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THE MIND IN THE VULVA

Deconstructing the Androcentric Interpretation of Prehistoric Images

SURF Conference Panel Session 9A

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Anthropology

I. Background

Last year, the archaeology world was abuzz over a new discovery. On May 14th 2012, the title of an article in the popular *Science Magazine* read, “Engravings of Female Genitalia May Be World’s Oldest Cave Art.”¹ A more mainstream article in the *Christian Science Monitor* used a sensational headline that read, “In France, earliest-ever wall art appealed to hunters ... and lovers.”² Both articles described the discovery of engravings on a stone block that dates to 37,000 years ago.

A team of archaeologists led by Randall White, a professor of Anthropology at New York University, excavated Abri Castanet, a site in southwestern France once occupied by prehistoric humans. A large block had fallen from the roof of the rock shelter and directly onto a segment of the floor. As White and his colleagues broke the stone slab into sections and lifted them out, they discovered that the underside had an engraving, which they described as a “vulva” image.³

My research calls into question the contemporary male-centric values that dominate the interpretation of circular, oval, triangular, open-angled, or bifurcated engravings from 40,000 years ago onward as female genitalia.

The motif in question is a very common, and also varied, symbol found within a fifteen-kilometer stretch of the Vézère Valley in southwestern France.⁴ The first examples of these so-called “vulva” engravings were found in 1910 and immediately interpreted by French priest and

1 Michael Balter, “Engravings of Female Genitalia May Be World Oldest Cave Art,” *Science Magazine*, <http://news.sciencemag.org/2012/05/engravings-female-genitalia-may-be-worlds-oldest-cave-art>. (accessed 09 Nov. 2013).

2 Pete Spotts, “In France, Earliest-Ever Wall Art Appealed to Hunters...and Lovers,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, <http://www.csmonitor.com/Science/2012/0514/In-France-earliest-ever-wall-art-appealed-to-hunters-and-lovers> (accessed 09 Nov. 2013).

3 Randall White, “Context and Dating of Aurignacian Vulvar Representations from Abri Castanet, France,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 109, no. 22 (2012), 1.

4 Brigitte and Gilles Delluc, “Les Plus Anciens Dessins de l’Homme.” *La Recherche*. no. 118 (1981), 14.

archaeologist Abbé Henri Breuil as representations of female genitalia.⁵ A century later, and this interpretation still holds among scholars.

In his previous work, White decried the use of the term “art” when discussing representations from the Upper Palaeolithic period because of its “status as a historical artifact of the later stages of the so-called Western tradition.”⁶ Yet, he was quick in making an inferential leap from the Q-shaped engraving on the block found at Abri Castanet to “vulva.” Although, like most scholars, White moved away from the explicit categorization of Upper Palaeolithic image-making as art, the idea that the Q-shaped engraving is a representation of female genitalia, and by definition art, is implicit in his interpretation.

My goal is not to critique Professor White or Abbé Breuil, but rather to look at these particular engravings without sexual preconceptions. I argue that if we continue to accept a single and simplistic interpretation that infers that our species’ preoccupation with sex dates back to the Upper Palaeolithic period, we are closing the door on an intelligent, nuanced, holistic approach.

The simplistic sexual interpretation of these engravings has already been challenged in recent years. Some scholars saw them as schematized representations,⁷ while others chose to describe rather than interpret them.⁸ However, Breuil’s approach still persists to this day, and the “vulva” label remains the dominant narrative. To re-evaluate this interpretation, I will use the data I collected this summer, including a systematic review of all literature related to the interpretations of these Upper Palaeolithic engravings; a survey of museums of prehistoric art in France; and photographs taken during my visit to a few sites in the Dordogne Valley, where many of these engravings were found.

The questions that I address include: What are the reasoning and motivation behind Breuil’s subjective interpretation, and how did his view creep into the work of almost every scholar who uncovered and studied similar engravings after him? Is it possible to see things other than vulvas in these engravings? Even if these engravings are depictions of the anatomical body parts known as vulvas, do we necessarily know what they signify? Can we put a big single umbrella over this wide range of shapes? Why is looking at prehistoric engravings through a sexual lens problematic, and why is it important for us to move away from a sex-obsessed knowledge production?

