Male Genital Representation in Paleolithic Art: Erection and Circumcision Before History

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OBJECTIVES	To report on the likely existing evidence about the practice of circumcision in prehistory, or at least a culture of foreskin retraction, and also the meaning of erection in Paleolithic minds. The origin of the ritual of circumcision has been lost in time. Similarly, the primitive anthropologic meaning of erection is undefined.
METHODS	We studied the archeologic and artistic evidence regarding human representations performed during the Upper Paleolithic period, 38 000 to 11 000 years BCE, in Europe, with a focus on genital male representations in portable and rock art.
RESULTS	Drawings, engravings, and sculptures displaying humans are relatively scarce, and <100 examples of male genitals are specifically represented. Some depict a circumcised penis and other represent urologic disorders such as phimosis, paraphimosis, discharge, priapism, or a scrotal mass. In addition, a small number of phalluses carved in horn, bone, or stone, with varying morphology, has survived to the present and also reveals a sustained cult for male erection and foreskin retraction not limited to a particular topographical territory. The very few noncoital human or humanoid figures with marked erection appear in a context of serious danger or death. Therefore, erection could be understood as a phenomenon related to the shamanic transit between life and death.
CONCLUSIONS	The erection in Paleolithic art is explicitly represented in almost all the figures defined as unequivocally male that have survived to the present and in many objects of portable art. Circumcision and/or foreskin retraction of the penis are present in most of the works. UROLOGY 74: 10–14, 2009. © 2009 Published by Elsevier Inc.

The history of urology starts with written documents that precisely refer to procedures, practices, and descriptions of morbid processes related to the urinary and male genital system. In prehistoric times, the oldest ice age art was produced in some places in Europe during the Upper Paleolithic period, which includes the Aurignacian (circa 38 000–30 000 years before present [BP]), Gravettian (circa 30 000–22 000 years BP), Solutrean (circa 22 000–18 000 years BP), and Magdalenian (circa 18 000–11 000 years BP) periods. Graphic documents from those periods exist that reveal how men understood their environment and also the physiologic phenomena and the pathologic processes of their organism.

Homo sapiens left Africa 100 000 years ago, and around 40 000 years ago colonized all of Europe.^{1,2} The biologic

capacities of modern humans included planned mass consumption of resources, development of sophisticated flint and bone technology, body ornament with an aesthetic sense, burial rituals, and the development of ice age art, a symbolic code of images composed by artistic representations that transmit contents. This legacy constitutes a unique source of information regarding both human and animal behavior.^{3,4} However, although it is possible to formally classify a figure according to several patterns, it is very difficult to know its precise symbolic meaning.^{5,6} In this sense, human representations constitute the less-numerous group and are possibly the most difficult to determine from a formal perspective. Sometimes, the scarce anatomic resolution prevents sex determination, and representations are often mixed and combine human and animal features. Almost always the human forms are naked, lack body ornaments, and tend to be identified by the vertical character of their bodies and the facial features.^{7–9}

Archeologic and anthropologic investigations have clarified the life mode of our ancestors. The elements used to reconstruct prehistoric times include bones, stones, colorants, shells, charcoals, and diverse remains; however, the

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documents that generate the best information are the engravings and paintings that have survived to the present in caves and rock shelters or on rocks, as well as depictions and sculptures in carved bones and horns, occasionally used as graphic support. The study of Paleolithic art provides many clues regarding ancient human behavior. The interest these beings displayed in both reproduction and sexuality is patent in their works.¹⁰⁻¹⁵ However, sexuality and procreation were complementary, but differentiated in their mind, because images exist that can be considered highly erotic and not at all of a reproductive character.¹⁰⁻¹² Most probably, the sexual behavior of Paleolithic humans could have had a wider scope than reproduction itself.¹⁰

MATERIAL AND METHODS

We systematically reviewed the descriptions of both rock and portable art performed in the past 2 centuries by scholars of prehistory (from 1864 on), with an emphasis on human representations produced in Europe (France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Central Europe, and Western Russia) during the different Upper Paleolithic periods, the prehistoric age that lasted from 38 000 to 11 000 years BCE. Classical writings, including textbooks, publications, and articles displaying descriptions and/or recordings, since the first written reference of the finding of a human form in Paleolithic art in Laugerie Basse (Dordogne, France) were analyzed, together with recent publications indexed in the "Current Contents" and other monographic books. In addition, whenever possible, the original descriptions have been validated by confirmation visits to the caves, rock shelters, and open air sites or museums and personal collections where portable art has been preserved.

The proportion of human representations that can be defined as unequivocally masculine, by either full size or partial penile forms, have been analyzed. If possible, the attitudes and surrounding scenarios of the representations have also been recorded. Sometimes, even the archeologic context and information have been available. An analysis regarding the anatomic descriptions of the diverse phallic forms was undertaken, with emphasis on the definition of the erectile status and the description of morphologic changes of urologic meaning.

