

## **The fate of a thinking animal: Pleistocene art as part of the process of human hegemonic appropriation of the world**

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**Abstract:** *Pleistocene art possesses manifold often “superimposed” meanings. Some are only fully accessible to the original creators; some are totally reinvested by present day researchers. Some may be the conscious expressions of the mind of an artist in a given time while others may reflect the idiosyncrasies of an entire community. Although original creators were (admittedly) unaware of the fact, ancient imagery can be regarded as a stepping stone in the process of human hegemonic appropriation of the planet. Taking open-air sites as an example, it will be argued that Pleistocene rock art can be seen as an attempt to place and understand ourselves within a “natural” World that becomes humanized when landscapes are created.*

**Keywords:** landscape, human development, open-air rock art.

**Résumé :** *L'art du Pléistocène possède souvent multiples significations « superposées ». Certains ne sont que pleinement accessibles aux créateurs originaux ; certains sont totalement réinvestis aujourd'hui par les chercheurs. Certains peuvent être les expressions conscientes de l'esprit d'un artiste individuel alors que d'autres peuvent refléter les particularités de toute une communauté. Bien que les créateurs originaux n'en aient pas complètement été conscients, l'imagerie du Paléolithique supérieur européenne peut être considérée comme une étape dans le processus d'appropriation hégémonique de la planète par les êtres humains. Prenant les sites de plein-air à titre d'exemple, nous ferons valoir que l'art rupestre du Pléistocène peut être vu comme une tentative humaine de nous placer dans un monde « naturel » qui devient précisément humanisé quand les paysages sont créés par (entre autres) le geste de l'inscription ou de la peinture.*

The term rock art refers to motifs painted or engraved onto stone surfaces located in different contexts and emanating from a more or less distant Past. This is a straightforward and simple definition to which all can adhere. But rock art also provides unique clues to our ancestor's mental life (notably to spiritual or religious beliefs) while it gives proof, in the final stage of the Pleistocene, of the emergence of *Homo Sapiens Sapiens*, a thinking animal with an aptitude for abstract thought and the capability to put it to use. Throughout this paper the role of the unconscious in the process of human appropriation of the planet, in which rock art plays an instrumental part will be mentioned often. Nevertheless, if it is quite difficult to access the conscious part of the mind of our ancestors, it is impossible to penetrate the

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unconscious mind<sup>1</sup>. Or is it? It can be argued that while the conscious enforces concepts in a synchronic fashion (that is, dictates the meaning that is attributed to rock art symbols, for instance) hard to fully grasp *a posteriori*, the manifestations of the unconscious are truly universal and cross time boundaries. Freud investigated the hidden motivations that lie in the back of our minds suggesting that they are recurrent in human History (Thurschwell 2000). For instance, he even tried to demonstrate that prehistoric humans already had in guilt (linked with the Oedipus complex) an important social constraint (Freud 2001). His disciple (to a certain point) Jung (1990), saw in History the existence of collective unconscious archetypes that while being reflected in different ways in diverse societies (in myths, tales or cognitive and behavioral structures) all expose the basic human fear: that of physical and even spiritual oblivion.

The aim of this paper is not to present new ideas. Rock art researchers as, for instance, Michel Lorblanchet (1999) or academics from other areas, as the art critique Signe Howell (1991), have draw attention to, on one hand, the role of art in human appropriation of the Universe and, on the other, to the elemental constants of human life (sex, death, mourning, birth...). Rather, it will be suggested that (rock) art can be used as a mean to unveil, in a diachronic fashion, human agency within the environment, and above all, its role in the process of human hegemonic dominance over the planet.

