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"ETHNOGRAPHICAL" CONTRIBUTION TO THE INTERPRETATION OF THE LAUSSEL PALEOLITHIC RELIEF

ABSTRACT: The famous Laussel Paleolithic relief has in the past attracted much discussion and has been dealt with in many studies. According to some authors, it represents coitus, according to others, childbirth. The relief has also been interpreted as having been completed at later date or as being incomplete. Here, several examples of coitus and childbirth scenes in rock paintings of Northern Australia are presented. These depictions of sexual themes were found during anthropological research by the Czechoslovak Anthropos Expedition to Arnhem Land in 1969 and 1973. Although these North Australian paintings cannot be connected with European Paleolithic art, I feel that the striking psychological analogy deserves consideration. We can summarize, that as a result of a similar psychology; the similarity of the media of expression; and the economic and cultural basis in hunting societies; we can find much in common between them, which can be of great assistance in the study of the oldest European art. This article is a reprint of a previously published article (Jelínek J., 1974: Anthropologie (Brno) 12, 3: 227–229).

KEY WORDS: Rock art – Paintings – Coitus – Childbirth – Laussel – Paleolithic – Arnhem Land – Northern Australia

The famous Laussel Paleolithic relief (*Figure 1*), which according to some authors represents coitus, according to others childbirth, has in the past attracted much discussion and has been dealt with in many studies. Those who held to the classical theory of fertility magic were rightly criticised on the grounds that definitely sexual symbolic scenes are comparatively rare in

Western European Paleolithic art, and scenes of coitus completely exceptional.

The comparatively clear Laussel relief was also interpreted as having been completed at later date or as being incomplete. Contemporary authors (Laming-Emperaire 1962, Leroi-Gourhan 1965) now contend that European Paleolithic art does not admit of ethnographical comparison.

This article is a reprint of a previously published article "JELÍNEK J., 1974: 'Ethnographical' contribution to the interpretation of the Laussel Paleolithic relief. *Anthropologie (Brno)* 12, 3: 227–229."

Abstract, Key words, links to the Figures added and Figures renumbered by Editors.

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FIGURE 1. Coitus scene. Rock carving. Laussel, France. The lower figure is smaller and less carefully carved. This figure was in Jelínek (1974) labelled as Fig. 3.

In the years 1969 and 1973, during anthropological research in Arnhem Land (Jelínek in print), I found several rock paintings whose comparison with the Paleolithic relief from Laussel is interesting. While agreeing that these North Australian paintings cannot be connected with European Paleolithic art, nevertheless I feel that the striking psychological analogy deserves consideration (Jelínek 1975).

In both cases, in Europe and in Northern Australia, these were artists of a hunting society, living a hunter's life which had many common features. In both cases similar technical media were available: flat rock wall, paints or tools for making a relief, and an art with no knowledge of perspective. This lack of knowledge forced the artist to make a three-dimensional scene or object into a flat picture. Variations in this flattening are limited.

The opinion that there are very few clearly sexually motivated pictures in European Paleolithic art comes down to the fact that scenes of coitus, whether of humans or of animals, are very rare. Sexually motivated pictures

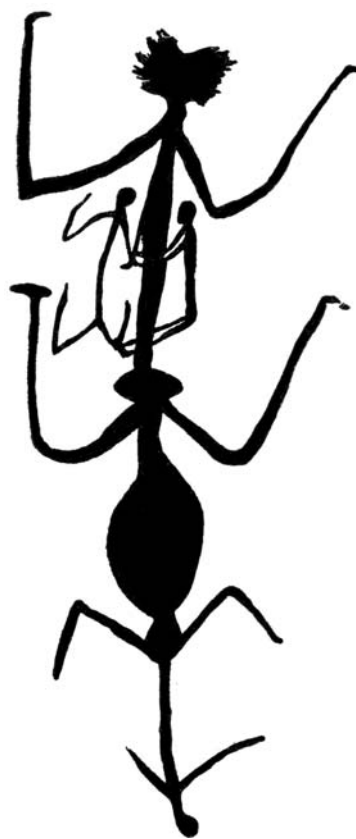


FIGURE 2. Coitus scene. Rock painting. Inagurdurwil, Arnhem Land. The lower figure is smaller and less carefully painted. This figure was in Jelínek (1974) labelled as Fig. 1.

