

REVIEW ARTICLE

THE BIRDMAN OF LASCAUX: A NOTE

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ABSTRACT

The so-called "Shaft Scene" at Lascaux, representing the mortal conflict between a hunter and a bison, rewards frequent re-examination. This one concentrates on the nature of the supposedly human hunter (in reality a bird-man composite), his context, and his parallels in other caves, and reinforces those (few) interpretations that consider the scene a mythological narrative.

KEYWORDS

Lascaux, Shaft Scene, Palaeolithic Art, Narrative, Composites

1. INTRODUCTION

There are, by one reliable count, 1,963 animals and signs painted or engraved on the surfaces of the cave of Lascaux: 364 horses, 90 stags,

7 felines, 434 assorted signs or abstractions, and so on¹ (Aujoulat, 2005). There is only one human figure—exactly one—and it is not even completely human (Fig. 1).



Figure 1: The Shaft Scene at Lascaux: Birdman and bison

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It has a head, two jointless, curving arms, two splayed hands, two spindly legs, two flat feet and, where the legs meet the featureless, outlined torso, a thin, sharp protrusion that is universally identified as an erect penis (given its location, what else can it be?)². But the head is avian, not human; the hands have only four fingers (making them look more like talons); and the phallus has more in common with the figure's pointy feet than with the normal male organ³ (Ucko and Rosenfeld, 1967). Needless to say, this is not how human beings look: the vaunted naturalism found in so many other Palaeolithic paintings is lacking here (as it is in most Palaeolithic images of human beings). And yet the figure appears in one of the most remarkable and well-known compositions in this or any other painted cave --a composition that is by almost any measure a true narrative, even though "composition," "narrative," and even "art" and "artist" are terms that some commentators would rather not apply to the paintings and carvings found on the walls and ceilings of Palaeolithic caves.

2. THE ART OF PALAEOLITHIC ART

It is not particularly useful to enter the debate over the "artistic-ness" of Palaeolithic art—that is, the sterile and pointless argument over whether Palaeolithic art is art at all. But enter it we must, if briefly. The argument in opposition has often been made by anthropologists who like to put the words "art" and "artists" between quotation marks (diminishing prehistoric art and prehistoric artists *a priori*) but who also seem to have little regard for (or understanding of) modern art history and art historians (who, they claim, incredibly, ignore cultural context). These scholars write such things as: "The so-called 'artists' of 30,000 years ago did not discover something that is true for all humans at all times in all places—as in transcendent imagery and art," with the implication that "real" art is about knowable "truth" and that therefore Palaeolithic art is not art⁴ (Conkey et al., 1997). No art historian I know thinks that a work of art must discover or reveal some universal "truth" in order to be art, that it must be "transcendent" (whatever that means), or even that the "primary function" of art has to be aesthetic (it has been a long time since art historians cared very much about "beauty" *per se*, and even a bad or crude aesthetic is still an aesthetic). These scholars also imply that since many nonwestern or aboriginal cultures apparently have no term for art, then, by ethnographic analogy, Palaeolithic people would not have had such a term, either, and that without a word for it there can be no such thing as art⁵ (Conkey et al., 1997). This is patently false. All we need to do is point out that the ancient Greeks had no word equivalent to our "art," either: all they had was *tekhnē*, "skill," "rational production." But perhaps those in opposition would on the same grounds ban, or at least put quotation marks around, the term Greek art⁶ (Conkey, 1987; White, 2003).

We now exit the debate. For if art is the product of tangibly marking or decorating visible surfaces or objects with images, abstractions, or signs; if it is the practice of shaping natural materials and transforming that inchoate stuff into something else, something made, something designed, something configured with skill and intelligence; if it is a form of communication or declaration; if it is a representation of reality or unreal flights of the imagination; if it is an expression of symbolic or metaphysical thought or of cultural values; if it has meaning and intention— then let us stipulate that what we find painted, carved or engraved on the walls and ceilings of Palaeolithic caves, or sculpted out of antler or incised on bone, or modeled out of ivory or clay or limestone, is art. It is the most distant kind of art and, in many ways, the strangest, too. It is an art without a history like other histories, produced in and for a society (or societies) we cannot observe; it speaks to us in a language or in patterns we cannot understand; and it may or may not be a kind of art that has more modern parallels (that depends on the validity of ethnographic comparisons)⁷ (Lewis-Williams, 2002; Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 2001; Francfort et al., 2001; Lorblanchet, 2001 and 2006; Lorblanchet et al., 2006; Bahn, 1997, 2001 and 2006). But it is a kind of art that still rewards investigation into its nature, development and techniques, and into the interplay between image and sign. There is in such works as the paintings of Lascaux (and Altamira and Pech-Merle and so on) a construction of meaning and reference that we may never fathom, and there may be more than one cogent interpretation or explanation of imagery created over the span of 30,000 years or more. But our ignorance of it does not mean the art was not intelligently designed and rationally, purposefully, produced⁸ (Lorblanchet, 2010).

