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THE HOHLE FELS 'VENUS': SOME REMARKS ON ANIMALS, HUMANS AND METAPHORICAL RELATIONSHIPS IN EARLY UPPER PALAEOLITHIC ART

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Abstract. The recent find of a female statuette in Aurignacian contexts in Hohle Fels Cave, southwest Germany, has important implications for the understanding of the development of European Palaeolithic art and its ideological and practical contexts. Here, it is argued that this figurine provides support for the continuity of metaphorical relationships that connected the characteristics of humans and animals over thousands of years during the early Upper Palaeolithic of Europe. These relationships were expressed during the Aurignacian period (c. 40 000 – 32 000 BP) mainly through figurative animal representations that were materially and socially attached to individual persons. Subsequently (c. 29 000 – 18 000 BP), this discourse was transformed in the course of socio-economic changes in subsistence and settlement patterns and with the development of larger and more permanent settlement structures. The new find of the Hohle Fels 'Venus' allows an understanding of these processes of change and continuity in greater detail, and has implications for future studies in this direction.

1. Introduction

In archaeology, new discoveries can sometimes dramatically alter or expand our understanding of the past. In the field of European Palaeolithic art studies, perhaps the most prominent recent case is provided by the discovery and subsequent radiometric dating of the Grotte Chauvet (Clottes 2003; Pettitt 2008). However, not always do new finds challenge ideas about the past. Sometimes they also provide dramatic support and further clarification for certain interpretative frameworks. I want to argue here that the recently published find of the so-called 'Venus of Hohle Fels' presents such a case (Conard 2009) (Fig. 1).

In his recent article, Conard (2009: 248) drew attention to the fact that the statuette necessitates a re-thinking of our understanding of the occurrence of typical Gravettian female statuettes, which also include the famous Venus of Willendorf (e.g. Gamble 1982). The find from the Hohle Fels Cave is around 35 000 years old and this does extend the occurrence of basic features of Gravettian-style female figurines by at least 5 000 years. However, I want to argue here that the Hohle Fels Venus can be much more than a challenge to our present understanding of the formal and stylistic development of European art (Mellars 2009). In this paper, I briefly want to show that the Venus provides an interesting piece of evidence for our understanding of some of the ideological and metaphorical processes



Figure 1. The recently discovered 'Venus of Hohle Fels' (photograph by H. Jensen; copyright University of Tübingen).

of change and continuity connected to figurative art of the European Palaeolithic. The Hohle Fels 'Venus' provides empirical support for the complex metaphorical character of the Aurignacian figurative art from southwest Germany as well as the continuity and transformation of these ideological structures over thousands of years. The new find empirically confirms continuities between Aurignacian and Gravettian mobiliary art, which have been developed and proposed elsewhere (Porr 2002, 2004). In another context, I have recently commented on the role of the southwest German Aurignacian art in the reproduction of cultural memory within synchronic social processes (Porr 2010). In this paper here, I want to shift the focus slightly to diachronic aspects and discuss some preliminary implications of the new find from Hohle Fels Cave for the understanding of changes and continuities in ideologies and material expressions of Early Upper Palaeolithic art in central Europe.

Despite some significant criticism in the recent past (Conkey et al. 1997; Moro-Abadía and González-Morales 2008) concerning the use of the term 'art' in the analysis of Palaeolithic imagery and other material expressions, I will not drop the term here altogether and will use it interchangeably with 'images', 'representations' etc. I nevertheless acknowledge that indeed the term 'art' is problematic in this context if it is used uncritically (Ingold 2000: 111–131). However, as this topic necessitates a much more extensive discussion this needs to be addressed in future contributions. I rather want to draw attention here to some problems involved in the interpretation of Palaeolithic figurative imagery, which are connected to ideas about the relationships between animals and humans during that time.

2. Animals and humans during the Palaeolithic: towards a phenomenological ecology

Within Palaeolithic archaeology, encounters between animals and humans during the Palaeolithic period have been mostly viewed within an adaptationist framework (e.g. Gamble 1986). The theme of 'hunting' is one of the main motifs in the history of Palaeolithic research with multiple connotations. The relationship between animals and humans is usually described within a 'confrontational' and competitive framework in which the hunter is said to act *against* the animal. The animal plays the role of an opponent that constantly aims at escaping and evading the hunter. Consequently, relations between animals and humans are presented as 'problems-to-be-solved' and sometimes the development of human intellectual capacities are modelled to make this problem-solving process ever more effective (Landau 1991; Gamble and Gittins 2004). In this contribution, I assume that this view is most likely wrong. I do follow the fundamental critique of Ingold (e.g. 1994, 2000) that the ecological-evolutionary perspective is very much misplaced in the attempt to understand the practices of hunters

and gatherers and consequently also detrimental to an understanding of the dimensions and meanings of Palaeolithic practices and figurative depictions. It uncritically describes and analyses human-animal relationships during the Palaeolithic from a modern Western perspective, which at the same time mirrors the discourse of modern evolutionary biology of hunter-prey relations (e.g. Bettinger 1987, 1991). By adopting this perspective, Palaeolithic archaeology generally subscribes to a view of hunting and gathering people as being more in the realm of 'nature' than in the realm of 'culture', and that they have to be primarily studied with methods borrowed from the natural sciences (Ingold 1996).