RESULTS

In European Paleolithic art, a total of 702 representations can be identified as full-size human and are seen on cave walls, rocks detached from caves or rock shelters, and portable objects. Among them, 74 (10.5%) can be conceived as male forms because the scrotum and/or penis is specifically depicted. Of these 74 images, 27 (36.5% of the male forms) represent an erectile state (Figs. 1-3).

In other cases, only a portion of the human has been represented, usually the hand (negative or, rarer, positive hand stencils), the head, or the external genitalia. No definite form exists for assigning a sex to the hand representations, although those of larger proportions are most probably male. Smaller hands could be either feminine or juvenile. For head representations, a sex assignment is also difficult, although occasionally a beard or a

Figure 1. Engraving on cave wall revealing human figure with disproportionate long penis with uncovered glands in Saint-Cirq (Le Buge, France).

Figure 2. Several recordings showing huge phalli. (A) Statue known as "Priapus" found in Gravettian layer aged 22 000 years (Laussel, France). (B) Human couple in coital scene engraved in Los Casares cave (Riba de Saelices, Spain). (C) Human thin engraving in attitude of ejaculation in Ribeira dos Piscos (Foz Coa, Portugal).

point-ending mandible is a trace to assign masculinity. Once penises or vulvas are depicted, the sex appears evident. However, these forms are not always easily recognized when represented alone, and their total number might exceed what has been admitted. Approximately 107 isolated genital representations have been specifically recorded to date by scholars, either sculptural or graphic. Most of them are female. Male genital represen-

Figure 3. Grotesque hunter with phimotic erect phallus hit by eviscerated bison in Lascaux cave (Montignac, France).

Figure 4. Phallus carved on wall in Fronsac cave (Vieux-Mareuile, France) with prepuce edema characteristic of paraphimosis.

Figure 5. Portable art phallic pieces recovered from Castanet, La Madeleine, Blanchard, La Madeleine, Le Forne du Diable, and Roc de Marcamps (left to right). All are in erection and most show totally retracted or absent foreskin. Second piece from La Madeleine shows redundant nonphimotic foreskin and one from Le Forne du Diable suggests partial phimosis, but allows possibility of foreskin retraction.

tations in both portable and rock art are proportionally rare, but not exceptional. We recorded a total of 22 isolated male genital forms (21.6% of all exclusive genital representations). All were represented in erection (Figs. 4 and 5).

The morphologic details of the male genitals also provide a lot of information regarding normal and abnormal

genital patterns. The erectile status provides a better opportunity to assess the presence of phimosis. We recorded a total of 96 Paleolithic (rock or portable art) genital male forms in erectile status, either full-size human (77%) or partial phallic forms (23%). Only 10 (10.4%) were clearly phimosis or give the idea of difficult foreskin retraction. Thus, although no specific ritual of circumcision has been represented in Paleolithic art, these data give definite indirect evidence of the existence of a culture of foreskin retraction in prehistory.

Phimosis is not the only urologic disorder represented in Paleolithic art. Paraphimosis is also evident in a penis engraved in the wall in the Fronsac cave in France, possibly alerting to the danger of not practicing foreskin retraction (Fig. 4). Urethral discharge is also depicted in the Los Casares cave in Spain, a cave in which a coital scene and a possible childbirth are also carved. A scrotal mass is represented in one of the Grimaldi figures, which has been called "the Hermaphrodite" because, unlike the others, it is not definitely female. Finally, priapism or a pathologically exaggerated erection might be depicted in the figure in Laussel known as "Priapus" (Fig. 2A) or in the Le Portel cave, where a human has been represented around a stalagmite with the form of an erectile phallus. These examples of pathologic erection status might have impressed people at Paleolithic time thus meriting elusive representation.

The phenomenon of erection is usually represented in an isolated genital form or in an individual and is very rarely a part of a scene. Only 2 coital scenes with erect phalluses are specifically represented, 1 in the wall in Los Casares cave (possibly of Gravettian-Solutrean chronology, around 20 000 years ago; Fig. 2B) and another in a plaque of portable art found in La Marche cave (in a Magdalenian context around 13 000 years ago). Other coital scenes in different mating postures have been recognized, but their genitals are not represented. A solitary erectile man (ithyphallic) is represented ejaculating in a thin carving in a large stone in the open air in Ribeira dos piscos (possibly of Magdalenian chronology, around 12 000 years ago; Fig. 2C). Other scenes with ithyphallics include the scene at Lascaux in which a humanoid figure is knocked down by an eviscerated bison (Fig. 3), the man in a bone disk found in Mas d'Azil that most likely represents a hunter hit by a bear; and the 2 men tied from feet to neck who are probably being executed and are surrounded by a group of dancers in the Addaura cave. These 3 examples have something in common: the erection appears in the context of serious danger and death.