3. THE BIRDMAN

But back to the Birdman, who, of course, is not alone on the Shaft's wall. To the right there is a large bison (it is no masterpiece of naturalism, either), which lowers and rotates its disproportionately small head and horns in classic charging mode even as its guts cascade concentrically out of a wound caused, apparently, by a long, thin spear with a barbed point that crosses (and imaginatively penetrates) the bison's hindquarters. The Birdman, spreading his arms out as if seeking solid ground, tilts away from the bison (and from the vertical); he is falling, or has fallen, knocked off his feet by the bison's charge (but he is not, as he is often said to be, prostrate, or face-down on the ground)⁹ (Sieveking, 1979). Three other objects or signs are found below the confrontation of Birdman and bison: one short with three barbs (could this be a piece that has broken off the long spear during the battle?)¹⁰ (Irwin, 2000); another looking like a flattened X; another, purely vertical, ending in the shape of a bird, whose head is virtually identical to the head (or mask?) of the Birdman, though facing away, in left profile, rather than right. The bird-tipped object is often thought to be a spear-thrower (and indeed a few spear-throwers, such as one from Le Mas d'Azil, do end in the figure of a bird—a grouse, say-- or a bird-like abstraction that resembles a beak)¹¹ (Sieveking, 1979; Bahn and Vertut, 1988; Garrod, 1955; Leroi-Gourhan, 1967; Coombs, 2018; Lechler, 1951). In any case, the bird looks past the Birdman, across a niche in the stone, toward six black dots in two neat rows and an apparently indifferent rhinoceros, moving left. There is some formal balance between the beasts: the raised tail of the rhino, curling to the right, balances the raised tail of the bison, curling left. But although some scholars believe that it is the rhinoceros that has gutted the bison or even killed the Birdman¹² (Breuil, 1952; Ucko and Rosenfeld, 1967), the beast (whose style and technique are distinct from the bison's) seems to have been the product of a different artistic episode from the one that created the violent conflict between Birdman and bison¹³ (Aujoulat, 2005; Sieveking, 1979; Leroi-Gourhan, 1967 and 1982; Ucko and Rosenfeld, 1967). If we exclude the rhinoceros (and a technically similar horse partially painted on a wall opposite the scene), what we have is, probably, the representation of two pyrrhic victories in one. The Birdman has disemboweled the bison with his spear-thrower-propelled spear, but at the cost of his own life. The bison has charged and trampled the man, but at the cost of his¹⁴ (Breuil, 1952). There is thus a temporal dimension to the image. But what is remarkable is that it is even possible to read one or more narratives into this scene—and it is a scene—and that it is susceptible to interpretation. In other words, its importance lies in its evidence that the Palaeolithic artist had the will and the capacity to tell stories¹⁵ (Cf. Aujoulat, 2005; Özdoğan, 2022; Aubert et al., 2019). And the telling of stories is potentially the telling of myths.

The scene is not least remarkable because of its location near the bottom of what is misleadingly called the Shaft—a large, recessed space connected to the ovoid or domed (and very richly decorated) Apse via a narrow passageway. Negotiating that space could not have been easy and, at first glance, one would think that the Shaft and its sparse paintings could not have been visited routinely¹⁶ (Leroi-Gourhan, 1967). The descent from the level of the Apse is 6m long; at one point, as Aujoulat notes, a ladder would have been useless, at another crawling would have been required¹⁷ (Aujoulat, 2005). Some visits were certainly made by the light of lamps fueled by animal fat: one complete sandstone lamp (engraved with "nests" of lines that recall the barbed sign or object beneath the Birdman), and another fragmentary one, were found in the early 1960s in the Shaft itself, though it is impossible to tell whether they were brought there by an (or *the*) artist or a visitor (a lamp's relatively consistent light would perhaps have suited the artist better than flickering torches, evidence for which—soot on the walls—is virtually absent)¹⁸ (Aujoulat, 2005). Also variously found in the Shaft were some bladelets, a piece of a reindeer antler baton (radiocarbon dated to 18,600 +/- 190 BP), some bits of charcoal, and a few long spears of possibly Early Magdalenian date¹⁹ (Aujoulat, 2005; Leroi-Gourhan, 1967). It is enticing to imagine intrepid spear-bearers (whether members or heads of clans, shamans, or young initiates) descending to view the image of the unfortunate Birdman and bison—both victors, both victims—some to recount the story aloud, others to listen, some to purposefully leave lamps and spears behind, others, perhaps, to forget or misplace a spear in the dim or the dark.