This paper will focus on the first two of the proposed questions in order to 1) uncover the epistemological platforms that have generated such a long-lasting interpretation, and 2) open the door to a wide range of approaches, thus increasing the possibility of uncovering potential alternative interpretations to these engravings.

II. A Constructed Narrative

The Périgord region in France is world-famous for its prehistoric sites. In the Vézère Valley alone, between Montignac and Les Eyzies, over 200 Palaeolithic sites are known. This great number of sites has driven a long history of research and protection. For more than 150 years, excavations

5 A. D. Stoliar, “On the Sociohistorical Decoding of Upper Palaeolithic Female Signs.” *Soviet Anthropology and Archaeology* 16, no. 2 (1977/78), 42.

6 Randall White, “Substantial Acts: From Materials to Meaning in Upper Paleolithic Representation,” In *Beyond Art: Upper Paleolithic Symbolism*, ed. D. Stratmann, M. Conkey, and O. Soffer. San Francisco: California Academy of Sciences, 1996.

7 Jeremy F. Bourdier, “Préhistoire de France,” *L’Homme* 8, no. 1 (1968): 106.

8 John Clegg, “Australian Prehistoric Pictures,” *Proceedings of the X UISPP World Congress* (1981).

and studies have continuously contributed to our knowledge of prehistory, and it was in France that the first prehistorians established a chronological framework for the Palaeolithic as well as following periods, which are still used as a worldwide reference.

An important figure in the documentation of Palaeolithic art was Abbé Henri Breuil. A well-respected prehistorian, he established an undisputed position in the field at a very early age,⁹ Breuil has left a great legacy of discoveries and documentation. Nonetheless, whatever theoretical positions he adopted, he made his own, and professed as doctrinal truth¹⁰. Abbé Breuil's interpretation of the so-called vulva engravings is neither derived from analysis nor developed through scholarly debate.¹¹ It is an assumption he made when hotelkeeper, collector, and prehistory enthusiast, Louis Didon, enquired about a "heart-shaped" engraving on a limestone block he found in Abri Blanchard. In a letter to Didon dated January 25th, 1911, Abbé Breuil interpreted the engraving from Abri Blanchard as "Pudendum muliebre." In Latin, *Pudenda* means "a thing to be ashamed of," and *muliebre* means "feminine." Breuil's argument was that such shapes are used in early Cuneiform and in Egyptian hieroglyphs to represent the female sex (Figure 1). He also proposed that male and female symbols utilized in biology trace their origin back to these prehistoric engravings (Figure 2).¹²

These ethnographic parallels Breuil used to support his interpretation are erroneous. However, his initial idea continues to be perpetuated. Unlike the engraved triangular shapes placed on the high-reliefs that depict the female form at Roc-aux-Sorciers near Angles-sur-L'Anglin, or the pubic triangles placed on some female statuettes that date back to the Upper Palaeolithic to represent female genitalia (Figure 3), the so-called vulva engravings are not found in the context of female figures. I argue that, as most of the figurines do not highlight the pelvic area, these shapes should not be interpreted by reference to the female statuettes.¹³ As there is little attention paid to the actual genitalic region of female figures, why would mark-makers depict free-floating vulvas? Furthermore, even if these shapes were meant to represent the female genitalia, we have no knowledge of the cultural conventions that might have been used to depict these so-called vulvas more than thirty thousand years ago.¹⁴ When Professor White and his colleagues announced to the world that the engraving on the block found in an early Aurignacian level at Abri Castanet in France was a 37,000 year-old vulva, they did so not because the image itself resembles an actual vulva, but because, historically, similar images have been described as vulvas.¹⁵

III. Perpetuating the Myth

One of the most influential early archaeologists was André Leroi-Gouhran, whose methodological working-outs in the field of practical archaeology were of great importance. Gouhran, following Breuil's interpretation, defined circular and enclosing shapes as emblems of the female form.¹⁶

