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TIME, SIZE AND MEANING(S)

TIEMPO, TAMAÑO Y SIGNIFICADO

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*We dedicate this paper to the memory of our dear colleague and friend
Don José Antonio Lasheras Corruchaga*

Resumen

En ocasiones nos acercamos al estudio del arte prehistórico desconociendo gran parte de su contexto cultural y, sobre todo, de las creencias que lo inspiraron. En este sentido, el análisis de creaciones artísticas tribales modernas nos reporta valiosos datos sobre algunos de esos aspectos que no son tenidos en cuenta al estudiar el arte prehistórico, sobre la complejidad de sus significados y sobre nuestras limitaciones al aproximarnos a un fenómeno tan alejado en el tiempo.

Ilustramos el tema con una reflexión sobre los *Gobardhans*, esculturas antropomorfas realizadas con estiércol de vaca con motivo de la fiesta del *Diwali* de zonas de la India como Bhopal o Madhya Pradesh.

Palabras Claves

Arte prehistórico – Arte tribal – Gobardhans – Diwali – India – Bhopal – Padhya Pradesh

Abstract

Sometimes we approach the study of prehistoric art not recognizing large part of its cultural context and, particularly, the beliefs that inspired it. In this sense, the analysis of modern tribal artistic creations report us valuable data about some of those aspects that are not being taken into account when studying prehistoric art, About the complexity of its meanings and about our limitations when we approach a phenomenon so far in time.

We illustrated the subject with a reflection on the Gobardhans, anthropomorphic sculptures made with cow manure on the occasion of the Diwali party of Indian zones as Bhopal or Madhya Pradesh.

Keywords

Prehistoric art – Tribal art – Gobardhans – Diwali – India – Bhopal – Padhya Pradesh

DR. JEAN CLOTTES / DR. MEENAKSHI DUBEY-PATHAK

Introducción

Rock art researchers, in most cases, study the images they are working on without being able to know anything about their cultural context and the beliefs or stories that inspired them. The most prevalent attitude when carrying on our research is to try to remain as “objective” as possible by describing, measuring, photographing and tracing the rock art under study. We all try to be as precise as we can and we use statistics both to determine the importance and qualities of the subjects represented and to make comparisons with other sites pertaining to the same cultural tradition.

For example, in the Niaux Cave (Ariège, France) studied by one of us¹, 111 animal representations were documented (figure 1). They include a majority of bison (54, i.e. 48%), followed by horses (29, 26%), then by ibex (16, 14.4%), the other species being much rarer (3 aurochs, 2 stags, 4 fish, 3 indeterminates)². In addition, there are far more geometric signs and one possible human.



Fig. 1

On this panel in the Niaux Cave (Ariège, France) do all those bison constitute a single panel or have they each a different story depending on when and why they were made?

Trying to go further in our study, we had the bison -being the most represented animal in the cave- examined by a specialist of live bison who determined the ages and postures of 75% of the bison images, which showed that their authors had deliberately chosen to draw them in a naturalistic way. This led to the conclusion that “merely classifying those animals as ‘bison’ probably was an attitude reductive of their meaning”

¹ J. Clottes, *Les Cavernes de Niaux. Art préhistorique en Ariège-Pyrénées* (Arles: Éditions Errance, 2010).

² J. Clottes, *Les Cavernes de Niaux...* 171.

and that for their Magdalenian authors, such themes as “dead female”, “motionless calf” or “aggressive male” might have had an important discriminating value that had so far been neglected in cave art research³.

Since then, we have had the opportunity to witness in Central India some modern artistic tribal creations for which all necessary explanations were provided⁴. They are not rock art and they do not and will not help us understand better the bison images in Niaux and elsewhere in Paleolithic cave art, but they illustrate some other parameters that are never taken into account when trying to address the possible explanations for an art that has gone fossil. They also provide a very useful example of the complexity of meanings and the impossibility to access them in all their intricacies when we are so far removed in time from their makers.