4. THE BIRDMAN IN CONTEXT

As for the Birdman himself, there is a choice to make, or at least to pose: either he is a masked man, or he is not. That is, either he is a human being wearing a bird mask out in the hunt—a totem identifier, perhaps, a correlative to the bird perched at the end of the spear-thrower—or he is not masked and thus really is part bird. He would therefore belong to a small but impressive category of Palaeolithic composite and thus putatively imaginary creatures found in both parietal and mobile art. There is, for example, the well-known and very early ivory figure of a standing man with a lion's head from Hohlenstein-Stadel. There is a figure at Les Trois Frères with a tail, human legs, at least one cloven hoof, and a bison's head playing what some implausibly think is a musical bow (is he, instead, blowing on a pipe or bleeding from the nose?). And there is that hybrid of all hybrids, also from Les Trois Frères, known as the "Sorcerer." Assuming Breuil's famous drawing is roughly accurate (which not everyone assumes), he is part human (legs and feet), part bear (paws), part horse (tail, body), part owl (face), part stag (head, antlers), and part feline (penis)²⁰ (Bahn and Vertut, 1988; Sieveking, 1979; Leroi-Gourhan, 1967 and 1982).

Of course, there will always remain the possibility that the Birdman

and his fellow hybrids are in fact all costumed human beings wearing headdresses, masks, or animal skins—a popular interpretative position founded upon ethnographic parallels drawn from aboriginal or Native American hunters²¹ (Lewis-Williams, 2002; Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 2001; Francfort et al., 2001; Lorblanchet, 2001 and 2006; Lorblanchet et al., 2006; Bahn, 1997, 2001 and 2006). But, again, what if that is not who they are? What if they really *are* hybrids—that is, fantastic composites and thus products of the Palaeolithic imagination? And what if Birdman and his battle with the bison illustrates a Palaeolithic tall tale, the representation of a myth told by clan members at the mouth of the cave either before negotiating the Apse and Shaft or after the descent, in front of the lamp- or torch-lit image itself?

In that case it would be odd if the Shaft scene narrative were unique—if Palaeolithic story-tellers over many thousands of years had only one such tale to tell. And, in fact, there may be others in the realm of Palaeolithic imagery—other tales about hunters heroically, if fatally, confronting bisons, or even surviving the conflicts. There is, for example, a relief from Le Roc de Sers showing a bison pursuing a fleeing man, who may live to fight another day: his deeply bent legs enhance the sense of motion and violence in the scene (Fig. 2)²² (Bahn and Vertut, 1988; Leroi-Gourhan, 1967).



Figure 2: Fragment of stone frieze from le Roc de Sers: man flees bison

A braver man appears to hold his ground against a bison in a sloppy painting at Villars²³ (Leroi-Gourhan, 1967; Aujoulat, 2005). Engraved on a fragment of a reindeer antler from Laugerie Basse is a scene that is, in Leroi-Gourhan's view, "identical" to that of the Shaft scene²⁴ (Leroi-Gourhan, 1967). Compositionally the scene is not, in fact, identical, but the basic elements are all there: an apparently wounded bison leaves behind a fallen, ithyphallic man with extended arms. At Saint-Cirq there is an abbreviation of the theme: just a bison's head and a male figure with an erection²⁵ (Leroi-Gourhan, 1967). And on a relief slab from Laussel, an apparently different kind of tale: a tall, belted man with an outstretched arm (but missing his head, feet, and phallus) seems to be throwing a spear at an animal that is not there (or is not preserved) [Fig. 3]²⁶ (Leroi-Gourhan, 1967; Sieveking, 1979). Not all the hunters in this collection are successful and the "bison vanquishes man" theme is not repeated verbatim everywhere²⁷ (Leroi-Gourhan, 1967 and 1982; Aujoulat, 2005). But mythical heroes and mortal champions do not always win, and artists—even Palaeolithic ones—are free to vary their stories²⁸ (Leroi-Gourhan, 1982).



