

Shorter Note

Humans, Animals and the Domestication of Visual Images

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The last two issues of this journal have included contributions on very similar topics. Alasdair Whittle (2000) has investigated the relationship between the distinctive imagery of Breton menhirs and the adoption of agriculture in northwest France, whilst a number of writers have reviewed Jacques Cauvin's book *The Birth of the Gods and the Origins of Agriculture* which examines the relationship between symbolic systems and the beginnings of farming in the Near East (Cauvin *et al.* 2001). In each case the discussion extends from the material aspects of food production to its ideological significance. For both Cauvin and Whittle the argument focuses on the interpretation of ancient 'art'. In commenting on this approach, I shall try to take their case a little further.

The illustrative fallacy

In both study areas the discussion has emphasized the distinctive subject matter of ancient visual images: models of humans and animals in Cauvin's work, and carvings of artefacts and animals in Whittle's study (the latter group also includes what may be drawings of whales). It would be a mistake to take these images literally and to regard them as depictions of everyday life, and neither author follows that path. Even so, the 'illustrative fallacy' has had a considerable influence in European archaeology. It is why some authorities distinguish between the Hunters' Art of northern Scandinavia and the Farmers' Art found in areas further to the south. The pictures are used as evidence of the subsistence economy, yet it is clear that in fact these styles overlapped in space and time (Sognnes 1995).

The same applies to the Levantine Art of south-east Spain, which is largely taken up with humans and wild animals. Because this style includes many hunting scenes, it has often been dated to the Mesolithic period, but recent work suggests that it post-

dates an earlier group of paintings which include similar designs to the Cardial Ware of the early Neolithic (Martí Oliver & Hernández Pérez 1988).

In fact, the animals portrayed in prehistoric art may have had a metaphorical significance, and that could explain why there are so many areas in which pictures or models of domesticates are under-represented in relation to their wild equivalents. Even when domesticates are shown, a similar point can be made by comparing the depictions of animals with the faunal remains excavated on the same sites. This procedure is followed by Cauvin (2000) and it provides a further argument that these images were not a direct reflection of the subsistence economy. The commonest animals among the ceramic models were not the most frequent in the bone assemblage (Cauvin 2000, 32).

The distinction between humans and animals

Whittle observes that depictions of animals are especially common at the time when farming was first adopted:

There are interesting . . . [occurrences] of representational or semi-representational styles which emphasize natural creatures, before or at the transition to different lifestyles. These largely seem to disappear subsequently, to be replaced either by abstract motifs or by the tradition of anthropomorphic figurines. (Whittle 2000, 255)

It certainly seems as if the relationship between humans and animals was an important concern at that time.

If species identifications provide a misleading impression, are there other ways of considering this topic? A number of writers have suggested that hunter-gatherers may not necessarily consider themselves in different terms from the animals on which they depend. The very idea that humans and animals are different in kind may be alien to their way of thinking. Thus Tim Ingold writes of 'animals as persons' (Ingold 2000, 90) and Nurit Bird-David has emphasized the affinity between hunter-gatherers and their prey. Hunters may not think of the natural world in terms of control over resources, and in-

stead they employ metaphors of procreation and kinship (Bird-David 1990; 1992). That could be why it is conceivable for people to turn into animals or for animals to be transformed into human beings. These are not always distinct categories. The boundaries are by no means fixed and for that reason the lives of hunters and animals maintain an essential continuity. But that kind of reciprocity breaks down with the development of farming, for this involves a quite different kind of relationship. It enforces a separation between the farmers and their livestock which, for Ingold, is the difference between 'trust' and 'domination' (Ingold 2000, 61–76).

How might this be reflected in the evidence of prehistoric images? If it is not enough to identify the species that are represented, is another approach more rewarding?