## Rock art and landscape

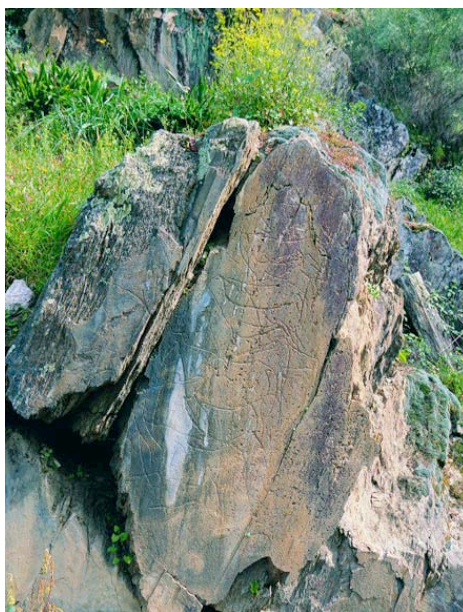
Rock art keeps record of the fashion humans construct(ed) their "world", halfway between the constraints imposed by the physical, the "real" and the desires (sometimes for greatness...) and will of human mind(s). In this sense, rock art clearly serves as a mean to embody ourselves in the landscape. Following Ingold's view (2000), it is argued that the landscape is not just the natural world or, on the other hand, just an "artificial" human construction. "Human beings do not, in their movements, inscribe their life stories upon the surface of nature (...); rather, these histories are woven, along with the life-cycles of plants and animals, into the texture of the surface itself" (Ingold 2000: 198). The environment, as Ingold elegantly puts it, "is itself pregnant with the past" (*ibid.*: 189). In this sense, rock art motifs are evidence of past relationships between humans and their environment that add to the piling up of histories we continually inscribe in the landscape.

On the other hand, rock art motifs, as other markings in the landscape, also provide depth to History and appease human fears regarding individual and collective oblivion. In a rather semi-conscious fashion, it assures us that something will stay behind after we are long gone: a sort of perpetuation of the species. In turn, the depth of human history, as signaled by those marks we leave behind, reinforces our species gest and helps to give sense to our collective and individual existence. The evolution of the processes, of which the Pleistocene inscription or painting of motifs in the available surfaces is the founding moment, of landscape creation, of

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis-Williams notes that "human beings are not either conscious or unconscious" and that "consciousness should rather be thought of as a spectrum (...) (where) at one end (...) is alert consciousness" and, at the other, "deep, dreamless sleep" (2008: 27). Even if this might be so, for simplification purposes, this short paper will only refer to the conscious and to the unconscious.

humanization of the "non-human" is one of the most fascinating analyses that rock art allows. Richard Bradley carried out a comparative study on more or less contemporaneous (from the Neolithic onwards) Northern Iberia and Southern Scandinavia rock art and its implantation in the landscape (2000, 64-80). Apparently, "the significance of a particular location becomes archaeologically identifiable through that activity, and yet there is every reason to think that the place itself had achieved a special significance before (...) these events occurred" (Bradley 2000: 79). In fact, the pre-existent significance humans attributed to natural topography features might have determined the "need" to mark those sites with their culturally invested meaning signs, i. e. rock art. Chris Scarre mentions several types of different "prominent landscapes features such as mountains, cliffs, caves, pools, waterfalls, hot springs, and large trees" (2008, 212) as "places of power", of recurrent significance through time and space. When human beings invest meaning into those "places of power" they become "shrines of the land" (*Ibid.*). The author has elsewhere also suggested (Fernandes 2008) that the location as well as shapes, texture or tones of rock art might have been decisive in the selection of outcrops to engrave in the case of the Côa Valley Pleistocene rock art (Fig. 1). If so, this further reinforces the role rock art had in the process of landscape creation and in seizing and transforming the physical world.



**Fig. 1.** Panel (Penascosa 3) with Upper Palaeolithic rock art in the Côa Valley, Portugal. Besides the many superimposing existent figures (aurochs, horses, deer and goats), note the unique shape, tone and texture of the outcrop. (*Photo in Baptista 1999: 98.*)

## Rock art as a “by-product”<sup>2</sup>

(Rock) art might be understood as a “by-product” of other human activities. As all of the different activities man pursues are interconnected and, in essence, not subject to be ranked from the most important to the least significant one, it is not suggested that art originated completely by accident but rather that all our actions produce “secondary” effects to the ones originally intended. These might become, on their own merit, significant realms of the human mental “toolkit” and our actions. For instance, the biologist Gillian Morriss-Kay (2010) suggests that hunting might have been behind the emergence of abstract thought that, in turn, fostered the surfacing of art. Her argument is based on the premise that humans are the only beings that give chase to an animal that falls outside their field of vision. Hunters had to rely on what she calls the “mind’s eye” to continue to visualize a deer (for instance) that disappears over a hilltop. She concludes stating that:

“The neural changes that provided our ancestors with the imagination to understand, through logic, the continued existence of something that is no longer visible (...) would have had a genuine evolutionary advantage. Without these survival-enhancing functional origins, it is unlikely that we would have the neural equipment to create art” (Morriss-Kay 2010: 174).