In Central India, the various tribes raise cows and buffaloes as is done elsewhere in the world, even if not for their meat. In fact, their herds are the main riches of those modest people. From day to day, cows bring a main food staple –milk- from which butter and cheese are made. They give birth to calves that will augment the herd. They also provide invaluable power to draw carts and ploughs. Last but not least, their dung is collected (figure 2) to be dried for fuel or to be mixed with water and be used as plaster for house walls as well as for the ground inside and outside the house.



Fig. 2
Painted cow. Badwai Village (Madhya Pradesh)
A woman is picking up the cow's dung for further use

³ J. Clottes, *Les Cavernes de Niaux...* 179.

⁴ J. Clottes & M. Dubey-Pathak, *Des Images pour les Dieux. Art rupestre et Art tribal dans le Centre de l'Inde* (Arles: Éditions Errance, 2013). J. Clottes & M. Dubey-Pathak, «L'Art des Vaches sacrées dans le Centre de l'Inde». *Arts sacrés* 27 (2013) 24-33.

As always in India, where reciprocal gifts (*manta*) are at the basis of relationships, be they with other humans, with gods or with animals, the benefits derived from the cattle must have their counterpart. If the cattle are respected all the year long they must still be honored in special ways under certain circumstances. The time chosen to do so is Diwali, the major Indian festival in the year, that occurs on the first Moonless Night in the Fall. In addition to its being the Feast of Light, Diwali is also the Feast of Prosperity in honor of its Goddess, Lakshmi. The cattle being and symbolizing prosperity for rural populations, the honor bestowed upon them is thus particularly apt at Diwali time.

This is done in several ways around Bhopal (Madhya Pradesh), right in the heart of India, where we were able to observe all that follows and to collect our information in several tribal villages. We distinguished three main visual examples: decorating the animals themselves by painting their horns and sometimes their bodies and placing feathers or flowers around their necks (figure 2); painting the walls of houses and mostly those of cowsheds with cow/calves motifs (figure 3); finally and perhaps mostly what will be our core subject in this paper: making anthropomorphic sculptures with cowdung called *Gobardhans* just outside people's houses. Their complex history mixes Hinduism with ancient tribal customs.



Fig. 3

Partly crushed Gobardhan in the foreground and painted cowshed in the background.
Samradha Village (Madhya Pradesh)

In November 2013, we saw a dozen or so *Gobardhans* in villages belonging to different tribes in the Bhopal area. We were told that only women make them, a kind of important information obviously unattainable for cave art. Another one is when they were made (on the day following Diwali) and the duration of their role which is particularly brief, as it lasts for one day only: they can be destroyed and often are under the wheels of vehicles or under the hooves of cattle as soon as the day following their making. We were even told that in the past the owners used to bring their cattle to trample them.

In Paleolithic caves we have no idea for how long the art remained valuable or potent as it remained most times undestroyed. On the other hand, portable art such as engraved plaquettes had a transient value: we find them often broken, thrown away or reused on the habitation sites, such as at Enlène in the French Pyrenees where we collected hundreds on a Magdalenian habitation site in relation to a painted cave, that of Trois-Frères⁵.

The sizes and thickness of the *Gobardhans* vary. They depend on the amount of cowdung available to people. The more cows an owner possesses the richer he is and the bigger, thicker and impressive the carving will be (figures 3, 5).

Most of them represent one massive man about three feet tall, lying on his back, often with his mouth open and his tongue out. His head is surmounted by a kind of crest that could be his hair or some headdress. His arms and legs are stretched out with fingers and toes sketchily indicated. Sometimes the sexual organs of the man are shown (figure 4) or he may sport a moustache.



Fig. 4
Gobardhan covered with flowers, crushed by a vehicle on the left.
Note the snake on the right. Badwai Village

5 R. Bégouën & J. Clottes, «L'Art mobilier des Magdaléniens dans les grottes du Tuc d'Audoubert, des Trois-Frères et d'Enlène». *Archeologia* 207 (1985) 40-49.