are less rare, in carvings (e.g., La Roche-Lalinde, Les Combarelles, Gönnersdorf) in stylized paintings (Pech Merle) or even in female statuettes (Petersfels, Pekárna Cave). Stylized symbols of female sex can be found especially in mobile art. On the other hand it is not out of the question – as shown among other things by the striking absence of human faces – that some themes were more or less omitted for unknown reasons.

If we turn our attention to the wealth of paintings from Northern Australia, we find that sexual subjects are comparatively common. But a more detailed study shows that pictures of coitus are more exceptional, whether of humans or of animals, even in places which we know to be associated with ensuring the increase of various animals. Where the sexual organ is emphasized in a painting of human figure, it is often a painting of an unnatural or mythological being.

In the Oenpelli region on the east side of the rock formation which the aborigines call Inagurdurwil, we

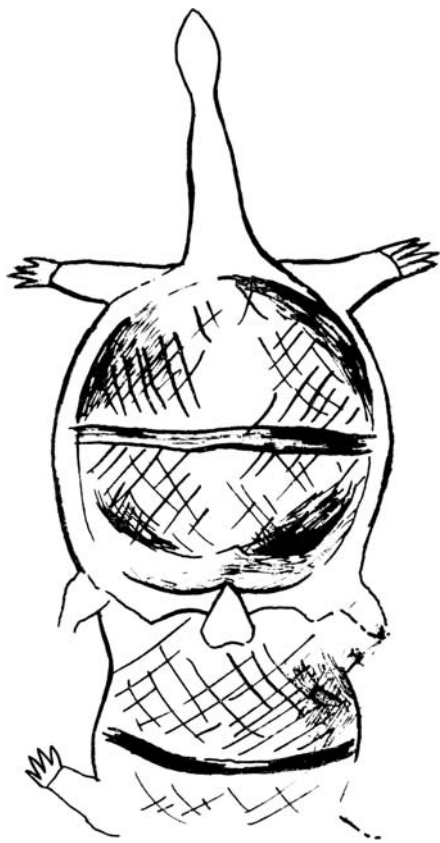


FIGURE 3. Tortoise coitus. Rock painting, Old Woman's Dreaming. East Alligator River, Arnhem Land. The lower figure is incomplete. The position is the same like in human figures. This figure was in Jelínek (1974) labelled as Fig. 2.

found a painting which had already been published by Mountford in 1954 and 1956 (*Figure 2*). It is especially interesting that both figures are drawn on the flat rock wall similarly to the Laussel relief: the lower parts of the body are turned towards each other and the heads away from each other. As at Laussel, the lower figure is smaller and less carefully drawn. It is surely not necessary to explain this fact by saying that the Laussel relief was completed secondarily. When drawing the first, main figure, usually better situated with regard to the artist, e.g., at a more comfortable working level the artist usually devotes more care and energy to his work than when drawing the second, less conveniently situated figure. It is a question of fatigue and psychology. On the question of whether coitus or childbirth is involved, I can mention another painting, which I found on the rock called "Old Woman's Dreaming" (*Figure 3*), near Cahill's Crossing on the East Alligator River. This was a painting



FIGURE 4. Childbirth. Rock painting. Sleišbeck, Arnhem Land. The head of the child is visible between the thighs of the figure. This figure was in Jelínek (1974) labelled as Fig. 4.

of coitus of two tortoises painted on the rock surface in a completely analogical way, i.e., with heads away from each other and the lower parts of the bodies towards each other. Here too the lower figure was less carefully drawn. The painting clearly indicates a mating scene.