So, in this sense, the emergence of (rock) art can be seen as a “by-product” of hunting activities.

On the other hand, Hugo Lamdin-Whymark, working on the Prehistoric rock art of Kilmartin, Scotland (specifically Torbhlaren sites 1 and 2), proposes that rather than just having a traditional motif-centered perspective, the artistic production process in itself should also be valued as it might have been a meaningful *performance* (Hugo Lamdin-Whymark, personal communication). He bases his proposal on the fact that archaeological layers around the studied panels preserved chunks and flakes of quartz (deemed to be the remnants of the tools used to create carvings) while other pieces “appear to have been deliberately placed in fissures” (Hugo Lamdin-Whymark, personal communication) of the outcrops containing rock art. Stretching the argument a bit further it may be put forwarded that rock art could also be a 'by-product' of its creation act, that is, it could be (also? just?) the result of ritualistic creative performance. In this sense, the rock art creation process could be in itself as important as the end result. On the other hand, shamanistic interpretations of rock art can also entail the idea of rock art being a “by-product” of other human activities. That is, the drive behind rock art creation can be perceived as having been the *commanding* need to visually translate images or concepts envisaged by the shaman while in trance. In this sense, rock art can be seen as the “by-product” of the shaman’s socially significant quest through the spiritual realm in order to achieve proposed goals.

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<sup>2</sup> The term 'by-product' is usually applied to something that was produced in the making of something else and/or as a secondary result or a side effect of a particular action or process. Hence, in this paper, the word is used with the sense present in the first part of the above definition. While it is not (admittedly) an entirely satisfactory term to use regarding what it is suggested in the course of this paper, the expression does apply to what here is suggested.

Art in itself can be seen as being *recurrent* since artists continually seek inspiration in more ancient works of art. It is well-known that Picasso took inspiration from African sculptures that, at the time, were considered to be primitive art (Howell 1991)<sup>3</sup>. This *recurrence* may also be viewed as art having the capability of constantly being its own "by-product". Furthermore, at the same time, art can also generate its own "by-products". The example that comes to mind is that of writing systems. Anati has tried to establish that the genesis of writing systems may be found in rock art. The Italian researcher notes that the syntactic connections between the different signs (or, as he also calls them, "graphemes") present in European Pleistocene rock art may lead us to infer that the "human logical conceptual mechanisms that resulted in the invention of modern writing in the last 5000 years" (Anati 2000: 25) had been there, at least, for 40000 years.

Although regarding (rock) art as a "byproduct" of other activities might be considered quite controversial, the above paragraphs aim to establish that this notion is latent in different attempts to explain (rock) art and pinpoint its emergence. However, the current paper aims to offer a diachronic view of the role rock art might have had in the process of human dominance of the planet rather than its direct and synchronic origins. To do this, it was needed to establish that (rock) art did not emerged (pristinely) on itself nor is it an end in itself. In his seminal study on Upper Palaeolithic European art Max Raphael states:

"Art is the creative act which gives the material and ideological life-contents of a concrete society adequate visible forms. These forms are not completely determined by their antecedents nor do they arise mechanically under the pressure of external influences nor are they the product of both: the truth *is* that they have no history of their own. More precisely: art has historical roots that lie outside *it*, and it has historical consequences that again lie outside it. Art as such *is* not a historical act but an act of creating values. (...) The main task of a history of art is to show that these determined forms – forms and not contents! – must necessarily arise from definite economic, social, political, moral, religious, etc., roots, that these forms express them, represent them, manifest them; (...) that they react on these roots and play a part in their transformation. Every attempt to go beyond this task and to constitute an immanent history of the development of forms necessarily leads to reducing the creative process to a mechanical act. The result *is* a catalogue or a sequence of 'styles' but not a history of art or even of styles. Art as such has no history, there is only a theory of art which is the theory of artistic creation; but this theory of art itself has a concrete content only *if* it can explain artistic creation as the transformation, the translation of historical situations into the language of visible forms, and this as a necessary process". (1945: 17)

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<sup>3</sup> The Spanish painter has equally been quoted as having said upon visiting the cave that "after Altamira all is decadence".