Fig. 5

Samradha Village. Thick Gobardhan. Cows drinking at a trough are represented three times. A small propitiatory fire was made between the legs

In general he is surrounded by distinct minute carvings. They may also be on top of his body in variable numbers. Three themes are constant among them: cows drinking at a trough, represented by small cowdung sausages side by side (see in particular fig. 5 where this particular motif is three times repeated); occasionally, those small sausages are scattered all over the body of the man; a snake also drinking (figure 4); small circular objects, sometimes one within the other, symbolizing homework (grindstones, women carrying or cooking food). Except for the snake, the nature of none of those carvings is obvious enough to be determined and understood by an uninformed observer.

In certain cases, the *Gobardhan* is isolated on the ground, near the house or the cowshed (figures 3-5, 7). In others, it is in the centre of more or less complex painted motifs, white or multicolored, that frame it (figure 6). Beneficial symbols like swastikas may reinforce the power of the image.



Fig. 6

Badwai Village. The owner, a woman who made the Gobhardan, told us its story.
Note the small character with a pebble on top at lower left

We also noticed the occasional presence of a very small character, carved with the same technique but in a more simple way, on the side of the composition and with a pebble on top of its body (figure 6).

In other cases, two characters slightly smaller than the man we described but identical in all other respects (figure 7) had been represented side by side and they were also accompanied by cattle drinking.



Fig. 7

Badwai Village. Yamraj and Yamuna, brother and sister.
The drinking cows are present and fires were made

Had we not been told the stories we would have reckoned that the coudung sculptures were those of one man in most cases, sometimes of two men (one big and one small), and occasionally of two men created in exactly the same way with the same techniques, the same appendages and with the same traces of ceremonies near them.

Those traces consisted of small votive fires at the foot of the effigies, or between their legs or at their head. Flowers or small cotton tufts were always scattered over the body. Earthenware lamps and fragments of coconuts had sometimes been deposited. Peacock feathers had been stuck into some of the bodies, flowers or plants into others.

The stories that were told to one of us (MDP) throw light upon those practices and on the signification of the characters represented. They also stress the importance of cattle which we might not have guessed as the main personage is always a man.

One of the numerous legends about Krishna is at their root. In ancient times, on the day following Diwali, people used to worship Indra, the God of Rain. One day, Krishna, the ultimate herder, told them that in fact they should rather pay homage to their cattle because they owed them their prosperity (milk, calves, dung, work power). They started doing so, but a man whose name History has forgotten went to Indra to complain. The God, vexed and furious, started a deluge of rain that threatened to destroy the world. Krishna took pity upon the humans, lifted a mountain with his little finger and animals and

people took shelter onto it. The gigantic mythical snake Shesh who is supposed to hold the Earth on his head was also threatened by the flood. Krishna protected him as he had done for humans. The small isolated character with a pebble on top of him is thus the accursed unnamed person who had intervened with Indra.

As to the *Gobardhan*, it represents the anthropomorphized mountain. It is often covered with cows, materialized by the small sausages and by the tufts of cotton on its surface.

The whole composition with the subjects represented and the ceremonies performed on that day is considered as a homage paid to the cattle, to honor them, to thank them and also to ensure their protection.

On the other hand, the two men side by side (figure 7) only have their technique, material and outward form in common with the real *Gobardhans*. They were made one day later, which makes all the difference. Their story has got nothing to do with theirs despite their identical appearance.

Though looking alike they represent a brother and his sister, Yamraj and Yamuna, Saturn's children. Yamraj was the God of Death. When Yamuna, his sister, invited him to come and visit her on the second day after Diwali, he refused because he did not want to endanger her by his presence. Year after year she never stopped inviting him. Finally he relented and went. She gave him a very warm welcome and all went well. Then he told her that whatever she asked of him he would grant her. She asked him to decide that whenever a brother would visit his sister on that particular day his health and his life expectancy would be bettered. That is why still in our days brothers in India pay a visit to their sisters on the second day after Diwali.

As a conclusion, we can see that in Madhya Pradesh nearly identical representations, possessing the same style, made with the same material and surrounded by the same traces of ceremonies had widely different stories attached to them. Their meaning was completely different and depended on the particular day when they were created and on the legends they were meant to embody.

When we consider the fifty-four bison images in the Niaux cave (see above) we cannot help wondering how many stories they represented for their authors and what those stories could have been...

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