Figure 3: Hunter (?) on a relief from Laussel

5. CONCLUSION

It will, perhaps, surprise no one that when art historians look at the Shaft scene they see a work of art, or that they instinctively consider it a true "composition," the product of a rational mind (or series of minds) that sought to express, record, evoke, or communicate something, at some level of complexity, long ago. The relative stylistic primitiveness of the participants is not at issue: the quality of the painting is far less important than the very fact of it. Let us further stress that there was likely more than one meaning to Palaeolithic art (both representational and abstract, both two-dimensional and three), that the human motivations behind its creation were varied and will always be unknowable (because those who know are dust), and that, therefore, there is no need here to choose from among the many homogenizing theories that have been proposed to explain it *in toto*—recreational, symbolic, magical, ritual, structuralist, totemic, astral, shamanistic, psychedelic, or otherwise²⁹ (Bahn and

Vertut, 1988; Bahn, 2001; White, 2003). But human beings have always been myth-makers and story-tellers: they probably have always *wanted* to tell and to be told stories. That is what human beings do. That is, in fact, one of the things that makes us human: it is our compulsion. And any interpretation of the Birdman that does not account for or acknowledge the narrative potential of Palaeolithic art—that fails to discern stories or myths in the Shaft scene at Lascaux and related imagery—must itself fail.

ANNOTATION

Note 1: Aujoulat 2005, 64-66

Note 2: The figure apparently suffers from postmortem priapism (a "death" or "reflex erection") which can occur when death is quick and brutal (as in hanging), or when the spinal cord is injured or severed—a surprising bit of Palaeolithic anatomical knowledge that must have been learned from experience. For another possible example, see n. 25 below.

Note 3: More convincing as phalloi are the several modeled clay "sausages," slightly curved, found on a floor at Le Tuc d'Audoubert, but they are more likely horns intended for sculptured models of bison or aurochs; Ucko & Rosenfeld 1967, 57 and fig. 39.

Note 4: Conkey and Soffer, eds., 1997, 2.

Note 5: Conkey and Soffer, eds., 1997, 2.

Note 6: For other arguments against calling Palaeolithic art "art," or questioning art historical approaches to it, see Conkey 1987, 413 n. 1, 419 (she wishes the phrase "palaeolithic art" would just go away, to be replaced by "visual and material imagery"), and White 2003, 20-23, who calls for a re-evaluation of such supposedly time-worn art historical assumptions as that "true" works of art must be the products of "individual genius" (an assumption that most art historians no longer make). White still titles his book *Prehistoric Art*.

Note 7: Ethnographic parallels are fundamental, for example, to Lewis-Williams' controversial shamanistic interpretation of cave art; see Lewis-Williams 2002. Also, Clottes and Lewis-Williams 2001; Francfort et al. 2001; Lorblanchet 2001 and 2006; and Lorblanchet and Le Quellec, et al., eds., 2006. For blistering critiques, see Bahn 1997, 2001 and 2006.

Note 8: In this as in other things, I follow Lorblanchet 2010, 120, who writes of the great panel with spotted horses and hand stencils at Pech Merle: "Contrairement à A. Marschack... nous ne voyons pas dans ce panneau une accumulation désordonnée de motifs indépendants les uns des autres, mais une composition magistrale."

Note 9: Cf. Sieveking 1979, 121 (caption), 122.

Note 10: This object has been identified as a "short harpoon;" see Irwin 2000.

Note 11: Birds are comparatively rare in parietal and mobile art (though their bones are common in Palaeolithic debris), and when they appear they are, like humans, usually crudely drawn; Sieveking 1979, 149; Bahn and Vertut 1988, 132. For the hooked ends of a number of spear-throwers resembling beaked heads, see Garrod 1955. Leroi-Gourhan 1967, 316, once believed the bird-tipped sign was a spear-thrower, but became "less sure" of that; still, he notes the grouse-tipped spear-thrower from Le Mas d'Azil, which is illustrated by a drawing in Coombs 2018 (fig. D). Lechler 1951, 165-167 and pl. Lb., illustrates another example, with several birds perching on the tip. And there is the famous antler spear-thrower from Le Mas d'Azil with two birds perching on a large turd exiting the anus of a justifiably curious young ibex; Bahn & Vertut 83 and figs. 46, 47.

Note 12: See, for example, Breuil 1952, 134-136; Ucko and Rosenfeld 1967 43-44.