## Rock art and religion

Rock art illustrates, in a way most archaeological data cannot, the start of *Sapiens Sapiens*' discovery, comprehension and dominance of an environment that only gains intelligibility when spiritual, symbolic and mythological dimensions are bestowed upon the world, *our planet*. A world of "conquest and progress" but also an object created by a primordially instinctive mind. Rock art translates into symbols "theologies" of comprehension and proto-control (hence, of humanization) of our (given) environment(s). Today, only the iconic character of rock art is fully reachable since the mythologies (and stories) that provided meaning and significance to rock art are lost, although interpretative analogies, sometimes simplistic, sometimes esoteric, might be inferred from so-called modern primitives societies. Steven Mithen points out: "Archaeologists are more likely to have success at reconstructing the 'outside' meanings of this art, rather than the 'inside' meanings which require access to the lost mythological world of the prehistoric mind" (1996: 159). In a way, diachronically speaking, this "outside" meaning is the content provided, through the creation of mythologies and theologies, to (and legitimizing) the human process of appropriation of the planet.

Mithen also introduced the concept of cognitive fluidity "that arose in the human mind, which resulted in art, new technology, and a transformation in the exploitation of the natural world and the means of social interaction" and also religion (1996, 178), to try pinpoint the birth of conceptual thought. On the other hand, Boyer speaks of the "recurrence of certain types of mental representations in religious systems" (1992, 27). Michel Lorblanchet states that rock art was "probably born *with* and *from* religion" (1999, 272; author's translation). Lewis-Williams suggested that "religion is not an intrinsically unrecoverable component of the past" (2008, 39). He goes on to argue that religion is "wired" into the human brain" (*Ibid.*: 27). Even if this is so, the fact that religious belief might be connected to yet poorly understood neuro-chemical mechanisms (Culotta 2009), does not impede that once being there, spiritual beliefs could not have, concomitantly, fulfilled a social cohesion role in different societies. Human beings, regardless of precise circumstances, always had need for ways of alleviating the harsh truth about existence (in an escapist fashion, if you will), the finite nature of life. It has been proposed elsewhere by the author (Luís and Fernandes in press) that rock art can also be seen as being *just* entertainment. Entertainment in a similar manner as today we understand the concept<sup>4</sup> but also beyond, as an ontological, cultural, socio-economic tool to indoctrinate society or individuals within a society: an appealing way of conveying meaning is the most effective fashion to assure its deliverance and comprehension. Thus religion (or spiritual beliefs)<sup>5</sup>, with all the attached paraphernalia of all explaining myths, coded signs or magical rites could have took advantage of alluring and powerful ways to assure that the intended social cohesion "command" is delivered and complied with (also facilitating faster dissemination) in a more successful way. Depending of each precise context of creation, we can see much rock art as a way of materialising in visible and perennial fashion aspects of such paraphernalia. Therefore, (rock) art

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<sup>4</sup> Regarding the way Entertainment is regarded today, as opposed to 'High culture', see Shusterman (2003).

<sup>5</sup> Besides its role in strengthening harmony and the character of social groups (Durkheim 1965) and even in controlling economic practices (Rappaport 1999).

played a major part in the very fabric of social regulating processes. Max Raphael pointed that:

“what the works of art that have survived show us *is* a maximum of spiritually creative power placed in the service of the ruling ideas and classes. (...) In every known society art has had the function of creating a synthesis of real actions and theoretical-ideological ideas. This synthesis of compulsions and wishes in the Palaeolithic age displays a striking power of emotion and thought.” (1945, 13)

The existence of (ruling or not) social classes in the Upper Palaeolithic might be quite difficult to establish from the available archaeological record<sup>6</sup> (rock art included). Therefore it will not be suggested that (rock) art, a “maximum of spiritually creative power” that took some hundreds of millennia to reach, serviced the demands of a ruling class in Upper Palaeolithic societies. However, if the term “class” is substituted by the word “species”, Max Raphael’s statement does adequately portray the commencement of the human world appropriation process. The emergence of a ruling species, which is yet to be fully conscious of the significance of the process that was set in motion, is hence deeply tied to the embedment of the surrounding “natural” world with signs that while (mostly) inspired in nature (with the representation of other animals) only have their full meaning if seen through the human “mind’s eye”.