Because of this traditional theoretical orientation, Palaeolithic archaeology has largely failed to critically engage with significant developments in the anthropological study of hunting and gathering people in the last two decades (Porr 2001). In a number of articles Bird-David (1990, 1994, 1999) shifted the focus of comparative analysis in hunter-gatherer studies from economic activities to social and symbolic structures. In her analysis of the south Indian Nayaka Bird-David examined the interdependence of different subsistence strategies (foraging, farming, wage-labour), social relations and the 'metaphorization of human-nature relations'. She found that 'the intra-family caring relationship, especially the adult-child, constituted for the Nayaka a core metaphor, in terms of which they thought about their relatedness to the natural environment' (Bird-David 1993: 112). The Nayaka shift between different subsistence activities without obvious difficulties and without losing their cultural identity. Anthropologists often described this economic flexibility as 'opportunism' or 'opportunistic foraging', implying a 'mindless rummaging about for food' (Bird-David 1992a: 38). At the same time they used to ignore the cultural dimension that is involved and which consists of a body of shared socio-cultural concepts. It is not the 'hunting and gathering mode of subsistence' that presents the core of this so-called hunting and gathering society. It is rather a collection of metaphors and, therefore, a cultural and ideological element that seems paramount and which provides, despite great individual, temporal and spatial 'economic' variation, the cultural integrity of the Nayaka.

The significance for this discussion here and for Palaeolithic archaeology is that these results are in fact applicable to hunters and gatherers from all over the world and provide a powerful and distinctively non-materialist perspective on the topic: 'Briefly, for hunter-gatherers the natural environment is seen to be peopled by human-like relatives who share food with its inhabitants. It is a giving environment which provides for their needs. They conceive themselves to be part of a cosmic system of sharing. They relate in this way to the natural environment as and because they hunt and gather within it, and vice versa' (Bird-

David 1992a: 39, see also 1990, 1992b; Gamble 2007).

A very similar point is elaborated by Ingold in his analysis of hunter-gatherer perceptions of the environment (Ingold 1992, 2000) and, more specifically, animals (Ingold 1994). In this latter context, Ingold stresses that 'hunting' in hunter-gatherer societies is not conceptualised as a distinct pursuit of an animal that tries to avoid the encounter with the hunter. 'Hunting' is rather seen as a complex interaction between two equal parties. Very often, we find the idea that the animal voluntarily gives itself up for the hunter to be killed. The prerequisite for this to happen is that the hunter respects his or her prey and the rules of this interaction. Because the relation is seen as an interaction between two conscious beings, the hunter not only has to master the material aspects of hunting (e.g. how to read tracks, how to construct a suitable weapon), but also to understand 'the chains of personal (non mechanical) causation' in which he or she is embedded. Ingold therefore argues that the hunter does not transform the world in hunting, but rather 'the world opens itself up' for her or him. He argues that hunter-gatherers, instead of attempting to control nature, concentrate on the 'control of their relationship with it'. The hunter's tool, the hunting weapons, 'serve to reveal the otherwise hidden intentions of non-human agents'. In a world in which all events are caused by intentional subjects, 'the hunter does not seek, and fail to achieve, control over animals; he seeks revelation' (Ingold 1994: 16).

'Hunting' is consequently not separated from the course and understanding of everyday life, neither in practice or in the understanding of the people themselves. The hunting and killing of animals is seen as a part of the reproductive cycles of life in which all living beings are involved. Again, relations with non-human agents and inter-human interactions are not conceptually separated, but only different aspects of one cosmological system. This interrelationship is ultimately based on an ideology of sharing and equality (Bird-David 1990). The hunter does not attempt to achieve domination over his or her environment, but the maintenance of relations of trust. In exchange, he or she has to respect the powers and subjects of the environment (Ingold 1994). Shepard (1998: 293-294) consequently reminds us that 'tribal people not only perceive their environment as spiritual, conscious, and subjected to rules of respectful behaviour', but also that their 'cosmography is marked by a humility which is lacking in civilized society'.

These observations correspond to an attitude and perception of the environment which is very different from the Western idea of nature as a realm that is separated from humanity. It is also in conflict with the concept of human environmental relations, which forms a central element in evolutionary or ecological approaches. The world in which the hunter lives and with which s/he interacts is not a 'passive container of resources'. The environment is seen as saturated with individual powers and subjects. 'It is alive'.

Humans have to maintain good relationships with these powers in different ways: 'In many societies, this is expressed by the idea that people have to look after or care for the country in which they live, by ensuring that proper relationships are maintained' (Ingold 1994: 9). Consequently, to understand and explain hunter-gatherer behaviour and its material effects these elements (cf. Bird-David 1992a) need to be included.

These considerations make it necessary to re-think the current understanding of human-animal relationships during the Palaeolithic and, consequently, to re-think the role of Palaeolithic representations of animals. Both have indeed to be seen within a different, non-Western ontology (Dowson 2009; Wallis 2009; Alberti and Bray 2009), which has to include a different attitude towards the constitution of animals, humans and the environment. This would have to lead to the development of a theoretical as well as methodological perspective that might be described as 'phenomenological ecology', which integrates issues of the mutual constitution of animals and humans in their dynamic and material interactions as well as variations in perceptions and experience. This approach needs to include factors that might be called 'phenomenological' or 'experiential', because they refer to the actual experience of the encounter between humans and animals, and how this experience is reflected, negotiated and communicated in figurative representations (e.g. Willis 1990; Morphy 1989). Animals will no longer be viewed as 'resources', patterned over a neutral space, but as subjects in complex relationships, as sources of meaning and metaphorical reflexions. The vast amount of ethnographic evidence from hunting and gathering societies shows that the encounter between humans and animals was and is not a matter of acquiring resources or overcoming a challenge. Rather it was perceived as an encounter and dialogue between two living beings and persons, which was embedded within a different perception of the environment (Ingold 2000) and the conceptualisation of animals and humans (Ingold 1988). Consequently, material objects made from animal remains as well as material representations of animals have to be viewed as part of these metaphorical relationships, as material mediators (e.g. Tilley 1999).