Note 13: The outlines of the rhino (and the partial horse on the opposite wall) were completely created by spraying. Some of the bison and birdman were painted with a brush, other parts were sprayed. In addition, analysis of the manganese dioxide pigments indicates that the

rhino's are different, and were applied more thickly; see Aujoulat 2005, 158, and Sieveking 1979, 121 (caption). Leroi-Gourhan 1967, 316, and 1982, 38, finds no evidence that the rhino is connected to the Birdman scene. For various interpretations, see Ucko and Rosenfeld 1967, 43-44.

Note 14: Breuil 1952, 134-136, believed the bison cannot be charging the man because it has already been disembowelled, but the scene could be a precocious example of "simultaneous narration," with different moments compressed into one image.

Note 15: Cf. Aujoulat 2005, 158: "The originality of this panel resides in its narrative potential..." In 2021 a stone wall relief showing a bull charging a man—a scene reminiscent of the ones in Lascaux's shaft and at Le Roc de Sers (Fig. 2)—was discovered at Sayburç in southwestern Turkey and dated to the Neolithic period (c. 11,000 BC). It has breathlessly been called the earliest narrative scene in the history of art; see Özdoğan 2022. As will be clear, I believe the Palaeolithic Shaft scene at Lascaux (dated four to six millennia earlier) deserves that honor for now, at least concerning European and Middle Eastern art. In Asia there may be a far earlier case, dated roughly 44,000 BP, at Sulawesi, Indonesia; see Aubert et al. 2019.

Note 16: For Leroi-Gourhan 1967, 315, the Shaft played an important role in the "sanctuary" that was Lascaux, and the adjacent Apse was decorated over time by visitors on their way to visit it and, presumably, its scene of Birdman and bison. Early in an unpaginated posting of August 24, 2018, A. Coombs claims that "the lip of the chasm leading to [the Shaft] is worn showing that people regularly used its opening."

Note 17: For the morphology of the Apse and Shaft, see Aujoulat 2005, 40-42.

Note 18: Aujoulat 2005, 54-56. Flickering torches would, however, have seemed to animate figures once painted on the wall.

Note 19: Aujoulat 2005, 51, 52, 58-59; Leroi-Gourhan 1967, 315.

Note 20: Bahn and Vertut 1988, 85 and fig. 49 (lion-man), 144 and fig. 97 ("Sorcerer"), and 158 and fig. 104 (bison-man); Sieveking 1979, 148 and fig. 92 (bison-man); Leroi-Gourhan 1967, 126 and fig. 57, and 1982, 51-52, fig. 19 ("Sorcerer").

Note 21: See above n. 7.

Note 22: Bahn and Vertut 1988, 123, fig. 83; Leroi-Gourhan 1967, fig. 305.

Note 23: Leroi-Gourhan 1967, fig. 358; Aujoulat 2005, 61, says the scene "takes on a form identical to that at Lascaux." But it is not identical: there is no sign that the bison has been gutted or that the man is wounded or dead, and the confrontation between man and bison is direct.

Note 24: Leroi-Gourhan 1967, 316, 482, fig. 439. But the man (his penis is short and triangular but apparently stiff) is behind the bison, not in front of it, and he might even be grabbing hold of the animal's tail with one hand while throwing the other arm outward.

Note 25: Leroi-Gourhan 1967, fig. 361

Note 26: Leroi-Gourhan 1967, fig. 270; Sieveking 1979, 78.

Note 27: Leroi-Gourhan 1967, 135, 511, speaks of "bison and hunter" and "wounded man" themes; for examples of the latter, see Leroi-Gourhan 1982, figs. 102 and 103. See also Aujoulat 2005, 60-61.

Note 28: Leroi-Gourhan 1982, 38, believes the Shaft scene "constituted an important and durable mythological theme," given similar compositions at Le Roc de Sers, Villars, Laugeries Basse, and Saint-Cirq.

Note 29: It is yet another matter to assume that the images on the walls of Paleolithic caves—even those thought to have been "sanctuaries"—would have spoken to all possible visitors in the same way, over the span of many thousands of years: many thousands of years is a long time. No single universalist or monolithic interpretation will do for Palaeolithic

art—an art that lasted so long and that was expressed so widely in so many complex manifestations. The meanings and functions of Palaeolithic art cannot have been homogeneous. They are, unfortunately, also irretrievably lost, and, with Bahn and others, we must be realistic about that; see Bahn and Vertut, 1988, 149-190 (for a handy and still pertinent review of the major theories) and 2001, 81-82; also, White 2003, 50-61 (esp. 57-58).

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