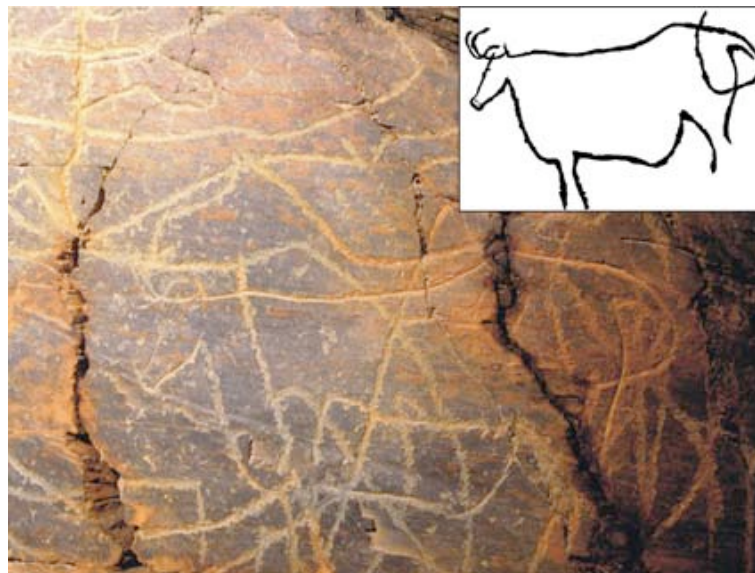
## The role of rock art in world domination by humans

Human beings have long ago, even if not in an entirely conscious fashion, begun a process of dominance over the physical world. Indeed, the first step in this process, linked to our ability for abstraction, was precisely to divide the world into the natural and human realms. Ingold (2000) has demonstrated that this partition between human and not human is entirely artificial; a fiction translated into mythologies and religion as a tool to legitimate the notion of progress insofar as it entails the domination of the “hostile” *other* environment. Pleistocene rock art is at the heart of the beginnings of this process. Marking the landscape is a way of stating and establishing dominance of this hostile natural world there for the taking that albeit being *another* belongs only to itself. It is not suggested that Pleistocene society engraved or painted motifs because they knew by doing so some millennia later human beings would be able to travel to the Moon. This is a semi-conscious process diachronically linked with the real necessities of each precise context of production. Quoting Raphael again, “the act of artistic creation has produced a content that comprises more than was supplied by reality and by social consciousness” (1945, 35). That is, there is a “dormant” more or less hidden dimension in (rock) art that besides elevating it beyond “the subordinated tasks that man embraces, or that are dictated by religion or magic” (Bataille 1979: 80; author’s translation) carries a semi-encrypted message onwards: the stories (mythologies and so on) created to justify and give meaning to our existence (also as masters of the planet) are self fulfilling prophecies. Considering that images are the most powerful translation of the whole

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<sup>6</sup> This is the major critique addressed to Marxist archaeology (Renfrew and Bahn 2000: 472). Raphael, albeit not being an archaeologist, was himself a Marxist. See Mitchell (2006) for an account of Raphael’s Marxist approach to art.

spectrum of human mental activity, it is no wonder that for so many millennia rock art has been created (and recreated) time and time again. Max Raphael notes that a work of art has to "carry a form-element through several dimensions of *space and consciousness* in such a way that certain axes of different frames of reference are unambiguously related to one another" (Raphael 1945: 34; author's emphasis). In the case of rock art, it is suggested that *time* could be added to the "dimensions of space and consciousness" Raphael mentions as, again in a diachronic perspective, these form-elements (to which themes and techniques of execution might be added) are recurrent in the rock art (and other kinds of art) of different periods and geographies. For instance, the aurochs is vastly represented in the Upper Palaeolithic (Fig. 2); its "domesticated" descendent can be found, for instance, in Minoan art (see Fig. 3) and today, in some Mediterranean countries, the bull still continues to be a powerful symbol that can be found in bullfighting (Fig. 4), the running of the bulls (for instance, in the world famous San Fermín festival in Pamplona) or the *Toro de fuego* ("fire bull") (Fig. 5). In fact, the bull is such an evocative image that it has become one of the major iconic symbols of Spain (Fig. 6)<sup>7</sup>. As Bradley notes, "(rock art) is not a unitary phenomenon and it exhibits a wide range of variation across time and space" being therefore, for instance, "legitimate to compare petroglyphs with free-standing sculptures and Roman inscriptions with entirely abstract designs" (2000, 65). This variation is given by the precise contexts of rock art production. Diachronically it is possible to compare motifs in an endeavor to understand how recurrent themes have survived and evolved, not only in meaning but also in the technical means that were used to represent them.