It is clear that these aspects will be challenging to reconstruct for Palaeolithic contexts. Certainly, comparative approaches that include ethnographic cases need to be conducted in this context to overcome the danger of imposing a Western understanding onto a non-Western system of understanding and perceiving. We also have to be careful not to impose our own understanding of certain animals and their qualities and potentials onto a particular collection of representations — an understanding that is not only guided by a different attitude towards animals in general but also by very limited first-hand experience with animals. I do believe that these difficulties can indeed be overcome by a careful and comparative

approach that systematically analyses the differences and similarities between material representations and images, the reconstructed behaviour of animals in their environment and the potentials of humans to experience and observe these. Nevertheless, for the approach that I present here, which concentrates mostly on Pleistocene lions and mammoths, more comparative work needs to be done on the range of experiences that were possibly connected with these animals as well as their reflection in ideologies and figurative representations (e.g. Haynes 1991; Quammen 2003; Hutchinson et al. 2006). The archaeological record of the European Upper Palaeolithic presents a particularly rich and well-documented reservoir of evidence for the understanding of these relationships. This current contribution aims at making some steps in the direction outlined above to explore the significance of the Hohle Fels 'Venus' within the metaphorical relationships structuring the Early Upper Palaeolithic art from southwest Germany and beyond (see also Porr 2010).

3. The Aurignacian art of southwest Germany: a short overview

The Aurignacian is a Mode 4 techno-complex and appears in Europe around 40 000 years ago. It is characterised by a lithic industry based on blade technologies, the regular use of different organic raw materials (e.g. bone, antler, ivory) and the regular occurrences of personal ornaments. It is also the time period where figurative representations first occur on a regular basis in the European archaeological record (Floss and Rouquerol 2007). Before the discovery of the female statuette from Hohle Fels, there were altogether 41 pieces of mobiliary art from the limestone caves and rockshelters of the Swabian Jura Mountains (Floss 2007). Research is ongoing and new statuettes and fragments are currently found almost in every campaign (Conard et al. 2009a). In the current collection, 22 statuettes can be subjectively related to specific animal species. A further three objects can be identified with some certainty (Floss 2007: 302). The four find spots are located on two tributaries of the Danube River, in the valleys of the Ach and the Lone. All figurative objects can be related to an established Aurignacian occupation of southwest Germany. According to the available radiocarbon data this settlement can be placed between approximately 32 000 and 40 000 years BP. The available C¹⁴ and TL dates from the Swabian Jura sites allow no further temporal differentiation (e.g. Conard 2009: 249; Conard et al. 2009b: 739). As there is so far no evidence that the Aurignacian art of southwest Germany can convincingly be subdivided into different phases (Conard 2007: 329; Conard and Bolus 2003, 2008), it is here assumed that all statuettes represent a single collection.

The statuettes vary in quality and technological sophistication. Every piece is unique. There is no

repetition or copying of forms (Floss 2007: 309). As a raw material ivory and, in one case, bone was used. One unclear piece was carved from a stone. With two exceptions (the large therianthrope statuette from Hohlenstein-Stadel and a large 'mammoth' from Vogelherd), the statuettes were small enough that they could have been carried around all of the time. Some figures are pierced, others show clear signs of longer use and polish so that it is evident that they were handled, carried or attached to clothing or other objects for a considerable amount of time. The identifiable animal species in this collection are dominated by 'mammoths' (six objects) and 'lions' (four objects). Further important species are 'bison' (three objects) and 'bear' (two objects). Three figurines are currently regarded as therianthropes, in which human and feline characteristics are mixed. With the exception of the representation of a 'water bird' from Hohle Fels cave and a possible fish from Vogelherd, all figurines seem to refer to large terrestrial mammals (Hahn 1986; Floss 2007; Conard 2007; Conard et al. 2009a). In contrast, the Hohle Fels 'Venus' is a depiction of a female body with exaggerated breasts and pubic triangle. The statuette does not have a head, but a carefully carved ring and, judging from partial polish, it was suspended and used as a pendant (Conard 2009: 250).

I have argued in more detail elsewhere (Porr 2002, 2004, 2010) that it is crucial to see the statuettes in relation to their actual use and consequently their relationships to bodily practices and corporal culture. Gamble (2007: 91) has recently emphasised the importance of the interplay of material and corporal culture, corporality and materiality in the construction of identity in earliest pre-History. Certainly, the role of socially situated bodily practices has been largely marginalised in the understanding of Palaeolithic art and material culture (Gamble and Porr 2005). In the case of the Aurignacian statuettes, these objects can only be adequately understood if they are seen as attached to individual bodies and people (Porr 2010). The use-wear traces and polish clearly show that they have been carried and handled for substantial periods of time. In contrast, their contexts of discard suggest that their significance did not extend beyond their actual use. All statuettes were found among the normal occupation debris and there is no evidence supporting a special spatial treatment of the statuettes after their use (Floss 2007: 306). There are only two exceptions in this context and the importance of this observation will be discussed below. Taking into account the individual character of the statuettes and the effort invested in their production, the available evidence clearly suggests that the Swabian statuettes acquired and possessed their significance in close relationships with individual persons and while being materially attached to specific individuals. With the loss of this connection, they also lost their cultural significance (Porr 2010).

