

## THE WRITING ON THE WALL

We have termed the ecstatic experience a "primary phenomenon" because we see no reason whatever for regarding it as the result of a particular historical moment, that is, as produced by a certain form of civilization.

—Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*

Secularisation . . . is an age-old cosmological type . . . which need have nothing to do with urban life or modern science. . . . The idea that primitive man is by nature deeply religious is nonsense. . . . The illusion that all primitives are pious, credulous and subject to the teaching of priests or magicians has probably done even more to impede our understanding of our own civilisation than it has confused the interpretations of archaeologists dealing with the dead past.

—Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols*

I recall being asked, some years ago, by someone at a conference I was attending, what I was currently working on. Like many writers, this is a question I try to evade, since I have a fear that if I talk about my work I shall become less motivated to do it. So in response I murmured something about Paleolithic consciousness, thinking this would be sufficiently obscure as to discourage any further exploration of the topic. However, my questioner was not to be put off, and her rejoinder went to the heart of the matter. "What are you using for research?" she quipped; "psychedelics?"

It is a common notion, going back to the nineteenth century but kept alive by writers such as Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell, that primitive humanity was up to its eyeballs in trance, myth, and shamanism and that this was the "true" consciousness of the human race, its "natural mind." The assumption here is that the "natural" mind is a religious one; that transcendent experience of an Absolute,

a “wholly Other,” is the touchstone of sacred experience, absolutely necessary for human beings to exist in the world and have meaning in their lives. Openly or implicitly assuming the existence of a mythic substrate, or universal psyche, scholars such as Sir James Frazer (*The Golden Bough*) elaborated a comparative mythology, in which some so-called archetype—heroism, let us say, or sympathetic magic—is purportedly shown to be present in every primitive culture around the globe, past or present. Thus, Mircea Eliade, in his very influential book on shamanism, wrote that there was a dialectic of the sacred that tends to repeat archetypes, such that one hierophany was equivalent to any other, even if the two were separated by a thousand years. The process of sacralizing reality, Eliade asserted, whether of a tree, a rock, or a god, was always the same. The shaman’s ability to leave his body and ascend to the heavens, he argued, was a primordial phenomenon; “it belongs to man as such, not to man as a historical being.” Eliade held that at the dawn of time, there was a free and easy communication between humans and gods but that this got lost, and after the “fall from grace” only certain privileged persons had the power of transcendent or ecstatic experience. The shaman, he concluded, was thus part of a mystical elite that guarded the soul of the community.<sup>1</sup>

What might be the evidence for this? The fact is that the belief in the great antiquity of the “ascent” tradition, in which the soul goes up to heaven and merges with the “Absolute,” is not merely the belief of a few easily persuaded New Age devotees or contemporary mystics; it has been held by a variety of scholars interested in Paleolithic art. Indeed, some form of religious explanation of cave art and related material seems to have been the rule for most of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> Thus, we find, in the cave of Les Trois Frères in the Pyrenees, a painting of a figure—often referred to as the “sorcerer”—wearing a mask and the antlers of a deer, which the eminent French scholar, the abbé Henri Breuil, took to be a Paleolithic god and which has often been regarded as a dancing shaman (Figures 2 and 3). On the walls of Lascaux, we see a stiff, prostrate figure lying on the ground and a symbolic bird on a stick depicted alongside it—clearly, to Eliade and others, a shaman in trance (Figure 4). At the Grotta Guattari in Italy, a Neanderthal cranium was discovered in 1939, of which the *foramen magnum* was enlarged, suggesting that the brains had been removed and eaten. The cranium also, supposedly, was found sitting within a ring of stones. And at Pech-Merle in the Dordogne, as well as at Le Tuc d’Audoubert in the Pyrenees, children’s footprints appear in the caves, said by some archaeologists to bear witness



Figure 2. The "Sorcerer" of Trois Frères. From Paolo Graziosi, *Paleolithic Art*.

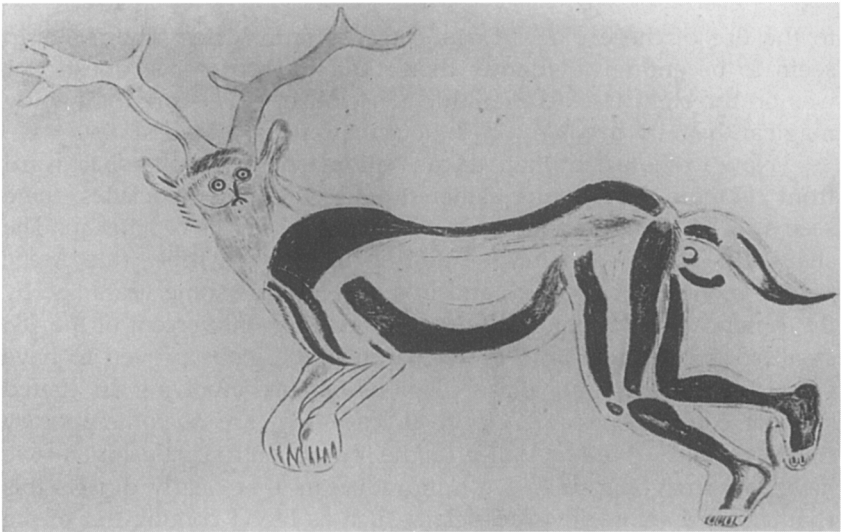


Figure 3. The "Sorcerer" of Trois Frères, Version by Henri Breuil. From Paolo Graziosi, *Paleolithic Art*.



