

Book Reviews

Emmanuel Guy. *Ce que l'art préhistorique dit de nos origines* (Paris: Éditions Flammarion, 2017, 340pp., 23 colour illustr., pbk, ISBN 978-2-0814-1245-3)

Endeavouring to bring together anthropological, archaeological, and art historical contributions within the field of Upper Palaeolithic rock-art studies, Emmanuel Guy proposes an ambitious and challenging hypothesis in his latest work *Ce que l'art préhistorique dit de nos origines*: that imagery from the period represents heraldic crests materializing dominance of resource exploitation by existing elites. Drawing on previous research by Brian Hayden (2007) and Alan Testart (1982), but also by Laming-Emperaire (1962) and Leroi-Gourhan (1964), Guy begins by calling attention to the evidence available in the ethnographic record regarding pre-Neolithic societies in which social inequality is the rule (Ch. 1). This rightly contradicts the well-liked 'peaceful savage' notion inherited from Romanticism that still has currency within some spheres of academia, akin to idealist notions on the intrinsic good nature of human beings (see also recent work by Grünberg, 2016). Perhaps it is correct to suggest that no human society is totally egalitarian; there are always differences crafted along biological and cultural lines such as gender, age, or skill. Be that as it may, the ethnographic record is rich in case studies of different societies classically designated as 'non-egalitarian' and 'egalitarian' (Testart, 1982).

The author then proceeds to suggest that the existence of particular regions sufficiently rich in resources (i.e. game, fisheries, supply of edible high-protein plants) during the European Ice Age, specifically

those featuring a concentration of rock-art, such as the Franco-Cantabrian arc (Ch. 2), fostered the emergence of ruling classes (Ch. 3) in the form of 'feudal' power networks (Chs 4–6). These used the symbols that were given visual form by rock-art as a means to perpetuate their rule, basing their authority in mandates of power bestowed by mythical animal ancestors. In this sense, the arguments put forward are clearly rooted in totemic approaches to (Ice Age) rock-art.

Guy presents an engaging and well-defended case, particularly when arguing for practices of food conservation, the resulting resource storage, and semi-sedentarization, or when emphasizing rock-art's political dimension. This reviewer—working from the particular case of Gravettian-Solutrean rock-art in the Côa Valley, Portugal and its affinities with Western Europe's Ice Age art from the same period—has proposed a similar argument, based on style, thematic recurrence, and superposition, to suggest strong ties between art and political compromise-making (Fernandes, 2018). These same attributes—figures obeying stereotyped canons scattered in clusters ranging across vast areas of Europe and reaching eastern North Africa in Qurta, Egypt (Ch. 8); relatively few themes portrayed (mainly herbivores, namely the 'big four' of horse, aurochs, goat, and deer); and the over-usage of only *meaningful* panels in caves or open-air sites to depict imagery, some presenting large accumulations of motifs—are skilfully used by Guy to assert the clear ideological content of Ice Age rock-art, although some

lines of reasoning are somewhat overstretched. Indeed, this is the case when suggesting that rock-art from the Ice Age is overwhelmingly non-narrative (pp. 172–74), side-stepping the role oral traditions and/or motion-depicting motifs (Luís & Fernandes, 2009) may have played in making figures come alive, thus becoming more appealing characters within different storytelling formats; or when equating a supposed obsession of Ice Age artists for imitation of natural shapes and proportions with the prestige sought by commissioning ruling houses (Introduction; Ch. 7). Such an obsession with imitation cannot be generalized to the whole rock-art corpus in question. For instance, Côa Valley Gravettian-Solutrean zoomorphic depictions—the only kind from that period at the Portuguese site—are almost always depicted without hoofs.

From these last points another supposition arises: the existence of some degree of ‘labour’ specialization, as presumed by the existence of expert artists—who would have attended ‘training schools’ (pp. 187–92)—from whom works could be ordered (Ch. 6). That being the case, how can one not envision that other trades could also have existed (hunter, gatherer, skinner, seamstress, tool or weapon-maker, etc.)? And, hence, that the few symbols used in rock-art might not represent ruling houses but rather ‘guilds’? Or, alternatively, that these same signs stood for collective symbols within a social, economic, and cultural framework acknowledged by different groups that partly or totally shared the same territory in a fashion of solidarity? Or even for fixed/fluid social aggregation identities, pervasive throughout different groups, bound, for instance, by totemic beliefs and defined according to age or gender, or other attributes less identifiable today? This is perhaps the major argument preventing an unreserved acceptance of Guy’s chief hypothesis: a too-narrow

interpretation for the use of rock-art that self-excludes all others. If motifs stood for ruling houses it is unlikely they would have been effective at representing dissimilar social categories such as guilds, clans, or totems. In fact, if totemic interpretations of Ice Age rock-art are making a determined comeback (see Santos, 2017, *a propos* the Côa Valley’s most ancient rock-art periods), it is believed that their allure rests on the fact that they stay open-ended. If imagery indeed plays an ideological role in establishing social compromises and in ordering affairs between different interest groups, then the precise structure of both symbols and groups, more than just being totally unperceivable today, is perhaps best recognized as having been composed of diverse and dynamic, thus changing, degrees of meaning attribution.