While the statuettes exhibit a clear element of

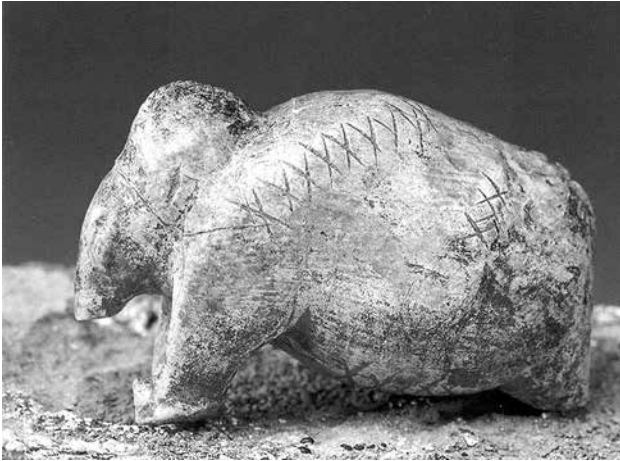


Figure 2. A 'mammoth' pendant from Vogelherd cave (photograph by H. Jensen; copyright University of Tübingen).

individuality they also refer to a structured set of symbolic and metaphorical relationships involving both humans and animals. I have argued in greater detail elsewhere (Porr 2004, 2010) that the Aurignacian art of southwest Germany is structured by a core opposition between lions and mammoths, which are best represented in the collection. Both animals can be connected by a number of similarities and differences that can both be traced in the art as well as the actual feeding and social behaviours of these animals. The latter aspects can be reconstructed with some certainty from bio-ecological parameters and comparisons with the behaviour of African elephants and lions (Maschenko et al. 2006; Schaller 1972; Haynes 1991; Uerpman 2001; Porr 2010). Pleistocene cave lions (*Panthera spelea*) were the largest predators during the Ice Age in Europe, while mammoths (*Mammuthus primigenius*) were the largest herbivores. Both animals can be viewed in a structured set of relationships of oppositions (e.g. fast/slow, herbivore/carnivore, aggressive/defensive etc.) and similarities (e.g. social behaviour, size, ecological dominance etc.). These features of behaviours are mirrored in the conventions of the depictions of the animals in the Swabian statuettes. While 'lions' are depicted displaying specific behaviours, the 'mammoths' are always shown in symmetrical fashion, with an emphasis on closed and rounded forms, without an attempt at depicting behaviours in an active fashion (Fig. 2). For example, it is possible to identify in almost every 'lion' statuette a specific facial expression, body posture and a different depiction of the position of the ears, which point to different states of alertness or aggressiveness. These references are missing in the depictions of the 'mammoths' and the 'bison' (see Porr 2010). Furthermore, therianthrope elements are exclusively restricted to lions/humans, also introducing an element of variability that is not present in the depictions of the herbivores in this collection. Elsewhere, I have argued that this observation could

suggest that the feline/human statuettes of the collection were more closely associated with altered states of consciousness and subjective visual phenomena than others (Dowson and Porr 2001). In any case, this characteristic might show that the relationship between human bodies and feline bodies was given a special significance and was perceived as particularly unstable during the Aurignacian of southwest Germany, and this element is not reflected in the treatment of the 'herbivores'.

4. Animal metaphors and the Aurignacian art of southwest Germany

One element that is often overlooked in the analysis of Palaeolithic art is the social behaviour of the depicted animal species. We can certainly assume that Palaeolithic hunter-gatherers were deeply familiar with all aspects of the behaviour of the animals in their environment. They certainly were also aware of the fact that mammoths and lions were distinguished by a central aspect of social behaviour. While Pleistocene mammoths were almost certainly socially dominated by older female individuals (Haynes 1991: 102; Maschenko et al. 2006), Pleistocene lions were most likely comparable to recent African savannah lions and characterised by a harem system (Kahlke 1994: 75). Because of the intimate connections of the statuettes with human individual persons and bodies, I consequently argued in greater detail elsewhere (Porr 2004) that Aurignacian people made conceptual links between males and lions, which were contrasted with females and mammoths. Given the connection of the statuettes to individual human beings, it might be possible that the feline statuettes represented males, were produced and/or used by males, or were metaphorical representations of meanings connected with maleness, while the opposite was the case for mammoths and women. These details are difficult to assess at the present stage and need to be examined in further studies. This interpretation, nevertheless, has the advantage that it can be easily refuted by future finds, which contradict the proposed structural relationships between humans, 'lions' and 'mammoths'. Certainly, such a challenge is already present in Schmid's (1989) interpretation of the Hohlenstein-Stadel therianthrope statuette as a female with breasts. This interpretation, however, was not generally accepted (see Wehrberger and Reinhardt 1994) and it rests on the interpretation of isolated ivory fragments of the statuette that are unclear and also cannot be clearly attached to the body of the figurine. Therefore, unless further evidence is presented or new fragments are found in future excavations the statuette cannot clearly be sexed and its significance has to be viewed in relation to the other statuettes, its use and depositional context (see below).

This present interpretation further provides an explanation for the curious phenomenon in the

Swabian Aurignacian art that mammoths are never depicted with tusks. Based on their body proportions, these animals can all be determined as adults and female mammoths indeed possessed tusks. However, tusk size clearly distinguished male mammoths from female mammoths and males most likely used their tusks in aggressive ways during fights in the mating season (Haynes 1991). It is therefore possible that Aurignacian artists chose not to depict tusks in the mammoths to emphasise the femaleness of the depictions – even though this produced an unrealistic image. While this link might provide an interpretation for other depictions of mammoths elsewhere, I want to stress that this interpretation is presently not intended to provide an explanation for the widespread rarity of the depiction of tusks in mammoths in figurative depictions during the European Upper Palaeolithic (Lister and Bahn 2007: 119). Finally, the general character of the symbolic relationships is further supported by the depiction of the other identifiable animal species in the collection. The statuette of a ‘bear’ (as a carnivore/omnivore; Richards et al. 2008) from Geißenklösterle conforms to the conventions of the lions, while the two ‘bison’ statuettes (as depictions of large herbivores) follow the conventions of the mammoths.