Figure 4. Bison, Prostrate Figure, and Bird at Lascaux. From Mario Ruspoli, *The Cave of Lascaux*.

to the use of these places for ancient initiation rites. There would seem to be enough evidence, then, that my conference questioner was on the right track: Paleolithic consciousness was predominantly magical, heavily involved in the cultivation of altered states.<sup>3</sup>

Now to the extent that we can legitimately extrapolate backward from contemporary hunter-gatherers and other tribal societies, there seems to be good ethnographic evidence for such a conclusion. The shaman is obviously a major figure in many such tribes (the Arctic region is notorious for this), and in a survey done some years ago by the American anthropologist Erika Bourguignon, 90 percent of the 488 small societies she examined from around the globe proved to have some form of institutionalized religious practice involving an altered state of consciousness (ASC). In at least one case of contemporary trance practice—the *!kia* dance of the *!Kung* Kalahari Bushmen—we have rock art going back five hundred years that clearly depicts this shamanic behavior, down to details such as blood coming out of the nose. So the ethnographic parallels would seem to be fairly good.<sup>4</sup>



In consequence, I am not going to argue that Paleolithic humans did not have a spiritual life nor that things such as ecstatic trance, spirit possession, and sympathetic magic were necessarily absent from it. The traditional "religious" interpretation of the Paleolithic may indeed be true. The real problem is that regardless of what is painted on the walls of French caves, we cannot know what was going on beyond our own interpretations of those paintings because no one was running around the Paleolithic with a video camera, conducting interviews. More than religious interpretations are possible, and indeed, a number of scholars have made them.<sup>5</sup> As for ethnographic parallels, they are very suggestive, but we have no proof that what is going on today among HGs was also going on twenty thousand or forty thousand years ago. Contemporary trance behavior could reflect modern developments, for all we know. What I am going to propose, then, following the suggestion already made in the introduction, is that sacred experience did exist in the Paleolithic, but that for the most part, it was not the sort envisioned by writers such as Eliade. Instead, what was dominant was a more horizontal spirituality, a persistent "secular" tradition that is a lot less exotic, but that, because of its obviousness (and our own fascination with the exotic), has escaped our attention. This may, in turn, give us some insight into what our "spiritual birthright" really is, and what that means in political and religious terms. Before I can do that, however, we need to take a closer look at the evidence already presented and come to terms with the weaknesses of the vertical, and/or magical, religious approach.

### Religion in the Paleolithic?

Part of the problem is the comparative method itself, which, as Eliade, Jung, and others admit, is not concerned with context. As Jane Harrison put it in her classic work, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, "mythologists are slow to face solid historical fact." It might be more accurate to say that they are oblivious to it. Thus the anthropologist Felicitas Goodman characterizes the approach as simplistic, one in which "snippets are cut from all sorts of religions which are then assembled into a collage of doubtful value." It is not that comparative methodology is faulty by definition; there are many good comparative analyses around. But the disconnection of psychological or religious practices from their historical embeddedness typically results in feel-good generalizations that have no basis in reality. To pick out any

given item or pattern from a number of different cultures and insist that they are equivalent, or to force a single pattern onto a large body of material without historical qualification, is unacceptable from a social science point of view and usually violates common sense as well. Writers such as Joseph Campbell and Eliade, however, ultimately had no real interest in data; they were on vision-quests, not scholarly quests, and had their answer in advance. Their examples presuppose a universal mythic substrate and then, in circular fashion, are used to "prove" the existence of that substrate. If this gets a lot of people excited, it is almost invariably at the expense of intellectual integrity.<sup>6</sup>

Given this caveat, the evidence provided above for trance practice in the Paleolithic begins to look a little less convincing. Although certain cave paintings are very suggestive, they do have a Rorschach-like quality, in that we are projecting twentieth-century religious yearnings onto a screen, as it were. The prostrate figure at Lascaux, for example, was first interpreted (1952) as a shaman in trance by the German writer Horst Kirchner, based on comparisons with contemporary bird symbolism in some tribal cultures. But unless one *assumes* the existence of certain psychological universals as a fact, there is no way of proving that contemporary and Paleolithic bird symbolism have the same meaning. As Eliade himself admitted, at least one other scholar saw the bird on a stick as a memorial image, while Nancy Sandars (*Prehistoric Art in Europe*) regards it as a spear thrower. Kirchner also argued that certain unidentified objects found at prehistoric sites were shamans' drumsticks (*Kommandostäbe*), based (again) on contemporary ethnographic similarities. But this too is a case of modern projection; we simply have no way of knowing what such sticks were used for. Magical practice is only one possibility.<sup>7</sup>

A similar objection can be made regarding the "sorcerer" of Trois Frères, an image that has been taken to be hard-core evidence for ASCs in the Paleolithic. Indeed, looking at the abbé Breuil's reconstruction of it (Figure 3), it seems hard to avoid a sense of magical significance here, and the painting is commonly regarded as depicting a man wearing an animal mask and performing a ritual dance. For six decades, Breuil was the key figure in the documentation of Paleolithic art, and his views had an enormous influence. It is his tracings and copies that are reproduced in most works on cave art, illustrations that have become more familiar to us than the originals. Yet his ideas regarding that art were neither original nor profound, and they were devoid of any specific comment. Under the influence of writers such as James Frazer, Breuil adopted a religious or totemic view very early in his career and never wavered from it.