One comparatively rare feature seems worth discussing here. This is the presence in different art styles of the composite human and animal images that are sometimes called therianthropes. These have a most distinctive distribution among the art styles of Mesolithic and Neolithic Europe. Whilst they are never particularly common, virtually all the examples come from societies who practised hunting, gathering and fishing. They are virtually absent from the arts of early farmers. The oldest images date from the Upper Palaeolithic period and the latest come from communities who were experiencing their first contacts with domesticates. By contrast, the imagery of the developed Neolithic makes a far greater separation between humans and animals, even when wild species are involved.

Such images have generally been interpreted in terms of altered states of consciousness, for in the ethnographic record it is common for shamans to assume the form of animals (Halifax 1980), but that may be only one manifestation of a wider principle according to which those categories overlapped. The clearest evidence of this relationship comes from three distinct areas of Europe in which we can compare the visual imagery of hunter-gatherers with that of early farmers.

Overlap and separation: images of animals and humans

The first example comes from Lepenski Vir. In this case it seems clear that the people who occupied the Iron Gates were in contact with early farmers in neighbouring areas (Garašanin & Radovanović 2001). But their visual imagery was completely different. The occupants of Lepenski Vir produced a series of

striking sculptures of strange composite creatures, half humans and half fish. Radovanović (1997) has suggested that these were modelled on the beluga which moves up and down the Danube and that the stone carvings might have been depictions of the ancestors. On the Neolithic sites of similar age in the Balkans, very different images were made. They were formed out of clay and consisted of stylized human figures and animals (Bailey 2000, 94–115). There is little to suggest that these categories overlapped. People and animals were evidently regarded as quite separate entities.

A rather similar contrast can be recognized in southern Spain, although in this case there is clear evidence of a change in the character of visual imagery over time. The main source of information comes from painted caves, although a very few designs overlap with pottery decoration. At some sites different paintings are superimposed but for the most part it is that link with diagnostic ceramics that provides the vital dating evidence. It suggests that the paintings attributed to the 'Macroschematic' style are contemporary with the use of Cardial Ware at the transition to the Neolithic period and that they were replaced in a later phase by the repertoire of Levantine Art (Martí Oliver & Hernández Pérez 1988). Macroschematic Art is characterized by elaborate abstract images and figures that seem to combine the features of humans and animals. These have been little discussed, but they contrast sharply with the figures found in the succeeding style of rock painting. Levantine Art includes numerous hunting scenes, but in this case the animals are portrayed in a naturalistic manner whilst the humans are highly stylized. There is very little evidence of composite figures (Beltrán 1982). Even though there are many paintings of hunting scenes, the people shown in these panels are clearly distinguished from the animals.

The last example comes from Scandinavia. Here it has been common to contrast the Hunters' Art of the north with the Farmers' Art found in the south, but, as we have seen, this is rather misleading, for there was a certain overlap between the two traditions (Sognnes 1995). Even so, there are areas in northern Scandinavia where there is very little evidence of agriculture during the currency of the rock carvings. It is precisely in those regions, at major complexes like Vingen, Nämforsen and Alta, that carvings of composite human-animals or human-fish are found (Bøe 1932; Hallström 1960; Helskog 1988). They occur on sites which depict large numbers of game and are by no means common. They are represented in much the same proportions as the

therianthropes in Upper Palaeolithic art.

The use of northern Scandinavian rock art extended into the period in which a new series of images was being created in areas further to the south, although these date mainly from the Bronze Age. Their distribution is certainly consistent with the areas with a farming economy, although both wild and domesticated animals are portrayed in the rock carvings. Once again there is little sign of composite images that combined the characteristics of humans and animals (Malmer 1981).

In each of these cases, there is a similar contrast between an art style associated with late hunter-gatherers and one made by the first farmers. The ages of these separate styles vary widely and so do the chronological intervals between them, but in each case it seems that the merging of human and animal identities is a feature that was present before the adoption of domesticates and largely absent after that time. It makes no difference whether the later styles portray wild or domesticated animals, agriculture or hunting scenes. The major element is that the people and animals portrayed in the same scenes were increasingly distinct from one another. It may be a reflection of the wider changes that made early farming possible, and that is why this evidence is so relevant to the issues raised by Whittle and by Cauvin.

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