The Aurignacian art of southwest Germany is in my view a reflection of the individual construction of identity in processes of the creation of material statements that refer to an abstract concept of the world that relates humans and animals according to specific traits (Porr 2010). The single statuettes are not passive reflections of the reconstructed structures of meanings, but they are the products of individual negotiations. Aurignacian people made links between their own actions and the behaviour of the animals in their environment. The behaviours of the animals were important reference points to explain both the relationships between animals and humans and the relationships between humans and other humans. What can be observed in the statuettes is consequently not a straightforward depiction of animal traits, I believe, but a complex engagement of humans with the animals in their environment and complex processes of comparisons that were conducted within an overall value scheme that included equally animals and humans. The construction of such a scheme necessitates choices in selecting traits from the ones that can be observed in both humans and animals as well as in the depiction of these in figurative art. Consequently, behavioural elements that could certainly be observed by Aurignacian people (e.g. the particularities of the behaviours of female lions or male mammoths etc.) are not reflected in the figurative art, in my view, even though Aurignacian people certainly were aware of these. However, this dialectic of observations and choices is certainly of central importance for further studies and is at the heart of a ‘phenomenological ecology’ as it was proposed above.

Following these observations of a structured set of differences and similarities in the Aurignacian art of southwest Germany, I postulated continuities between the underlying structures of meaning of both Aurignacian and later material representations. I argued that ‘Gravettian statuettes and the values and ideas connected with them possibly have their roots in an Aurignacian ideology of female defensive, calm and protective strength’ (Porr 2004: 268). This subjective argument, reflecting my perception of artistic intent, was based on the fact that the typical Gravettian statuettes of mature women indeed seemed to mirror the stylistic conventions of the mammoth statuettes of the southwest German Aurignacian. They also stress rounded forms and do not seem to display specific active behaviours. They consequently could very well be connected with an ideology of defensive and protective strength that relates to the behaviour of female mammoths to form stable matriarchic groups in which the offspring is nurtured and protected (Maschenko et al. 2006). The ‘Venus’ from Hohle Fels might also demonstrate that we cannot only expect continuities in ideas and ideologies, but also in terms of figurative representation. It is, however, interesting that the Hohle Fels ‘Venus’ is not simply a Gravettian female statuette (Conard 2009). It is rather the concept of a Gravettian statuette expressed within the practical contexts of the southwest German Aurignacian. As was argued before, one of the defining characteristics of the southwest German Aurignacian is the portability of the figurines and their apparent attachment to individual persons in production and use. The Hohle Fels ‘Venus’ shows the same characteristics, which are largely absent during the Gravettian. The missing head and face of the statuette shows that it was not intended to depict a specific individual human being. Rather, the place of the head and face, the locus of human individuality, was used to attach it to a real individual person during the Aurignacian. The ‘Venus’ statuette was consequently used to connect an abstract formal ideology to a specific human being.

In addition to the ideological elements connected with women and mammoths outlined above, the exaggerated breasts and vulva of the Hohle Fels ‘Venus’ draws attention to ideas about reproduction and fertility (Conard 2009: 251). These elements were not expressed explicitly through animal representations during the Swabian Aurignacian. However, this reduction to only one ideological aspect can be very well connected to the isolated depictions of vulvae, which are often found in Aurignacian contexts in western Europe (e.g. Chiotti et al. 2007; Mellars 2009). However, an even more interesting connection can now be made to one of the most impressive figurative arrangements in the Grotte Chauvet (Fig. 3). This cave contains the so-called ‘Venus of the Grotte Chauvet’, a monochrome drawing of the lower part of a mature female body with an extensive pubic triangle, engraved vulva and short legs without feet (Clottes 2003: 168–

171). Here, I want to draw attention to the fact that the female shape is directly connected to the shape of a bison and to the shape of a lion. In the light of the new evidence and the tentative metaphorical structures developed above, the focus on the reproductive organs in this case could consequently relate to the female ability to give life to both women and men, expressed through the depiction of a lion and a bison. The female vulva here becomes the centre of the origin of both men and women, or maleness and femaleness. This example should draw attention to the possibilities to read the meanings associated with Palaeolithic parietal art by making reference to structural relationships developed in other contexts that might be culturally and/or chronologically related. The interpretation of the 'Venus of the Grotte Chauvet' presented here is entirely subjective, but it might provide an impetus to look at similar depictions and arrangements elsewhere. However, it should also be noted that in this context the discovery of the Hohle Fels 'Venus' and its archaeological and chronological context also gives some credibility to the cultural affiliation of the Grotte Chauvet, despite the issues relating to its radiometric dating (Pettitt 2008; but see Bednarik 2007). Altogether, this seems another case to support viewing the Aurignacian and subsequent techno-complexes such as the Gravettian/Périgordien supérieur as following a continuous cultural development and not as two separate complexes. At the same time, it must also be acknowledged that this process certainly was not a socially and spatially homogenous one and I certainly do not want to suggest this here. Both in the Aurignacian as well as in the subsequent periods variability in figurative expression existed that might be a product of the interplay of individual, social, ideological or geographic factors. The exploration of these requires further and more detailed investigations in the spirit outlined above. However, within the flexible social formations of the Early Upper Palaeolithic of Europe there also certainly was room for individual idiosyncratic variations and innovations in the form of material expressions that cannot be accommodated within structured sets of significance (Porr 2010). Examples of these might be the so-called 'Venus of Stratzing/Krems-Rehberg' (e.g. Neugebauer-Maresch 2007; Bednarik 1989) as well as the 'water bird' from Hohle Fels (Conard 2003). While the reading of these expressions do depend on a convincing determination of the depicted motifs (e.g. animal species, behaviours, sex etc.), they also serve as reminders that the metaphorical structures that I propose here to have guided human thinking, reflexion and perceptions did not determine material expressions, but they arise out of the interplay of socially shared and negotiated values as well as a particular perception of the environment that is equally shared and negotiated. Material expressions are parts of these dynamics and actively created by socially situated individuals. The former therefore show both a tendency to gravitate