All human representations were seen as sorcerers or spirits; all Paleolithic caves had to be, ipso facto, sanctuaries for sacred activities. The result, write Paul Bahn and Jean Vertut in *Images of the Ice Age*, is that we are always getting the "Breuil version," "Paleolithic figures that have passed through a standard 'Breuil process': they are subjective copies, not faithful facsimiles." Breuil typically waited years—twenty, in the case of the Trois Frères "sorcerer"—to redraw his tracings for publication, and this led to numerous errors. Thus, he sometimes filled in missing elements or omitted lines that did not fit his magico-religious interpretation. Composite figures such as those at Trois Frères "were automatically and unjustifiably called 'sorcerers,' and were assumed to be a [sic] shaman or medicine man in a mask or animal costume." The truth is that we don't *know* what these figures represent; they may not be shamans at all. We also need to ask why, if shamanism were allegedly so important to Paleolithic peoples, such figures occur so rarely in Paleolithic art and are only schematically represented when they do appear.<sup>8</sup>

What Breuil did becomes evident when his popular reconstruction (Figure 3) is compared to a photograph of the actual cave wall (Figure 2). The figure is not necessarily dancing, as is commonly assumed (in Breuil's version it is often shown nearly upright); it could simply be crawling along the ground. As for the head, this barely appears in the original painting. The "Breuil version" is indeed an imaginative rendition, the product of the assumption of an "unreal, magical atmosphere in which the Paleolithic mind roamed," as art historian Paolo Graziosi once put it. Indeed, Breuil's reconstruction relies heavily on an ethnographic parallel, that of the Siberian shaman of the eighteenth century, which it closely resembles.

In consequence, I would like to suggest a more likely explanation, based on the notion that Paleolithic man was *not* wandering around in an "unreal, magical atmosphere," an explanation rooted in a very different ethnographic parallel: this is a representation of somebody hunting, one of the most obvious features of Paleolithic life. Thus, in southern Africa, in the nineteenth century, observers such as George Stow (*The Native Races of South Africa*) noted that hunters would often creep up on various herds or flocks, disguising themselves with the heads or hides of those animals and mimicking their movements. He found a number of paintings that depicted this, such as can be seen in Figure 5. This particular illustration is taken from a cave in the Herschel District, Cape Colony, and shows a Bushman hunter (far right) wearing an ostrich skin and feathers and stalking a flock. Such drawings, writes Stow, "would appear to any one not acquainted with the habits and customs of

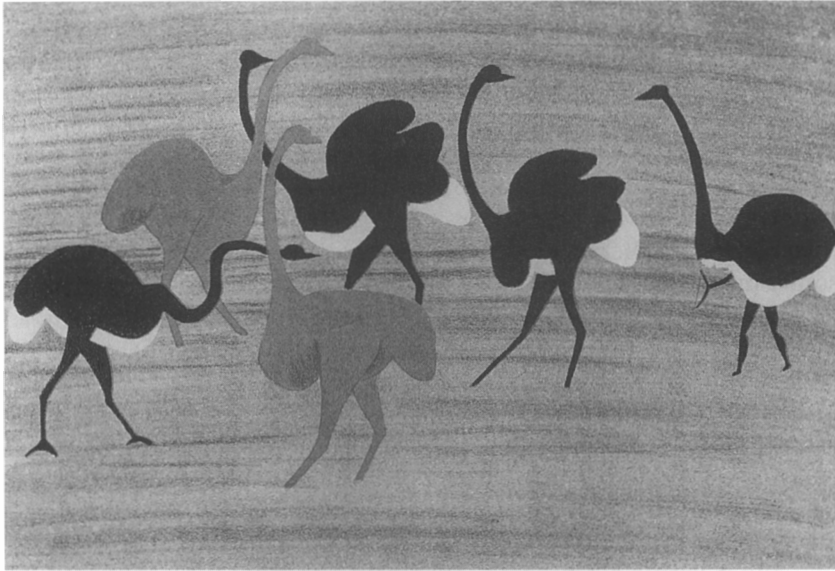


Figure 5. Bushman Stalking a Flock of Ostriches. From George Stow, *The Native Races of South Africa*.

this old hunter race to be intended for symbolic, or supernatural deities, around which some ancient myth was embodied." But this, he goes on, would be a misconception. Disguises of this sort were used constantly for practical purposes, and it was probably later elaboration that gave this type of activity a mythical interpretation—in particular, in civilization, such as we find among the Egyptians or Assyrians, says Stow. At the very least, all this suggests that a shamanic interpretation of the figure at Trois Frères is very likely a modern projection, and as such, unwarranted.<sup>9</sup>

Consider also the Neanderthal cranium discovered at the Grotta Guattari, which is often cited as an example of primitive cannibalism and ritual behavior. As it turns out, a recent re-analysis of the cranium, the floor deposit on the cave, and the accompanying faunal remains, revealed that there was no evidence to support such an interpretation. Cut marks on the skull, for example, turned out to be made by animals (most likely, hyenas) rather than by human beings. In addition, the story of the ring of stones cannot be verified. The cranium was removed by workmen soon after the discovery; no archaeologist ever examined the untouched site. Based on a rumor, then, the ring of stones exists only in a hypothetical reconstruction of the site on display in the Museo Pigorini in Rome.<sup>10</sup>

The evidence of children's footprints in caves as proof of ancient initiation rites is probably one of the best examples of projection and stretched imagination around. At Le Tuc d'Audoubert, for example, we find heel prints of teenagers, modelled clay bison, and some sausage-shaped clay objects on the floor. Conclusion? The teens were instructed to magically wound the bison, put the ("obviously") phallic clay sheaths on their penises, and then march out of the chamber, throwing away the "sausages" when the ceremony (which some believe involved ritual dancing) was over. How fanciful such an interpretation must be, write Peter Ucko and Andrée Rosenfeld (*Paleolithic Cave Art*),

is clear when it is remembered that no connection with the bison has been established, that the "phalli" may well have been intended for the modelling of animals . . . [and] that the correlation of age and heelprint size is a very doubtful matter especially when the relationship of body size and foot size of Paleolithic man is quite unknown.

