoveries in south-west Europe.

The “discovery” and publication of the large figures at Mazouco, Portugal (Jorge et al.,



FIG.2 – The smaller horse of Shishkino, after Okladnikov.

1981, 1982) and of the big pecked horse at Domingo García (Martín and Moure, 1981) was a major event in palaeolithic art studies, yet one which received very little recognition at the time, let alone roused any display of interest on the part of specialists. The same was true of the even more astounding discovery of the tiny engravings at Fornols Haut, owed to the incredibly keen eyes of Jean Abelanet. Eventually published in some major journals such as *Archéologia* (Sacchi et al., 1987) and *L'Anthropologie* (Sacchi et al., 1988), it was still accorded little importance by most specialists and, until a special conference (with excursion to the rock) was held at Tautavel in October 1999, very few had bothered to try and visit this unique site for themselves or even the cast of its engraved surfaces kept in Carcassonne (Sacchi, pers. comm.). Personally, I was astonished at the general apathy that greeted these first discoveries. I had placed a summary of the Fornols Haut engravings in *Nature* (Bahn, 1985), and included illustrations and a description of all three sites in my book on Ice Age art (Bahn and Vertut, 1988).

As far as I am aware, this was the first book on the subject to include an account of the phenomenon. I also discussed these sites in a paper at the international rock art congress in Darwin, Australia, in 1988 (Bahn, 1992). Yet despite the subsequent discovery of two further sites in Spain, the horse at Piedras Blancas (Martínez García, 1986/87, 1992) and the first figures at Siega Verde (Balbín Behrmann et al., this volume), and the dramatic increase in the number of known figures at Domingo García (Ripoll and Municio, 1999, and this volume), most specialists still remained unimpressed; amazingly, some major volumes published on palaeolithic art in France, Italy and elsewhere during these years made absolutely no mention of the phenomenon.

It is likely that the large numbers of figures at Siega Verde and Domingo García would eventually, once published and publicized, have grabbed the attention of those specialists who were focused exclusively on cave-art or portable objects. However, it was undoubtedly the dramatic circumstances of the revelation of the wealth of images in Portugal's Cõa Valley (Baptista, this volume), and the international struggle to save them from being drowned by a huge dam, which forced a realization among academics and public alike that this was a new phenomenon which merited their interest and enthusiasm. The new discoveries led me to devote not merely a page or two but a whole new chapter to the phenomenon in the second edition of my book (Bahn and Vertut, 1997), while it has now apparently become de

rigueur for every book on palaeolithic art published since the Côa's discovery to mention open-air art. Its time has finally come.

Assuming that all or most of these figures do indeed date to the Palaeolithic — and as yet we only have stylistic arguments for this, albeit strong ones — their major implication is that cave art was probably a very rare occurrence and not, after all, a characteristic of the late Ice Age. The vast majority of palaeolithic rock art was probably produced outside the caves, but most of it has failed to survive the millennia of weathering. Cave art, on the other hand, was comparatively well protected from the elements, and thus represents a freak of taphonomic survival. We cannot prove that the outdoor art was more abundant or more important or more “normal” than that in caves, and we simply do not know whether the roughly 300 decorated caves and rock-shelters of the European Ice Age discovered so far are a high proportion of those which originally existed, or the tiniest tip of the iceberg. Some specialists who have hitherto devoted their lives to the study of art inside caves are still loath to accept the new view that cave-art is a rare and unrepresentative aspect of Ice Age activities. Those who love to conjure up elaborate functional or mystical explanations for cave art, because of its location in dark and mysterious depths, seem to find identical figures in the open air to be disappointingly prosaic. Yet we know from ethnography in Australia and elsewhere that open-air art can be just as full of dread, mystery, power and taboos as anything in the depths of the earth.

Since rock art remains precisely where the artists chose to put it, these open-air figures present us with a totally new view of Ice Age life: we can see where different images were deliberately placed in relation to topographic features such as rivers, confluences, hills, passes, plateaux, etc. This kind of study is only just beginning in palaeolithic art, but it is already worth speculating that some valuable insights could be obtained from comparisons with the rock art (possibly of the late Ice Age, as well as of later periods) of the Siberian river valleys — their locations are the most similar to those of the Côa that I have seen anywhere in the world, and they have been known and studied for a long time. It is ironic, perhaps, that despite Okladnikov's erroneous assessment of Shishkino, it is indeed the rock art of Siberia which may prove most useful in the comparative study of the west European sites.