COMMENT

The relative scarcity of human representations with respect to animal forms most probably represents the zoomorphic thought of Upper Paleolithic societies and rare anthropomorphic consideration. Also, certain religious or cultural taboos could have influenced the rarity of naturalistic human representations.² Classically, an-

thropologists and Paleolithic art experts have related the erectile status to rituals of fertility.¹⁶ However, the phallus sometimes appears more important than the human form and is somehow determinant to the representation, such as the previously mentioned man around a stalactite in Le Portel, the human in Saint Cirq with a penis as long as his limb (Fig. 1), and the coital scene in Los Casares with a phallus as thick as the man's head (Fig. 2B). No doubt exists that in these, and other examples, the penis is an outstanding part of the representation.^{10,11} Sometimes, it is highlighted to the eyes of the observer, not by its size, but by how light and dark enhance the depiction, such as in the small human representation with a genital dot in Tito Bustillo (Ribadesella, Spain), which is best visualized when lighted from behind the stalagmite curtain.¹⁷

Similar to the female figures known as "Venuses" found all over Europe in a Gravettian-Solutrean context (around 25 000-16 000 years ago),¹⁸⁻²¹ a reduced number of masculine statues of the same period with the male genitals enhanced appear from France to the Czech Republic.²² Possibly the most expressive of them is a small figure with a huge erectile phallus known as "Laus-sel's Priapus" (Fig. 2), although others found in Brassempouy or in Brno II also have their genitals represented. Sculptural images of isolated penises created using the technique of bas relief by carving a stone fragment with a chisel have been found in layers of Gravettian chronology (around 22 000 years) in Laugerie-Haute and Sergeac rock shelters. They are coetaneous to the more numerous vulvar engravings found in similar contexts and performed using the same technique. These 2 phalluses on stone blocks were in proximity to vulvar engravings, which recalls the complementary association of both sexes and possibly symbolizes intercourse.

Another similar form of penile representation, also scarce, but somewhat more numerous than bas reliefs, is the engraving of an isolated phallus on cave walls. Good examples can be found in Fronsac, Bédailhac, Bara-Bahau, les Combarelles, Los Casares, and Chufín caves. Their chronology is uncertain because of the absence of associated archeologic stratus and also because the dating of engravings is not possible with current technology. In all of these places feminine representations are also depicted on the walls, sometimes as rod-like female profiles and other times as genital forms of triangular shape or color decoration of natural orifices. The genitals alone symbolize the whole human, but are, at the same time, realistic representations. Some of these phalluses reveal potential dangers or fears such as the one in Fronsac with paraphimosis (Fig. 4) or one of those represented in Los Casares with urethral discharge. It is not doubted that they constitute the first graphic register of urologic disorders.²³ Naturally, diseases such as phimosis, paraphimosis, hydrocele, or urethritis have existed since the very early days of humanity. In this sense, even the representation of a distorted enormous phallus we have men-

tioned could also be related to the representation of an episode of priapism, thus warning of another danger the artist witnessed or was told about, somehow creating for the first time the myth of Priapus.

Finally, a collection of instruments with phallic forms performed on antler, bone, or stone have been recovered in the context of habitation from different excavations, most of them in France that have survived to the present (Fig. 5). All over Europe, other bone instruments of unknown use with prominent phallic decorations have also been found. This material was far from being waste, because it could have been used to make valuable spear points or pendants instead. Some believe they constitute dildos or domestic masturbating devices, but they could also have been used in rituals. The only real meaning of these devices is that erection was important enough in these people's minds to merit perpetuation. Erection could mean virility and strength, not only as opposed to the feminine, but also to nature and the animal world. Quite often the animals they fought were also represented in erectile status. We noted that sometimes erection is represented in a dangerous situation or even in the transition to death (eg, the loss of the soul) and might constitute a shamanistic interpretation of the physiologic phenomenon of orgasm. Although we cannot know the meaning of erections in the Paleolithic mind, no doubt exists that it captivated these beings because it has been repeatedly represented in the graphic registry they generated.²³

Paleolithic genital representations can also be evaluated from a urologic viewpoint. Not all penises appear circumcised. Phimosis is evident in the depictions of sharpened or point-ending erectile phalluses, such as those represented in Murat, Gabillou (individual 109), La Marche (individuals 34 and 39), Laugerie-Basse, Tuc d'Audoubert, trois-frères (small human-bison), les Combarelles, and in Lascaux (Fig. 3). In addition, the grooves engraved in the penile sculpture from Le Forne du diable suggest it had partial phimosis that prevented complete foreskin retraction in erection (Fig. 5). Apart from this evidence, the remaining penile representations do not appear phimosis. We cannot know for certain that the Paleolithic peoples practiced circumcision, but this observation favors a general culture of penile foreskin retraction and genital hygiene care. Also, from the surgical and medical viewpoint, both highly specialized lithic technology and knowledge of the curative properties of different beverages and mixtures must be assumed from the archeologic and comparative ethnographic evidence, thus making possible the practice of circumcision in the Paleolithic period.

CONCLUSIONS

The genital representations performed in Europe during the Upper Paleolithic period (38 000-11 000 years ago) allow us to infer the possible existence of a prehistoric practice of penile foreskin retraction or even circum-

cision and also that erection was considered important from both a domestic perspective and in the mind of the cave wall art producers. Several urologic disorders, such as phimosis, paraphimosis, discharge, priapism, and even a scrotal mass, are represented and constitute the very first signals of what can be called primitive urologic knowledge.

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