In fact, they go on to say, heelprints "could well be the result simply of attempts to lessen the contact of the foot with wet mud when walking with a stoop in a low chamber." Archaeologist Randall White adds that what was probably going on was exploration, the excitement that children normally have in new situations. "Apparently," he writes, "children have not changed much since the Paleolithic; their prints are found in all sorts of nooks and crannies, while those of adults are restricted to paths that follow the middle of the galleries."<sup>11</sup>

Ucko and Rosenfeld come close to calling the shamanic interpretation of children's footprints "insane." At the very least, it is a good example of violating the principle of parsimony in science: don't create elaborate explanations for a phenomenon when a simpler one will do. It turns out that with one possible exception, no European Paleolithic caves contain any evidence of ritual performance, such as the presence of altars, implements, or signs of frequent human visitation. "There is no representation by these ancient gravers and painters of any sort of practice of curing another human being, nor is there any evidence of ecstasy or possession," writes the anthropologist Lawrence Krader. "The most careful conclusion we can draw," says another expert, "is that shamanism may have been missing in the earliest hunting cultures."<sup>12</sup> The point is that those scholars who have to have trance or initiation ceremonies going on in the caves are not, as they think, *finding* Paleolithic

religion. Rather, they are *demanding* that Paleolithic human beings be religious!

The same thing can be said of Paleolithic burials, which conceivably could point to some kind of religious life. Grave goods have been found buried with some ancient skeletons, suggesting a belief in an afterlife. Or the skeletons were sometimes buried in a flexed position, supposedly in an attempt to confine the spirit to the grave. But how do we know this, inasmuch as we do not have access to the mental context of these events? The flexing could have been done to have the smallest possible trenches, for example. In general, parsimonious explanations for Neanderthal burials are not spiritual or ritualistic ones, and unequivocal associations of grave goods with Neanderthals are extremely rare. Too often, "simple and likely explanations have been ignored in favor of complex scenarios invoking enigmatic purposeful behavior."<sup>13</sup>

The issue of modern ethnographic parallels also poses a host of problems. Certain things, it seems to me, *can* be continuously traced back to the Paleolithic, but these are sociobiological in nature. On the one hand, all humans smile (the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries excepted, I suppose); all are born from a female body, go through prolonged dependency, and are programmed to suck, to nurse at the breast; all have to eat to survive, and so on. If we cannot assume things of this sort, then we might as well pack up shop right now. On the other hand, tracing religious behavior back in time has a lot less validity because finally, continuity becomes just an assumption, and it could easily be incorrect. That Bushman rock art of five hundred years ago depicts trance dancing is fine, but 1500 A.D. is hardly the Paleolithic. In addition, present-day Bushmen of the Kalahari are not the descendants of the rock painters, who lived farther south (the /Xam Bushmen, who became extinct about one hundred years ago), and do not have a tradition of rock art themselves. There is also the problem that the percentage of rock art devoted to trance depictions is very small; in the Ndedema Gorge in the Natal Drakensberg, Harald Pager identified a total of thirteen dance scenes out of 3,909 individual paintings. Even then, this art could have been the result of neighboring Bantu (agricultural) influence, which has been present in southern Africa for nearly eighteen hundred years. Thus one observer, Dorothea Bleek, pointed out in the 1920s that the Bushmen of Angola were adopting prayers, dances, and fetish sticks from their Bantu neighbors. As impressive as the African rock art is, it cannot really tell us much about alleged religious ceremonies at Lascaux.<sup>14</sup>

However, what is an open question is whether the disposition to ASCs is psychobiological in nature. As Erika Bourguignon notes, a 90 percent figure for contemporary tribes certainly would point in that direction; but this may not be the crucial issue. The fact that many tribes *don't* practice it is no less significant, for it suggests that such beliefs and practices, even if wired into the brain in terms of capacity, get triggered only in certain cultural contexts. These contexts may be pathological, for all we know, and possibly confined to the Neolithic era. The "10 percent crowd" could be the *healthy* group, the ones we should be looking at. Thus, Peter Wilson argues (*The Domestication of the Human Species*) that ASCs emerge in contexts of group stress where no fission-and-fusion pattern (the freedom to leave the community and regroup) is present. Possession trance, writes Wilson, "or its frequency, relates to the extent of community life and hence may be involved with the increasing intensity of problems that emerge with daily group life." In turn, this would be a function of population pressure and population density—things that were not problems prior to the Neolithic Revolution.<sup>15</sup>