Finally, some mention should be made of dating problems. As mentioned above, all the open-air palaeolithic figures known so far are dated by style. However, this is also true of the vast majority of figures in the rock art of any culture in the world, including Ice Age cave art, and it is a situation that is unlikely to change much in the foreseeable future, given the scarcity of organic material in samples and the lack of funding available for the expensive business of direct dating. I have mentioned elsewhere that, had most of these figures been found inside a cave, they would have been accepted as palaeolithic without a murmur of protest — they are indeed “cave art without the caves” in every sense (Bahn, 1995). But palaeolithic art is almost unique in world rock art in that it comprises not only thousands of parietal figures but also thousands of well-dated portable images with which they can be compared — and in particular, the thousands of engraved or painted plaquettes from the Spanish cave of Parpalló (Villaverde, 1994) which span much of the Upper Palaeolithic and which display strong similarities with many of the open-air figures discussed here.

Although style alone can be a risky basis for dating (Lorblanchet and Bahn, 1993), and should be combined with direct dating wherever possible, it is also generally reckoned that the attempt to apply some highly experimental methods of direct dating to a few Côa figures, already affected by chalking, casting and even scraping, produced very mixed results, to say the least. The initial reports, however, of a recent age for some Côa images, based on radiocarbon dating or eyeball assessment through an impressive-looking binocular microscope, did cause one or two specialists to waver briefly in their conviction of palaeolithic age.

As Ray (1998) put it recently, “there is a tendency for archaeologists to become humble in the face of scientific data. In the 1950s in England, there was a television series entitled *Quatermass*. One episode had a scene in which noisome aliens were landing before a crowd of puzzled spectators. Quatermass comes to the rescue with the line, “Let me through; I’m a scientist”. The world is duly saved. We are more sceptical now, but the idea that an expert in one field can come into another and show it to be mistaken still appeals”.

As Ray (*ibid.*) also remarked, concerning a dispute between one geologist and the world of Egyptology, “if a geologist does not feel the need to take Egyptology’s word for something... there will be times when the reverse applies”. And certainly, until some concrete proof is put forward of a more recent age, the archaeological consensus and stylistic dating must prevail, and the bulk of the open-air figures discussed above belong firmly in the corpus of palaeolithic art. In closing, it is worth mentioning that some of the objections raised to the palaeolithic age of these sites are amusingly reminiscent of those made against cave art at the turn of the century: Martel, for example, claimed that the art of Altamira was Neolithic at best, because its paint was so fresh that it was better preserved than some Etruscan paintings (1906, p. 120).

In addition, just as the cave was too humid and its rock too friable to have preserved art for so long, so erosion and weathering must long ago have destroyed any palaeolithic figures produced outside — this despite the temperate local climate in the Douro valley, and the fact that the Alps have striations on rocks left by retreating glaciers at the end of the Ice Age, and many of these are still clear and sharp-edged after so many millennia. The most ironic of the objections raised was the claim that the animals depicted are not those of the Pleistocene but modern species, like domestic goats instead of ibex. Once again, Martel used this argument about Altamira (1905, p. 679, 1906), seeing there only depictions of a present-day or “neolithic” fauna with no extinct or emigrated species such as rhino, mammoth or reindeer (unlike the Dordogne caves, whose art he accepted as palaeolithic in age). Similarly, he saw the animals drawn in Niaux as neolithic, with only modern species, and he saw its “claviform signs” as pictures of hafted neolithic axes (1930, p. 196-197). An even more ridiculous example is the claim by Elie Massénat, a French prehistorian, who declared (1902, 1903) that the animal depictions in the handful of decorated caves known at the turn of century were recent works made by people hiding in these caves, perhaps in the religious wars! He believed that the bison, reindeer and mammoth figures were bulls, red deer and modern elephants, and that the style of the images was utterly different from that of the portable figures known from the Magdalenian. The modern fugitives who drew them were merely producing caricatures of the animals in the surrounding countryside, but for some reason they added elephants! The analogies with the debate over the open-air sites, 95 years later, are striking, and the reactions of Massénat’s colleagues in 1902 are well worth reading (Bahn, 1999), as are Breuil’s ripostes to the claims of Martel (Delluc and Delluc, 1998). But of course, the main thing we learn from history is that we never learn from history.

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