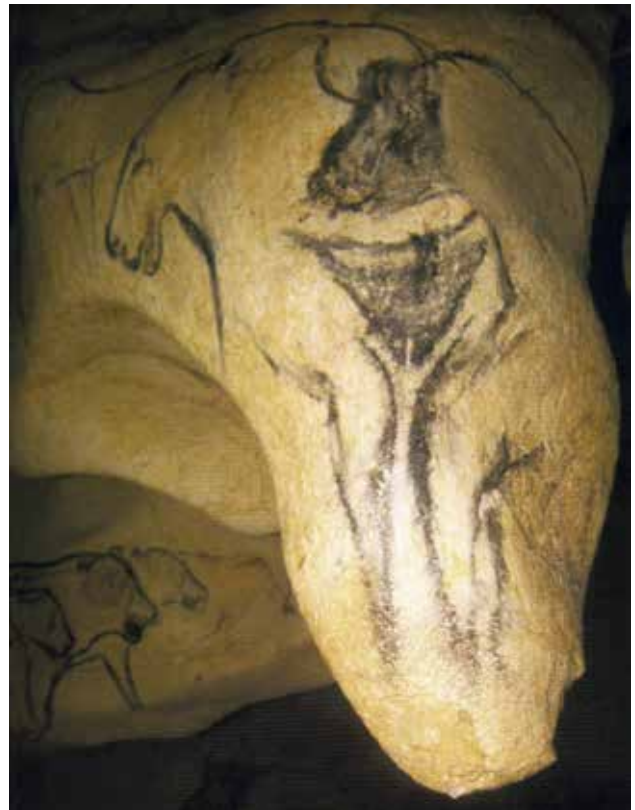


Figure 3. Arrangement of a female shape, a bison and a lion from Grotte Chauvet (Yanik Le Guillou, Ministère de la Culture).

towards certain motives and relations of significance and are equally characterised by individuality and idiosyncrasy to different degrees. These fundamental processes distinguish the approach presented here from explanations and approaches, which either view Palaeolithic figurative expressions as reactions towards material-ecological pressures or reflections of in-built mental structures (e.g. Leroi-Gourhan 1982; Conkey 1989; Barton et al 1994; Jochim 1983). In both cases individual humans are given no active role in the construction and negotiation of their social or ecological relationships. The recognition of these dynamics has to lead towards an acknowledgement of the situated constitution and use of material imagery and meanings in different contexts. In this sense, imagery has to be viewed from a relational and situated as opposed to an essential perspective that assumes fixed mental structures, mechanisms or orientations over time (e.g. Coward and Gamble in press). This approach does not deny the presence and relevance of deep and long-lasting traditions in thinking and material culture, but it draws attention to the necessity to understand the processes, how these are themselves established and reworked in different contexts over time and space by active and knowledgeable human beings (Porr 2002, 2010). In this sense, the following exploration of material culture and metaphorical meanings in contexts of

subsequent techno-complexes of central and eastern Europe does not argue for large-scale continuous development. It is an invitation to explore continuities and differences produced by past people in variable circumstance and in their daily attempts to understand their environment and themselves.

5. Metaphor and material culture during the Gravettian

In this section I want to briefly make some suggestions how the metaphorical discourses that connected men, women, animals and lifecycle events in the Aurignacian also had relevance in technologically and chronologically later contexts. During recent excavations in the Gravettian site of Krems-Wachtberg (Austria) an extraordinary double burial was discovered (Einwögerer et al. 2006). In this remarkable find two new-born infants were found together, covered in red ochre. It is very likely that these two infants were twins, who possibly died together at birth. This double burial was covered by the partly burned scapula of an adult mammoth, which rested on a mammoth tusk section. I want to suggest here that this arrangement was not accidental and neither was the choice of the involved materials. The mammoth bones in this burial show the deep significance of this animal in the context of life-cycle events such as birth and death. They show the intimate connections that were drawn between humans and animals in this context, which were both expressed through figurative representations as well as the use of particular animal remains. Indeed, this burial is only the latest example of a common practice during the central European Gravettian (Pavlovian), which could be observed in several cases in the sites of Předmostí and Dolní Věstonice (see Svoboda 2008 for a summary of the evidence). All of these individuals were buried under the strongest material as well as spiritual protection available at that time. Here, again the elements of protection, strength and life cycle events are interwoven within a metaphorical discourse that equally included humans and animals.