There is also the problem of the definition of the ASC, and Bourguignon has been taken to task by the British anthropologist I. M. Lewis for making theoretical distinctions in her analysis among possession, trance, and possession trance, which, he argues, cannot be sorted out in actual practice.<sup>16</sup> But once we admit that they might be all jumbled up, then it is quite possible that we are not necessarily talking about altered states. For example, "trafficking in spirits" might be equivalent to animism; but what is animism? Is the (secular) celebration of animal vitality that we see on the walls of Lascaux "animism"? Then the word would lose the totemic meaning that is being assumed for it. Such a framework, of course, has a good pedigree: Emile Durkheim, the eminent French sociologist, took Australian totemism to be the prototype of all religion. But as Ucko and Rosenfeld point out, modern tribes have undergone enormous changes; "it does not follow just because the Australian aborigines are totemic so, therefore, were Paleolithic men." "Almost invariably," they write, "the [ethnographic] parallel which is chosen by the archaeologist as the most meaningful one has some esoteric or ritual association," but there is no justification for this unless the context and content of the art itself warrants a religious, as opposed to a secular, interpretation.<sup>17</sup> When a local French official (Jean-Marie Chauvet) discovered a Paleolithic cave near Avignon in 1994, complete with paintings of animals that rival those of Lascaux, the report in *Time* magazine was—perhaps surprisingly—very astute. "We can assume," wrote the *Time* reporters, that these paintings "had a

symbolic value, maybe even a religious value, to those who drew them, that they supplied a framework of images in which needs, values and fears . . . could be expressed. But we have no idea what this framework was, and merely to call it 'animistic' does not say much." In fact, the overwhelming impression conveyed by the roughly three hundred animal figures at Chauvet is not one of religious feeling, but of a vivid and direct naturalism.<sup>18</sup>

Recall Paul Radin's comment that primitive subjective experience of the natural world was so intense that things often seemed to "blaze." Should we call this "animism" or "spirit possession"? It may be that "heightened awareness" is a more accurate description of what is going on than "altered state." We begin to see, in Bourguignon's case at least, the problem of relying on ethnographic parallels.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, there is another way in which religious ethnographic parallels are problematic, and that is that we are caught up in our *own* religious framework. In a very trenchant critique of Western biblical ethnocentrism, S. N. Balagangadhara argues that the notion of a society without religion is something we find disturbing because we ethnocentrically equate religion with experience of the sacred. Yet, he says, some societies are capable of sacred experience without having to generate any sort of religious world view at all. On what basis, he continues, can we argue that early humans were religious? Funeral practices won't work for the reason already cited: they may not be *religious* practices. And if we want to argue that religion *had* to exist among our Paleolithic ancestors because it is a universal hedge against death, we overlook the possibility that our ancestors might have simply regarded death as death, not as something terrifying or mysterious (this is in fact true of some HG societies today). There is no evidence that they would invent a god or a transcendent world, just because *we* do. As Nicholas Thomas and Caroline Humphrey demonstrate very convincingly in their volume *Shamanism, History, and the State*, shamanism "is more of an exotic essence, a romanticized inversion of Western rationalism, than a scholarly category that can stand up to any sustained interrogation."<sup>20</sup>

The consciousness of Paleolithic peoples, then, including their experience of the sacred, is not likely to be the same as ours projected backward in time. Trance and spirit possession certainly could have existed, but I would like to try to make the case for paradox, as defined in the introduction, as a more likely candidate for the mindset at Lascaux. There is no absolute "proof" here, as already stated, and I am going to have to extrapolate backward as well, but I believe that the argument below is more parsimonious and convincing than the "religious" alternatives.<sup>21</sup>



### What You See Is What You Get

Let us return once again to the issue of cave art. In *Prehistoric Art in Europe*, Nancy Sandars points out that with very few exceptions, books on the subject are more concerned with possible religious interpretations of the art than with the subject of what is actually portrayed.<sup>22</sup> But consider, she says, the relief engraved on the rock face at Roc-aux-Sorciers, located not far from Poitiers. (Figure 6) It dates from about 12,000 B.C. and depicts three nude female figures from the waist down. The effect is quite erotic, and Sandars comments on how *naturalistic* it is: "The most extraordinary thing about the figures is the mastery of perspective and the three-quarter view as they half-turn, like dancers in line, ready one by one to peel off and join the movement."

This same naturalism can be seen in the engraving of a horse from Schweizersbild in Switzerland (Figure 7), in which line and shading technique is used to suggest the contour of the animal under matted hair, and to give the appearance of weight and volume. The horse's head at Lascaux (Figure 8) also has similar qualities. The "aim of this art," says Sandars, "was truth to nature and the illusion of a thing seen." It is "frivolous," she goes on, to call the sketches of the three women "Venus figures," or to read symbolic interpretations into any of this material. The women are women; grazing deer are grazing deer. The "facts revealed by the art itself," write Ucko and Rosenfeld, "suggest that many Paleolithic representations were intended to have a visual effect," even those placed in remote regions of caves. Even the superpositioning of one painting on another, which occurs from time to time, "could well have had the specific aim of creating an impression of 'animalness' or 'vitality' which need not have been due to repeated and unconnected acts of magical representation."