It is interesting to note that Guy composes a quite suggestive account of climatic alterations during the Ice Age and their serious impacts on existing human lifestyles, specifically at its closing stage (Chs 9 and 10), without, however, considering their troubling implications for the longevity of the supposedly prestige-granting, thus social-control-facilitating, ‘feudal’ role of rock-art production. While Chapter 7 deals with the specific case of Magdalenian rock-art, its precise characteristics are regarded as another developmental stage in the aforementioned use of imagery. Yet Magdalenian rock-art production at the Côa, for instance, is mainly characterized by minute dimensions and fine-line technical execution of motifs—a stark contrast with the predominantly larger, pecked and abraded figures of more archaic periods. In fact, Côa Magdalenian art is usually considered to have had a less ‘public’ nature, thus not to have been as visible as Gravettian-Solutrean motifs. How would these figures be effective as imposing symbols given their lesser visibility?

Picking up the above point regarding slow-paced but steady social change, it is worth noting Santos' pertinent suggestion regarding the long diachronic evolution of Upper Palaeolithic rock-art cycles at Côa. Santos proposes that the precise characteristics of archaic (namely Gravettian-Solutrean) and more recent (namely Magdalenian) imagery are better interpreted if it is considered that the former was produced by societies following a totemic ontology while the latter results from a gradual shift towards an animistic system of belief (2017: 411–17),

The idea of palaeocapitalism leads to a major objection to Guy's work, since its logical consequence may support the contentious notion of Western primacy, throughout the ages and today, cumulatively materialized in the wide acceptance of the social, moral, economic, and even ontological values inherent to capitalism—even if more often than not forcefully imposed on both non-Western and Western societies over the course of the centuries (see, especially regarding the former, Diamond, 2017). The idea that palaeocapitalism made use of art to retain control during the *European Ice Age*, thus kick-starting the journey that brought the planet to its current shape, borders on the teleological, besides the more evident supremacist implications. Indeed, making twisted justice of the global history of the last 30,000 years or so, it might even suggest an update of the classic neoliberal dictum that was again quite in vogue just a few years ago (and still is?): from 'There is no alternative' to 'There has never been an alternative!' Hence, where Guy suggests accumulation, hoarding, and palaeocapitalism (Ch. 6; Conclusion), why not consider some sort of communal arrangements, also mediated by the use of rock-art symbols, for the sharing of resources and/or resource procurement territories; between guilds, different interest groups, 'clans', or even *proto*-social classes belonging to nonetheless *pre/non*-capitalist societies?

As Diamond (2017) or Morris (2010) suggested, if it wasn't for a specific set of circumstances at play—some haphazard, some forcefully imposed/procured—Europe might have been replaced in its 'civilizing' lead by other parts of the planet, namely areas of Eastern Asia or Central/South America—where, by the way, art forms had reached sophisticated expression levels *and* were used to uphold social control. If given the chance to develop 'naturally' (and, in the case of the American continent, to defend themselves against transcontinental foreigners equipped, as Diamond aptly evokes, with *Guns, Germs, and Steel*), all the different societies in those areas may have reached, jointly or separately, other forms of social organization, quasi-egalitarian or not, but in any case different from where *Western* capitalism, as typically defined, has led. On the other hand, from an evolutionary point of view, the notion of palaeocapitalism likely overemphasizes the competitive nature of human societies, perhaps overlooking the fact that it goes hand in hand with another important mechanism: cooperation. Both have been instrumental in the development of the species. Thus, rock-art production might 'be best understood if seen as having played a relevant part in continuous networked processes of political conciliation, authority sharing and/or transference' (Fernandes, 2018: 295).

All considered, *Ce que l'art préhistorique dit de nos origins* constitutes a highly stimulating read that has the potential to inform current and future debates regarding the motivations behind European Ice Age rock-art production. Nevertheless, further editions should take the opportunity to correct some minor inaccuracies of this first version, namely incomplete referencing in the text (ideas arising from the literature are inconsistently cited), incorrect bibliographic entries (for instance, on p. 183 the Ghemis et al., 2011 reference is truncated since the

bibliographic entry on p. 325 lists Clottes, J. as first author), and a lack of acknowledgement of the origin and manipulation of some of the illustrations. This is perhaps the major technical flaw of the book since the source of all the rock-art tracings pertaining to the Côa Valley, as well as to other Iberian and French sites (figs 8, 9 and 13B; p. 339), is not indicated. Moreover, in the case of the tracing of Côa Valley's Penascosa 3, present in Figure 13B, only about half of the imagery was selected to be included in this illustration when other motifs of Gravettian-Solutrean chronology are present in that panel and were documented by the team working at Côa (Santos, 2017: 265–66, Vol. I; 64–67, Vol. II). Finally, an index would be a useful addition.

To conclude, Guy's effort should be praised since, as quoted in the book, 'even if (hypotheses) are unacceptable, they stimulate, precisely by their inadequacies, the critique and research that will be able to surmount them' (Lévi-Strauss, 1945: 171, translation by the reviewer). Hence, what are considered to be over-assertions regarding palaeocapitalism, namely when advocating for a linkage between rock-art symbols and ruling elites, should not lessen the valuable insights that can be drawn from the well-articulated and researched case presented, notably regarding semi-sedentarization, food conservation and storage practices, and, above all, the political significance of rock-art during the European Ice Age.

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