Before the discovery of the Hohle Fels 'Venus', figurative art objects of the Gravettian period showed only little resemblance to the repertoire of the Aurignacian (see White 2003 for a general overview and references). The Aurignacian is superseded by different varieties of later techno-complexes (Gravettian, Périgordien supérieur, Pavlovian, Streletskian, Spitzian, Gorodtsovian, Kostenkian) in Europe by c. 29 000 BP (Conard and Bolus 2003). Besides a general increase in the elaboration and number of depictions in different media, figurines and depictions of 'mature women' are a dominant feature during this time period. Soffer et al. (2000: 514) have remarked that probably no other items of Palaeolithic art have received as much attention as these so-called 'Venus' statuettes. They have also noted that most interpretations do not pay appropriate attention to the variability and contexts of these objects. With these cautionary comments in mind, it can still be

stressed that the overwhelming number of Gravettian female statuettes does indeed share the main stylistic conventions of the Aurignacian mammoth statuettes of southwest Germany. Both classes of objects can be characterised by an emphasis on the centre of the body, symmetry and closed and rounded forms. Most Gravettian statuettes also represent adult, mature or indeed older women (Bahn and Vertut 1988: 138). I do interpret these structural similarities as reflections of thematic continuities between the Aurignacian and the Gravettian, which were expressed in different material form. Beyond their individual variability, the Gravettian statuettes continue to transport a value system that emphasises maturity, experience, and a defensive and protective strength in connection with women (Porr 2004, 2010). These values and ideals were apparently already present during the Aurignacian of southwest Germany and mostly expressed through animal metaphors that were attached to real individual people. In the following periods similar ideas were perhaps regularly expressed by the creation of idealised depictions of adult and mature women.

With this background, it is necessary to examine Gravettian statuettes in their contexts more closely. It is quite significant that a large number of Gravettian female statuettes were found within living structures. Prominent examples are the massive structures at Avdeevo and Kostenki, where a large number of these figurines were placed in pits within large habitation structures (Soffer 1989, Soffer 1985 for a general overview). In France, at the other end of the Gravettian world, the famous female head of Brassempouy was also found below a fireplace (White 2003: 87). White (2003: 137-141, 2006) has recently summarised this impressive evidence, which clearly suggests the importance of these objects for the spiritual protection of the inner domestic sphere. I want to suggest here that these transformations are a consequence of the changes in mobility patterns and the spatio-temporal organisation of social relations. The Gravettian statuettes and their use reflect a stronger emphasis on locales and campsites, while the element of individual mobility and flexibility becomes less important. The explicit depiction of female human bodies might also suggest a greater differentiation of gender-specific roles. The ideal role of women as spiritual centres and guardians of the home base is now depicted in a much more obvious fashion. Sites like Kostenki, Avdeevo, Pavlov, Předmostí and Dolní Věstonice show that the later Early Upper Palaeolithic in central and eastern Europe was indeed characterised by the formation of larger social groups, a more pronounced social differentiation and a greater emphasis on the exploitation of large game animals which probably facilitated a more pronounced differentiation in gender-specific subsistence tasks (see Gamble 1982, 1986: 322-331, 1999 for a summary of the evidence). Consequently, the basic theme of Aurignacian ideology was indeed preserved in the Gravettian,

while the material forms had changed, placing a greater emphasis on locales and places.

6. Metaphor and place in the Aurignacian of southwest Germany

These observations, in turn, now also provide new insights into the possible significance of two figurines and their contexts from the southwest German Aurignacian. The Vogelherd was without doubt the richest Aurignacian site in the Swabian Jura Mountains (see Niven 2007 for references). It is located prominently in the Lone valley, near Ulm. The cave was completely excavated in 1931 by G. Riek over the course of ten weeks, leaving no archaeological deposits in original contexts (Floss 2007: 297; Hahn 1986). The exceptional character of the site can be explained by its favourable layout and position within the landscape in relation to different resources (Niven 2007: 363). The location provided a panoramic view with two of the three cave entrances facing to the south. The inside of the cave is both fairly open but well protected, consisting of passages between 15 and 25 m long, 2 and 7 m wide, and 2 and 3 m high. The information that Riek provided can give some general ideas about the character of the Aurignacian occupation and the use of space. Aurignacian cultural materials were found throughout the cave and outside of the entrances. Riek recorded six hearths, which were located around the cave entrances. Faunal remains were specifically found in front of the entrances, including a large pile of mammoth bones and tusks (Niven 2007: 363). Because of its favourable location, the intensity of occupation as well as the richness of material culture and features, the Vogelherd appears as a predecessor to the more permanently occupied campsites of the Gravettian.

Looking at the figurative art objects from this site, one piece now gains a new significance. Among the objects, fragments of a large mammoth statuette were found (Fig. 4). Only the front legs, hind legs and the back part of this statuette are preserved (Conard 2008; Floss 2007: 298–299). Taking into account the general proportions of the mammoths in the collection, the original statuette was possibly at least 15 cm in length or even longer. This is, of course, difficult to estimate. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that this would have been the largest mammoth statuette in the collection, which would probably have been too large to have been carried around on a regular basis (Hahn 1986: 75–77; Conard 2008). I consequently want to argue here that this mammoth statuette served the same spiritual purpose during the Aurignacian than the larger Venus statuettes during the Gravettian. It was not attached to an individual person, but was temporarily attached to the site of the Vogelherd itself, providing spiritual protection for this camp and the people living there. This interpretation is also supported by the reconstructed position of the art objects within the Vogelherd, which were found in the centre of the cave (Floss 2007: 306). According to the original

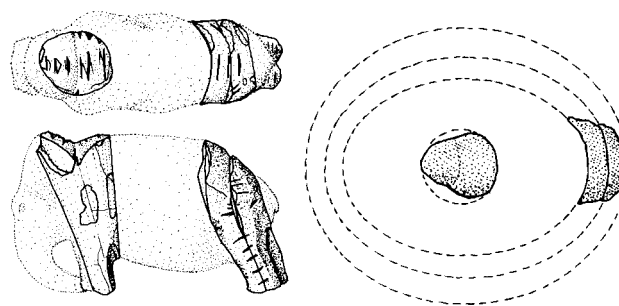


Figure 4. The fragments of the large mammoth statuette from Vogelherd cave (drawing by R. Ehmann; copyright University of Tübingen) (Conard 2008).

excavation documentation, the mammoth was here associated (together with the other figurative objects) with a large central hearth feature (Hahn 1986: 21). Even though more detailed information on its exact spatial position is not available, the object could have been intentionally placed in relation to the layout of the cave, the central hearth and the whole occupation site.

