

## BECOMING HUMAN

The Upper Palaeolithic era of Europe has left an abundance of evidence for symbolic activities, such as direct representations of animals and other features of the natural world, personal adornments, and elaborate burials, as well as other vestiges that are more abstract and cryptic. These behaviours are also exhibited by populations throughout the world, from the prehistoric period through to the present day. How can we interpret these activities? What do they tell us about the beliefs and priorities of the people who carried them out? How do these behaviours relate to ideologies, cosmology, and understanding of the world? What can they tell us about the emergence of ritual and religious thought? And how do the activities of humans in prehistoric Europe compare with those of their predecessors there and elsewhere?

In this volume, fifteen internationally renowned scholars contribute essays that explore the relationship between symbolism, spirituality, and humanity in the prehistoric societies of Europe and traditional societies elsewhere. The volume is richly illustrated with fifty halftones and twenty-four colour plates.

**Colin Renfrew** is Emeritus Disney Professor and Senior Fellow of the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research at Cambridge University. He is the author and editor of many publications, including *Archaeology: Theories, Methods and Practice*, with Paul Bahn, which is one of the standard textbooks on the subject.

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# BECOMING HUMAN: INNOVATION IN PREHISTORIC MATERIAL AND SPIRITUAL CULTURE

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## Foreword

Sir John Templeton believed that in their quest to comprehend foundational realities, scientists, philosophers, and theologians have much to learn about and from one another. For a decade now, the Humble Approach Initiative, a program of the John Templeton Foundation, has held symposia with a changing international cast of the most creative scholars from many disciplines who come together to pursue big, difficult, and invariably riveting questions. Some that have long engaged me, as student and teacher, stem from the fact that religious ideas often seem to develop in interaction with material culture. Looking at Palaeolithic art and recognizing that it is unlikely that there is only one meaning to thirty-five thousand years of image making, it is intriguing, nevertheless, to speculate whether these magnificent Ice Age representations of animal forms, rare human figures, and mysterious signs on cave walls may be expressions of religious feelings and notions – and, indeed, may actually shape subsequent emotions and concepts by serving as “tools” for future ritual practice. In light of a rich history of interpretation of these masterpieces – for example, theories that they signal a passage from the work world to the play world in a new era of free time and abundance; suggest totemism; reflect magical practices undertaken to bring about such desired ends as a plentiful hunt, fertility, and the destruction of enemies; or express concepts related to the structure and organization of the living world – what evidence, if any, exists that innovations in material cultures may be related to developments in religious ideas and behaviour? Can we infer anything from early prehistoric images about a possible link between spiritual development and human cultural creations? Is the deep cave filled with engravings and paintings a precursor of the shrine and temple? What was

the artist thinking as he or she drew? What accounts for the appearance of icons in some early prehistoric societies and not in others? Can studies of early cognition provide clues to the roots of spirituality in the underground chambers of the world? Does the content of mobiliary and parietal art, their archaeological contexts, and ethnological comparisons support a shamanic or other religious interpretation of subterranean picture making? Could the material expressions of the first biologically modern humans affect as well as reflect emerging systems of belief? Or are the productive, functional, and symbolic categories of Palaeolithic art makers forever beyond our grasp? Even as experts laboured to control the spread of fungi and bacteria in one world-renowned cave, France's celebrated Lascaux in the southernmost part of the Dordogne, the Périgord Noir, thirteen scientists and theologians met nearby in the village of Les Eyzies, the "capital of prehistory", to explore conjectured relationships between innovations in material and spiritual cultures, in the spring of 2004. One brought from a Middle Stone Age site in South Africa a few tiny perforated shells, dating back seventy-five thousand years, which may have been worn as beads and, if so, indicated symbolic thinking; all brought perspectives that caused their colleagues to look again at old questions in new light. Their conversation, which led to this book, fulfilled its sponsors' hopes that such symposia discussions will not only act as a corrective to parochialism but will also encourage discovery and accelerate its pace.

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