As in the case of the footprints at Le Tuc d'Audoubert, parsimonious explanations lead us *away* from symbolism, not toward it. What we are seeing on these walls is not only an appreciation of vitality but also the product of classic HG alertness. If this is "animism," it would seem to be a very secular variety of it. It consists mostly in a sense of the awareness of Presence, of the "magic" that exists in Self being differentiated from Other; of the awareness of Self *as* one is aware of the Other. I put it to you that this *was* HG spirituality, experience of the sacred—a horizontal experience, not a tale of souls ascending to heaven.<sup>23</sup>

Agriculture and sedentism changed all of this. Studies done of HGs versus farmers show strong tendencies for the former to be "field independent" and the latter to be "field dependent." This

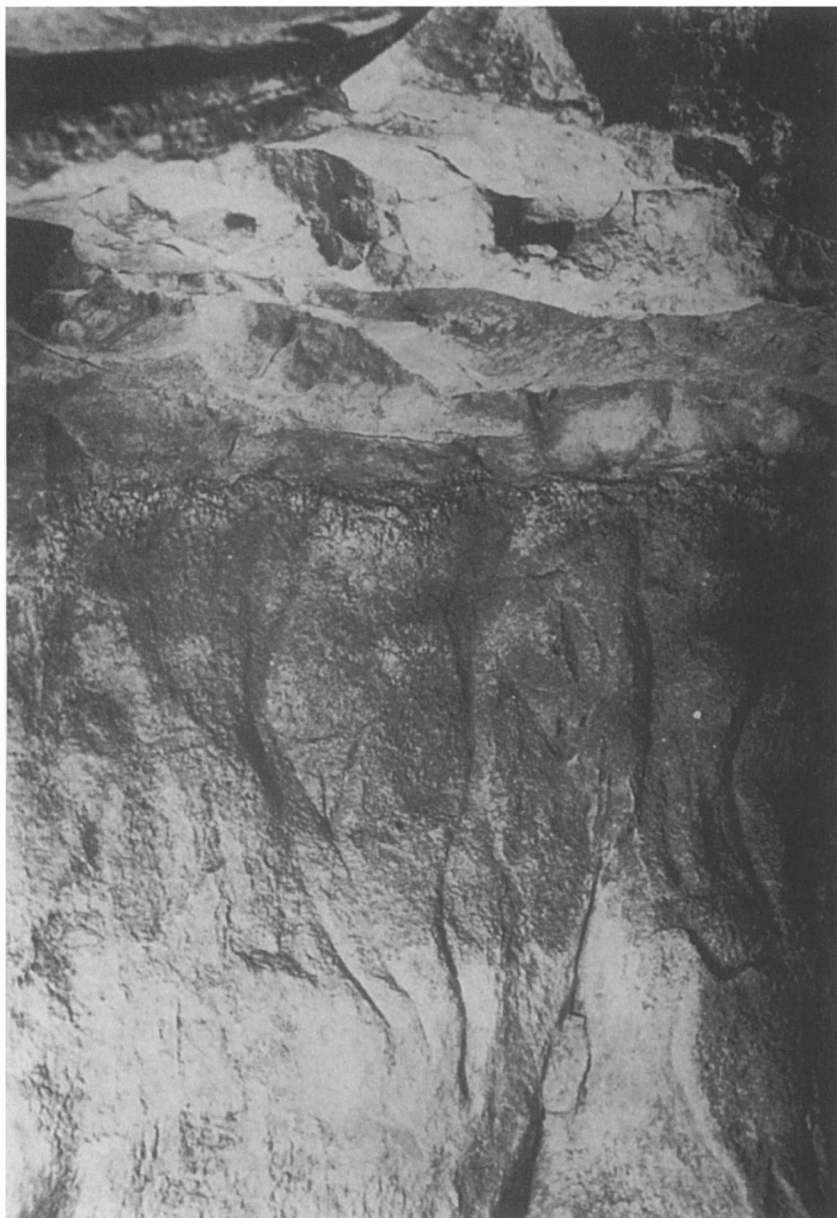


Figure 6. Three Women at Roc-aux-Sorciers. From N. K. Sandars, *Prehistoric Art in Europe*.

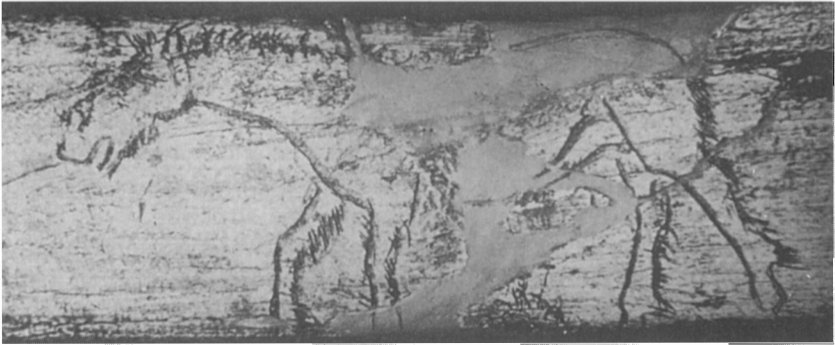


Figure 7. Horse at Schweizersbild, Switzerland. From N. K. Sandars, *Prehistoric Art in Europe*.