One further object in the collection now needs to be looked at in greater detail. This is the large therianthrope statuette (*Löwenmensch*) from the Hohlenstein-Stadel cave (Fig. 5). The exact details of the discovery of this extraordinary object have been published elsewhere (Hahn 1986; Schmid 1989; Wehrberger and Reinhardt 1994). Here, I want to draw attention to its relationship to the larger mammoth statuette from Vogelherd within the interpretative framework developed in this paper. It has to be noted that in their original form the therianthrope statuette from the Stadel and the Vogelherd ‘mammoth’ would have been the two largest statuettes in the Aurignacian art of Southwest Germany. This emphasises the importance that was placed on these animals by Aurignacian people. It is quite likely that this situation might well have contributed to the poor preservation of the mammoth statuette as larger pieces of ivory easily disintegrate over time in the sediment. The Stadel therianthrope also had to be pieced together from more than two hundred individual fragments (Schmid 1989). Both statuettes were found only a couple of hundred metres apart from each other. The Hohlenstein-Stadel cave is indeed within easy walking distance from the Vogelherd. As generally no clear chronological distinction can be made between the different Aurignacian sites in the Swabian Jura Mountains, it is entirely possible that both sites were occupied by the same group of Aurignacian people at the same time. In this case, both statuettes as well as both sites acquire a whole new level of significance.

It now appears to be highly significant that the statuette from the Stadel was indeed always recognised as the only statuette that was given a specific depositional treatment. Most recently, Floss (2007: 306) has stressed that this statuette was the only



Figure 5. *The therianthrope statuette (Löwenmensch) from the Hohlenstein-Stadel cave (photograph by T. Stephan; copyright Ulmer Museum).*

figurative object in the Hohlenstein-Stadel in the very deepest section of the cave where other depositional remains are becoming quite rare. I argue here that this placement in isolation and at this location was intentional and it was made to temporarily give the cave a specific significance through its connection to the statuette. I consequently want to argue here that the character and the contexts of these two statuettes signal the differential meaning that was given to these two sites by Aurignacian people. The large mammoth statuette is in correspondence to the long and intense occupation of the Vogelherd and the significance of this site in domestic terms and the reproduction of the group. The Hohlenstein-Stadel was a site with a different character, in opposition to the Vogelherd and connected to the male sphere in a more narrow sense of the term. In this context, it is significant that the Stadel statuette represents the

most impressive example of the fusion of animal and human characteristics in the collection and might be connected to 'shamanistic' ideas (Dowson and Porr 2001). It can consequently be argued that the Hohlenstein-Stadel was a special place connected with male shamanistic rituals that stood in opposition to the domestic and female sphere of the Vogelherd cave site. This view is further supported by the spatial character of both caves. The Vogelherd is a fairly open site that is widely visible. To a certain extent, it appears as a large tent and judging from the limited information on its spatial use it was also inhabited and used as one (Hahn 1986: 18–22). There is currently good evidence to support the interpretation that the Vogelherd served as a residential site that was intensively and repeatedly used during the Aurignacian (Niven 2007, 2008). In contrast, the Hohlenstein-Stadel (which is not visible from the Vogelherd) is a relatively long and deep cave, which would have allowed socially restricted practices to take place. New excavations have been on-going in the cave since 2009 under the direction of C.-J. Kind and the newly excavated materials might allow further insights into the significance of the site and its contents.

7. Conclusion

The new discovery of the 'Venus' from the Hohle Fels cave has opened up a whole new perspective on the development and significance of Palaeolithic art. The relationships between bodily practice and art objects need to be taken into account much more seriously in future interpretative approaches. Similarly, the role of metaphor in linking animal and human behaviour characteristics certainly needs to be looked at in more detail in the future. The extensive use of mammoth bones in the construction of habitation structures in central and eastern Europe was consequently very likely not only guided by purely practical necessities (see Gaudzinski et al. 2005: 189 for a summary). This paper should only draw attention to some of the new questions and possibilities that can now be addressed. As I have shown, this is not restricted to a re-thinking of stylistic trajectories, but can also be extended to our 'reading of the messages' of Palaeolithic art. I understand the examples presented here as a contribution to a new contextual understanding of Palaeolithic imagery that is not restricted to typological comparisons and should lead to an understanding of Palaeolithic imagery within a framework of the relational constitution of objects, humans and animals (Ingold 1991, 2000, 2004; Coward and Gamble in press). Such a framework would need to integrate different perspectives within one 'phenomenological ecology'. The discovery of the Hohle Fels 'Venus' allows not only viewing continuities between the Aurignacian and the following periods of the European Upper Palaeolithic. It draws attention to the fact that our early ancestors closely observed and understood the

animals in their environment and related them to their own experiences and practices. The people in the Palaeolithic perceived themselves as well as the animals in their environment within a complex set of differences and similarities. These were the conditions in which the creation of images and representations during the Palaeolithic took place.

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