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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Contents

List of Figures and Plates  page vii
Picture Acknowledgements           xi
Contributors                      xiii
Foreword by Mary Ann Meyers       xvii

1 Introduction – Becoming human: changing perspectives on the emergence of human values  1
  Colin Renfrew

2 The emergence of symbolic thought: the principal steps of hominisation leading towards greater complexity  10
  Henry de Lumley

SECTION I: AFRICAN ORIGINS, EUROPEAN BEGINNINGS, AND WORLD PREHISTORY

3 The origins of symbolism, spirituality, and shamans: exploring Middle Stone Age material culture in South Africa  29
  Christopher Henshilwood

4 Neanderthal symbolic behaviour?  50
  Jane M. Renfrew

5 Identifying ancient religious thought and iconography: problems of definition, preservation, and interpretation  61
  Paul S. C. Tac¸on

6 Situating the creative explosion: universal or local?  74
  Colin Renfrew

SECTION II: APPROACHES TO ‘ART AND RELIGION’

7 The roots of art and religion in ancient material culture  95
  Merlin Donald
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Authors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>The archaeology of early religious practices: a plea for a hypothesis-testing approach</td>
<td>Francesco d’Errico</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Out of the mind: material culture and the supernatural</td>
<td>Steven Mithen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Of people and pictures: the nexus of Upper Palaeolithic religion, social discrimination, and art</td>
<td>David Lewis-Williams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Ritual and music: parallels and practice, and the Palaeolithic</td>
<td>Iain Morley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>SECTION III: THE EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Materiality and meaning-making in the understanding of the Palaeolithic ‘arts’</td>
<td>Margaret W. Conkey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Sticking bones into cracks in the Upper Palaeolithic</td>
<td>Jean Clottes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Cognition and climate: why is Upper Palaeolithic cave art almost confined to the Franco-Cantabrian region?</td>
<td>Paul Mellars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>SECTION IV: REFLECTIONS ON THE ORIGINS OF SPIRITUALITY</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Interdisciplinary perspectives on human origins and religious awareness</td>
<td>J. Wentzel van Huyssteen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Innovation in material and spiritual culture: exploring conjectured relationships</td>
<td>Keith Ward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Index</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Contents</strong></td>
<td>269</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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List of Figures and Plates

Figures

2.1 Chopper on a trachyte pebble, Hadar, Ethiopia.  
2.2 Rhyolite flake, Hadar, Ethiopia.  
2.3 Chopper on a quartz pebble, Omo, Ethiopia.  
2.4 Quartz flake, Omo, Ethiopia.  
2.5 Basalt handaxe, Afar, Ethiopia.  
2.6 Quartz handaxe, Caune de l’Arago, France.  
2.7 Hornblend handaxe (Durandal), Caune de l’Arago, France.  
2.8 Handaxe, Nadaouiyeh, Syria.  
2.9 Hearth at Menez Dregan I, France.  
2.10 Hearth at Terra Amata, France.  
2.11 Accumulation of human remains, Sima de los Huesos, Atapuerca, Spain.  
2.12 Individual mortality according to age and sex at Sima de los Huesos, Atapuerca, Spain.  
2.13 Child’s grave, Qafzeh cave, Israel.  
2.14 Neanderthal burial, La Ferrassie, France.  
2.15 Neanderthal burial, La Chapelle-aux-Saints, France.  
2.16 Statue of a man with lion’s head from Hohle Fels, Germany.  
2.18 “The divine primordial couple”, Mount Bego, France.  
5.1 Symmetrical handaxe from Sterkfontein, South Africa.  
6.1 Venus of Willendorf, Austria.  
6.2 Venus of Brassempouy, France.  
6.3 Venus of Lespugue, France.  
6.4 Map of the distribution of Venus figurines c. 23,000 to c.21,000 bc.  
6.5 Venus of Dolni Véstonice, Moravia.  
6.6 Spear thrower from Mas d’Azil, France.  
6.7 Map of locations of spear-throwers from Palaeolithic Europe.
### List of Figures and Plates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>Venus of Laussel, France.</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>Clay bison, Tuc d’Audobert, France.</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.10</td>
<td>“Female sex” carved in bas-relief, Abri Cellier, France.</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>Bovid rib with blood vessel lines, Pech de l’Azé, France.</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>Perforated cave-bear fémur, Divje babe II, Slovenia.</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>Occurrence of “modern” traits in the African, Near Eastern, and European archaeological records.</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>Nassarius kraussianus shell beads, Blombos cave, South Africa.</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>Finger tracings superimposed on cave bear scratches, Chauvet cave, France.</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>Children’s footprints in a side gallery of Niaux Cave, France.</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>Charcoal heaps, Chauvet cave, France.</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>Stone plaquette and bones inserted in the ground, Enlène, France.</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>Bone pieces forcibly inserted into cracks, Enlène, France.</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>Bone pieces forcibly inserted into cracks, Enlène, France.</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>Reindeer antler inserted into soil in a recess, Fontanet cave, France.</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>Cave bear humerus inserted halfway into the ground, Chauvet cave, France.</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>Cave bear humerus inserted halfway into the ground, Chauvet cave, France.</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.10</td>
<td>Bone inserted into crack near stencilled hands, Gargas cave, France.</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>Distribution of Upper Palaeolithic cave art in Europe.</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>Reconstructed climatic fluctuations in central France over the past sixty thousand years.</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>Reconstructed distribution of vegetation zones in Europe at the Last Glacial Maximum.</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>Frequencies of different animals during Palaeolithic occupation of La Ferrassie, France.</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>Percentages of reindeer remains from Upper Palaeolithic sites in southwestern France (upper diagram) compared with those from preceding Mousterian (Neanderthal) sites.</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>Characteristic stone and bone tools of the Azilian period in southwest France.</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Plates**

*Colour plates follow page xvi*

I Rose coloured handaxe (Excalibur) Sima de los Huesos, Atapuerca Spain.
List of Figures and Plates

II Statue of a man with lion’s head from Hohlenstein-Stadel, Germany.
III Scene from Lascaux shaft, Lascaux cave, France.
IV Engraved ochre from Blombos Cave, South Africa.
V Nassarius kraussianus marine shell beads from Blombos Cave, South Africa.
VI Therianthrope and Dynamic Figure, Kakadu National Park, Australia.
VII Kangaroo-headed being with legs crossed, Kakadu National Park, Australia.
VIII The “Eagle Ancestor”, Wollemi National Park, Australia.
IX Early depiction of a Rainbow Serpent, Kakadu National Park, Australia.
X Rainbow Serpent and 13 flying foxes, Australia.
XI Double-headed thylacine, Kakadu National Park, Australia.
XII Thylacine with a woven bag, Arnhem Land, Australia.
XIII Bison on the ceiling of Altamira Cave, Spain.
XIV Horse, Le Portel Cave, France.
XV Rhinoceroses, Chauvet cave, France.
XVI Feline, Apollo 11 Cave, Namibia.
XVII Hand stencils, Gargas, France.
XVIII Hand stencils, Argentina.
XIX Palimpsest of painting and engraving, Lascaux, France.
XX Monolith at Göbekli Tepe, Turkey.
XXI Monolith at Göbekli Tepe, Turkey.
XXII Modified pigments and ochred stone artefacts.
XXIII Near-contemporary shamanic and ritual artefacts.
XXIV Recent deposits of small beads and other deposits, Arroe Rock, Montana, USA.
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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.

Mary Ann Meyers
Senior Fellow
John Templeton Foundation