Figure 8. Horse's Head at Lascaux. From N. K. Sandars, *Prehistoric Art in Europe*.

occurs for adaptive reasons and reflects the fact that HGs are alert to details, have the ability to focus on specific items in the landscape ("field") even as they scan it as a whole, whereas sedentary farmers tend to blur on details, see parts of a field of vision as merged with the whole. Peter Wilson says that domestication was a major modification here, altering the ability of humans to pay attention. HG societies, he says, "are marked by an emphasis on 'focus' in contrast to domesticated societies, which are distinguished by an emphasis on the boundary." Survival is the underlying issue here: among HGs

and nomadic peoples, survival depends on being able to distinguish a bird from the surrounding, dense foliage of a tree, or to spot a snake several hundred yards away. In a word, they are much more alert.<sup>24</sup>

Paying attention, living in paradox, being alert to the movement of animals—all of this had great survival value and is rooted in a sociobiology that I believe is traceable back to the Paleolithic. *Homo sapiens* had assimilated animal alertness into the structure of its brain long before it developed the capacity for self-awareness, and hardly lost that once self-awareness arose. Put self-awareness together with alert observation of the Other, the environment, and something like paradox is what results, a perception that carries its own type of aura.

It is at this point, however, that things get a bit complicated, because it would appear that based on what we know of the experience of infancy, the potential for vertical religious experience and for paradox has its roots in the first few years of life. "Aura" of whatever variety, in other words, would seem to be at least partially derivative from a situation that is psychobiological in nature. Much of our need for that aura can be traced to the phenomenon of prolonged dependency and the process of coming-into-consciousness that all human beings go through. This is part of our sociobiology; and while it probably cannot be traced back to, let us say, *Homo erectus* (1.5 million years ago), it nevertheless has a fairly long ancestry. This means that although Object Relations theory—that part of psychoanalysis that deals with very early Self/Other relations—is, as already noted, a twentieth-century "invention," some of its basic premises can be applied to Paleolithic life in the same way, say, that Darwin's theory of natural selection can (even though formulated in the nineteenth century); or (presumably) Freud's theory of the Oedipal relations of the family; or, for that matter, Newton's law of gravitational attraction (to close approximation), and so on. These things are obviously not in the same category as Eliade's "mythic substrate," although early Object Relations can shape the potential for mythic elements to emerge.

The dialectic of aura experienced as paradox, as secular/immediate presence, versus that which is experienced as vertical sacrality, "in heaven" and outside of us, is in many ways the theme of this book. The two modes give rise to two very different kinds of religious and political configurations. Inasmuch as the vertical forms of these—the state, the sacred authority complex, mystery cults and monotheisms—have not been with us for very long and are circumscribed by the Neolithic era (i.e., date back only a few thousand years), the argument for paradox as being our "baseline spirituality" would seem to be valid. But it is not the whole story, and working out the network of relationships is no easy task. Factors in the story

include the nature of human ontogeny (coming into consciousness); child-rearing patterns among Paleolithic vs. Neolithic peoples; the evolution of mind, and the historical emergence of self-awareness in the human race as a whole; the role of physical movement versus sedentism as a way of life; and the impact of population pressure. We shall have to look at all of these things in the pages that follow. For now, let me say a few words about human ontogeny and the evolution of mind.

### **The Birth of the Ego**

As far as Object Relations theory goes, what we are talking about is the emergence of cognition, specifically, the crystallization of an ego, or self-conscious awareness, out of an unconscious matrix.<sup>25</sup> A newborn human—and we can assume this is the case for an infant born in the Paleolithic caves of southern France as well as for one born in a hospital in Paris—does not make much of a distinction between Self and Other. Although much has been written by now on the infant's ability to recognize parents very early on (the ability to imitate gestures and so on), it is doubtful that this and related abilities represent true self-awareness or interiority, that is, the consciousness of one's own consciousness. What has been called the "psychological birth of the human infant" typically occurs during the third year of life, when the child realizes that he or she is a separate entity, a Self in a world of Others. This is the core of Object Relations. Standing in front of a mirror now, the child knows that the "playmate" in the glass is really "me," a specular image. But this realization does not happen all at once. Self-awareness is a nonlinear process, something that grows in fits and starts, and the presence of an existential identity with a reflective internal life (something that does not happen for the rest of the animal kingdom) takes a bit of time to stabilize. If the truth be told, it is a process that is never really complete.

In any case, the process/event of understanding that you are "in here" and that the other person (or in general, your environment) is "out there" is the birth of individual identity, but also of alienation from the world. The birth of real self-awareness tears the psyche in two, creates what one psychologist (Jacques Lacan) called "the gap," or what another (Michael Balint) referred to as the "basic fault." A lot of how this is negotiated depends on the immediate surroundings, and if they are benevolent, so much the better for our feelings of being at home in the world. But there is always a tear, a pulling away from a primal unity; and it is in the search to mend

that, to fill in the gap, that much of our sacred yearning is rooted. A "lived distance" now divides us from the world, and to varying degrees, we find it painful.

There are various ways of dealing with that pain; the one that is universal is the breast. In HG society, breast-feeding often goes on up to age four, and this undoubtedly accounts for the healthy psychological outlook that the individuals in undisturbed forager societies seem to have. But weaning of any sort means that something has to take up the slack, and this is where the possibility for paradox *or* for addictive attachment—the root of the SAC—both open up. The Freudian term for this is *cathexis*, and in our own culture the most familiar form of it in weaned infants is the teddy bear, generically speaking; what the British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott called the "Transitional Object." The T.O. becomes a breast substitute, the intermediary between Self and World. It is for this reason that such objects are, for children, quasimagical, endowed with aura (just try to pry a T.O. loose from an infant, and you'll see what I mean). Winnicott argued that we didn't lose our tendencies for cathexis later on in life; we merely found more sophisticated substitutes—for example, religions and ideologies.