9 Lawrence Guy Straus, L'Abbé Henri Breuil: Archeologist. *Bulletin of the History of Archaeology* 2, no.1 (1992): 5.

10 Peter. J. Ucko, and Andrée Rosenfeld, Palaeolithic Cave Art. *World University Library* London, 1967.

11 A. D. Stoliar, "On the Sociohistorical Decoding of Upper Palaeolithic Female Signs," 42.

12 Brigitte and Gilles Delluc. "Les Plus Anciens Dessins de l'Homme." *La Recherche*. no. 118 (1981), 16.

13 Paul G. Bahn, "No Sex Please, We're Aurignacian," *Rock Art Research*. 2 (1986):101.

14 Paul G. Bahn, "No Sex Please, We're Aurignacian," 99.

15 April Nowell. "Intention vs. Interpretation: The Identification of 'Pornography' in the Study of Upper Paleolithic Imagery." *American Anthropologist*. 2013. In Press.

16 Spivey, Nigel. *How Art Made the World: A Journey of the Origins of Human Creativity* (Jackson: Basic Books, 2005), 32.

This traditional, *a priori* definition is the product of “a vague, prejudiced, and logically and visually unverified, process of association,”¹⁷ and continues to be the default interpretation for these Upper Palaeolithic engravings.

This default interpretation is exemplified at the Musée National de la Préhistoire in the town of Les Eyzies in France, where a collection of engraved limestone blocks from the Dordogne region is lumped together in a display with a sign reading “Sexual Symbols of the Aurignacian.” Each engraving looks different from the others, yet seven engravings out of the eight were said to represent “vulvas.” A sketch accentuating the parts that would make the engraving look like female genitalia is strategically placed next to each block. Recognizing female genitalia in these engravings can be challenging. First of all, the blocks were taken out of their original context when they were recovered from sites where ceilings of rock shelters had collapsed. We therefore have no idea about their initial positioning or from which angle they were meant to be viewed. By displaying them in this manner, the museum curator is visually directing the viewers and imposing on them one single possibility.

Another set of limestone blocks from Abri du Roc-aux-Sorciers is on display at the Musée d’Archéologie Nationale in Saint-Germain-en-Laye outside of Paris. They all depict horse heads (Figure 4). The way in which the horses’ ears were depicted in these engravings shows a striking resemblance to the engraving from Laugerie Haute Ouest displayed at the Musée de la Préhistoire in Les Eyzies and described as a vulva (Figure 5). Searching for similarities in different objects is another possibility and perhaps even a better alternative than calling every single circular, oval, triangular, open-angled, or bifurcated engraving a “vulva.” However, this method typifies Breuil’s approach, as it treats these engravings subjectively and imposes meaning on them—meaning that we would not be able to confirm archaeologically.

IV. Conclusion

Relying on an *a priori* claim that these engravings represent female genitalia surely limits our ability as researchers to reconstruct the past. It is important to deploy several equally valid approaches when investigating the complex structures of past life, rather than relying on one preferred *ideological* package.¹⁸ Informed inferences are the product of theoretical archaeology. However, cultural predilections are inevitable when we rely on inferences. Paul Bahn stressed the need for “creative answers that are less based on speculation, and more on grounded synthesis.”¹⁹ It is impossible to claim certainty when it comes to knowledge of the past, so we need to use different approaches and theories when looking at the engravings on these blocks.

In conclusion, by uncritically accepting Breuil’s questionable interpretation – that these engravings represent “vulvas”—we perpetuate a myth, a myth that has become a part of our received common knowledge of prehistory.²⁰ Trying to understand these engravings through an approach that seeks their meaning is fraught with challenges,²¹ and any interpretation we impose on them is less likely to be verified archaeologically. It is important that we use complex

17 A. D. Stoliar, “On the Sociohistorical Decoding of Upper Palaeolithic Female Signs,” 42.

18 John Bintliff, *Death of the Archaeological Theory?*, (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2011), 7.

19 Paul G. Bahn, “No Sex Please, We’re Aurignacian,” 110.

20 P.J. White, and J.F. O’Connell, *A Prehistory of Australia, New Guinea and Sahul*, (Sydney: Academic Press, 1982), 14.