We can find a genuine depiction of childbirth in a rock painting near El Sherana (*Figure 4*), i.e., in the southwestern part of Arnhem Land, on the upper reaches of the South Alligator River.

Here a small child is distinctly drawn between the thighs of the standing woman giving birth, and the position is not the characteristic one which we see in the Laussel relief or in the drawings from Inagurdurwil or from Old Woman's Dreaming. Another depiction of childbirth is in the wooden sculpture from New Guinea (*Figure 5*), forming the entrance to a ritual area. Here again the child's head can be seen between the woman's thighs.

Still another childbirth example is published by McCarthy (1970) in a rock painting from Mt Grenfell

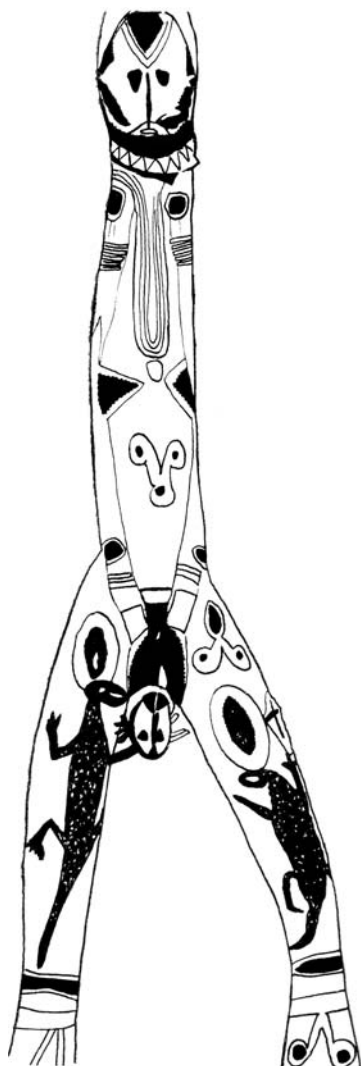


FIGURE 5. Childbirth. Wood carving. Waikam, New Guinea. Between the thighs of the figure one can see the head of the child. The two legs of the figure are the entry into a ritual room in the Manhouse. After Stöhr (1971). This figure was in Jelínek (1974) labelled as Fig. 6.

(Figure 6), Western New South Wales. All these examples of childbirth show a different composition than the coitus paintings. I see no reason, therefore, why the well-known Laussel relief should depict anything else than coitus.

Perhaps two more remarks can be made in explanation of this theme. In Arnhem Land paintings of a squatting woman figures often heavily stylized symbolized coitus, or at least we can say they have strong sexual undertones. In this connection let us remember the comparatively numerous depictions of women leaning forwards



FIGURE 6. Childbirth. Rock painting. The childbirth (top right) is a part of a ritual design. Mt Grenfell, Western New South Wales. After McCarthy (1970). This figure was in Jelínek (1974) labelled as Fig. 5.

– paintings, engravings, even small sculptures – often strongly stylized in European Paleolithic art (Gönnersdorf, Les Combarelles, Petersfels, La Roche-Lalinde, Pekárna Cave, etc.). Both pictures Australian as well as European even when in different positions seem to symbolize the same erotic invitation.

The second remark is that there is at least a double motivation in the depiction of sexual themes in Australian rock paintings:

1. Magic, including sympathetic magic, or the "evil magic" intended to harm someone (sorcery figures).
2. Erotic, either in the themes, or the erotic ventilation, as e.g., in the erotic paintings done by adolescent boys. There is not a simple explication for sexual themes in Australian rock art.

With the help of these interesting Australo-European rock art parallels we can summarize that as a result of a similar psychology and the similarity of the media of expression and economic and cultural bases in the hunting societies, we can find much in common between them, which can be of great assistance in the study of the oldest European art. The differences are undoubtedly a result of different geographical conditions and different traditions.

If used in a critical way. I find ethnographical – psychological comparisons useful for understanding of prehistoric art and life.

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