All of this opens up a host of questions. What about the role of child-rearing in the formation of attachment? Do all cultures have T.O.s, or do HGs cathect something else, beyond the breast? Given the diffuse quality of paradox, how did it manage to emerge at all? Is Object Relations true for all time? And if not true for *Homo erectus*, just how far back can we reasonably extrapolate it? A lot obviously depends on the answers to these questions. I shall say a bit more about the matter of attachment and its relationship to the SAC below; for now, we need to deal with the question of the universality of Object Relations theory. Specifically, was there a time when the human race awoke to its own interiority, stepped from what we might call "proto-paradox" into something else? When did interiority—"mind"—come into existence?

This last question is absolutely crucial, because the greatest discontinuity in terms of the emergence of culture has to be the phenomenon of self-objectification. There is archaeological evidence for this going back quite a ways, as I shall discuss below; but things such as art, personal adornment, or burial with certain types of grave goods, which emerge for the first time with any regularity in the Upper Paleolithic (say forty thousand years ago), would seem to be good indicators that a serious mental discontinuity has occurred. Julian Jaynes speaks to this issue quite eloquently when he writes, "It is as if all life evolved to a certain point, and then in ourselves

turned at a right angle and simply exploded in a different direction." Animals live in the eternal present, a kind of proto-paradox. To realize that one is operating in a time stream is to possess a radically different consciousness. The American anthropologist Irving Hallowell saw art, for example, as clear evidence of self-awareness, because it involves abstraction and representation, the conveying to others what is in your individual mind (self). He regarded this as proof of a generic type of personality organization that had not existed hitherto. "By the time we reach the Upper Paleolithic," he wrote, "the *infra*hominids have been left far behind."<sup>26</sup>

What, then, is this distinct psychology, this new "generic type of personality organization" that emerged during the Late Paleolithic? Although I believe Jaynes' dating of these events is very much off (he places it at 1300-900 B.C.), his description of this new consciousness is one of the best I have come across. Briefly, Jaynes' principal characterization of the new mental configuration is that of a metaphorical mind space, including a sense of past and future, which allows us to see ourselves in the "story" of our lives. In other words, when we are conscious in this self-reflective sense, we possess what he calls an "analog 'I,'" a metaphor we have of ourselves that can move about in our imagination. We "see" this imago, this self, doing things in the world, that is in space and time; and on this basis, we make decisions regarding the imagined outcomes that would be impossible if we *couldn't* imagine this self. We can observe this self, in our mind's eye, from the outside (as we sometimes do in a dream), or from the inside, looking out on the environment. In either case, a narrative is present in our minds, of past or future events, involving what we did or intend to do.<sup>27</sup>

Animal alertness is, of course, the ground of our consciousness; it represents our evolutionary origins, our genetic or ancestral "being," as it were. In such a state, there is no reflection or anticipation, but only an immediate awareness of the environment and a reaction to it—as I said, a proto-form of paradox. The entry of a time scale, of a metaphorical "I" having goals in the world, changes all of this. Not that alertness is automatically lost, but that reflection is now also present, and this conflicts with a purely alert state (human paradox means living inside and outside of a time frame simultaneously). It puts the human race on a path that takes it out of the animal state, and that eventually gets manifested in the creation of history and culture.

Before we turn to the issue of attachment/dependency and its role in generating a need for the sacred, we need to understand very clearly how dramatic a shift the events of the Upper Paleolithic rep-

resent in terms of human mental functioning. If it is the case that sharp Self/Other differentiation cannot be pushed back a million years, it is almost certain that it can be applied to the men and women of forty thousand years ago, if not a bit earlier. To see how remarkable was the change of mind that occurred across what is known as the "Middle/Upper Paleolithic transition," we need to undertake a brief excursion into paleoanthropology.

## The Birth of Culture

Consider the data presented in Table 1 below, which I have entitled "Outline of Hominid Biocultural Evolution."

What I have assembled here is the consensus of expert opinion on this subject that can be gleaned from works published over the last twenty years or so, substantiated by empirical studies in archaeology, anthropology, and paleontology. It is, I believe, the most plausible evolutionary picture of hominids that can be synthesized at the present time.<sup>28</sup>

What is perhaps most striking about this compilation, at least to my mind, is how *logarithmic* the cultural development is; the bulk of the "action" occurs when the modern (Cro-Magnon) human being, or *Homo sapiens sapiens*, appears on the scene. In fact, the relative suddenness, and recentness, of human culture has been commented on for decades now, from the anthropologist A. L. Kroeber in the twenties to archaeologists Lewis Binford, Paul Mellars, and Randall White in the eighties and nineties. Beginning with Kroeber, scholars have not been able to separate the dramatic developments of the Upper Paleolithic from the nature, and possibly evolution, of mind, no matter how elusive the latter may be. For what we see in the artifacts is the physical expression of human consciousness, even if interpretation is nearly always controversial or difficult.

The crucial issue in this development is the relentless, and finally explosive, cumulation of intent, or goal orientation; what archaeologists refer to as "planning depth" (p.d.). This in turn implicates the kind of consciousness described by Jaynes, the ego awareness necessary to see oneself in a story, in future time. Conscious tool making implies the ability to impose a mental template (arbitrary form) on unworked (i.e., formless) material. Thus Lewis Binford defines p.d. as the amount of time between anticipatory actions and their results, and the investments humans make in these actions.<sup>29</sup> However, we need to be cautious here because tool use certainly exists among apes and monkeys (as well as some other ani-