21 Eds. Margaret W Conkey, Olga Soffer, and Deborah Stratmann, *Beyond Art: Pleistocene Image and Symbol*, (San Francisco: University of California Press, 1997), 9.

methodologies and multiple lines of evidence rather than a one-dimensional approach when we seek to understand a period of great transition and immense duration.

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Appendix

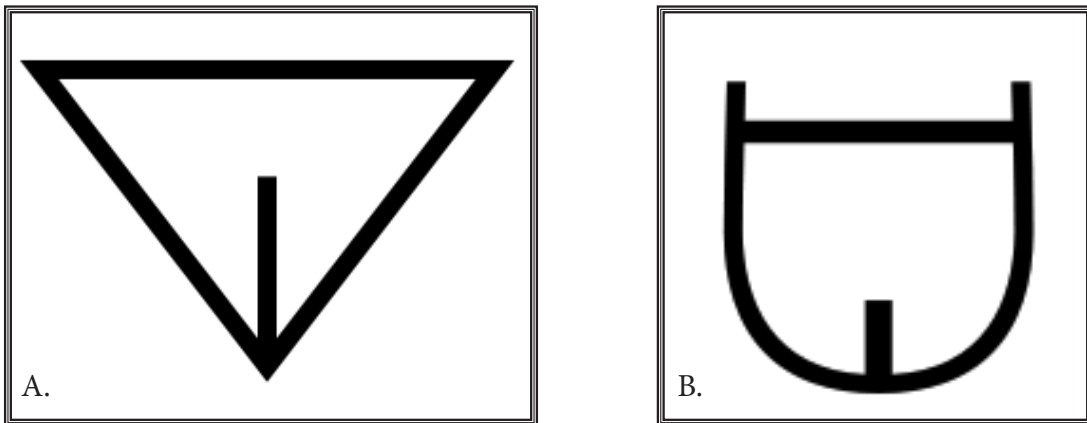


Figure 1. Sumerian Cuneiform (left) and an Egyptian hieroglyph (right). Source: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vulva_symbols.svg



Figure 2. Modern Zoology. Source: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Female_symbols.svg

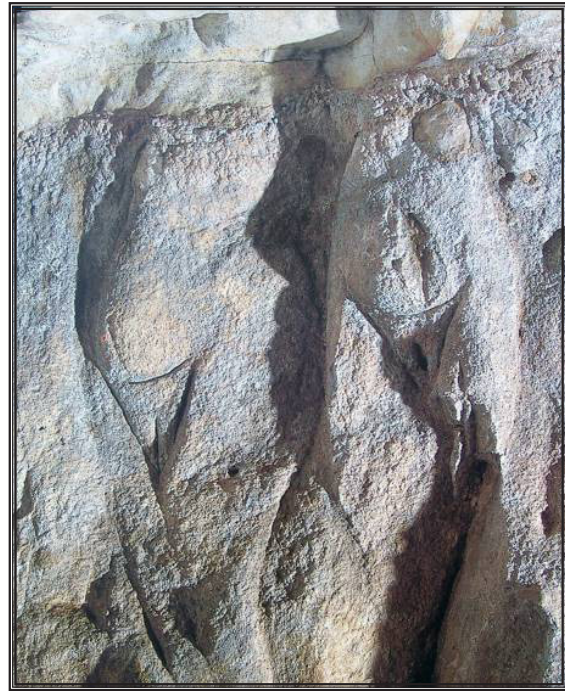


Figure 3. Venus of Willendorf (left); Female sculptures at Roc-aux-Sorciers (right); and Venus of Laussel (below). Sources: www.pbs.org; <http://www.atramenta.net/lire/les-figures-humaines-dans-lart-paleolithique/23919> ; ©Nada R. Hosking – Courtesy of Musée d'Aquitaine – Bordeaux.





Figure 4. Sculptures from l'Angles sur l'Anglin. All images ©Nada R. Hosking. Courtesy of the Musée d'Archéologie Nationale–Saint-Germain-en-Laye.



Figure 5. Engraving from Laugerie Haute Ouest. ©Nada R. Hosking. Courtesy of Musée National de la Préhistoire—Les Eyzies.