**Fig. 2.** Pleistocene aurochs wagging its tail in Fariseu 1, Côa Valley, Portugal. (Photo A.P. Batarda Fernandes. Drawing in Baptista et al. 2008: 57.)

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<sup>7</sup> Throughout History, different societies had in the bull an evocative symbol. The examples provided here are just a few of the uses the symbol has had (and has) in the Mediterranean area.



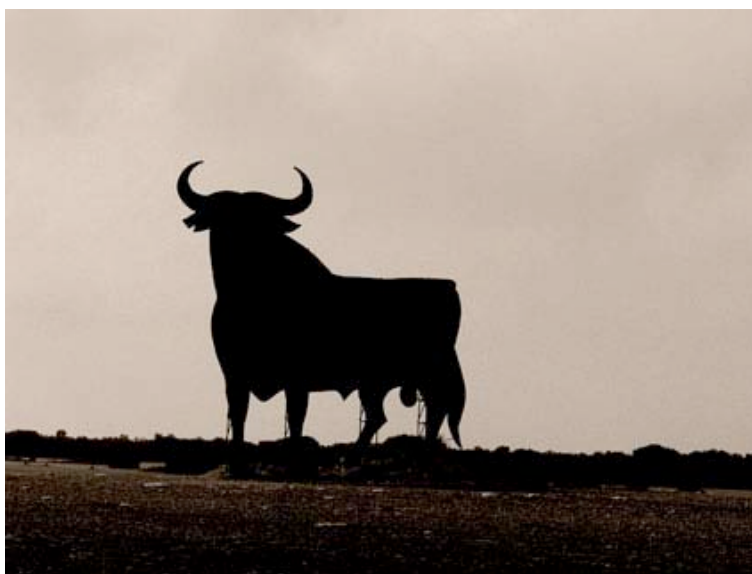
**Fig. 3.** Minoan fresco in Knossos palace depicting an acrobatic display involving a bull (a sort of proto-bullfighting?). (Photo [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Knossos\\_bull.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Knossos_bull.jpg))



**Fig. 4.** A bull in the arena. In Spain, as in Portugal and other countries, bullfighting is considered an art that attracts legions of aficionados. (Photo Alexander Fiske-Harrison, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:El\\_Pilar\\_Bull\\_by\\_Alexander\\_Fiske-Harrison,\\_Seville\\_Feria\\_09.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:El_Pilar_Bull_by_Alexander_Fiske-Harrison,_Seville_Feria_09.jpg))



**Fig. 5.** Fire bull during the *Fiesta de Santa Ana* in Tudela, Navarra, Spain. (Photo by Hynek Moravec, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Tudela\\_St\\_Anna7719m.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Tudela_St_Anna7719m.jpg))



**Fig. 6.** A familiar sight in Spanish roads. (Photo: <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Zaino.jpg>)

It is suggested that for Pleistocene society it was important to sublimate normal fears that arose from day to day life in a harsh and dangerous environment. European Pleistocene rock art, for instance, usually depicts a very limited number of animal species, of which man could have depended for sustenance. It would be a daunting task to hunt an aurochs or a wholly mammoth (Fig. 7), or to confront a saber tooth cat. Painting or engraving these animals would have been a way of exorcizing such fears while concomitantly creating the stories (or better still, the mythologies) that bred life and might to the images. Imagery would slowly have become "signified", that is, transformed into symbols imbued with automatic and "universal" meaning. At the same time, within a diachronic perspective, the process of world dominance commences. Human beings look at their given environment, try to understand and

seize it by recreating it in an abstract fashion in their minds *and in* the available media, the smooth rocky surfaces of caves or open-air outcrops. This recreation is not "reality" itself but our representation of it in images that become coded signs to which (nevertheless evolving) values and meanings are added. Rock art is thus the *de facto* evidence of beginning of this process of human parting from the natural world. Humans are marking the territory (which ironically many other animals also do – see Fig. 8) using the full might of their most valuable tool, the brain. Biological ejections are no longer needed since humans are animals that have a more powerful way, as it is believed, of controlling "nature" thus *creating* landscapes.



**Fig. 7.** Still from the 2008 movie "10,000 BC". While the movie is the typical implausible Hollywood action and adventure film (hence, *entertainment*), this image adequately depicts the size difference between a wholly mammoth and a human. (Photo: <http://www.imdb.com/media/rm3550778880/tt0443649>)



**Fig. 8.** Upper Palaeolithic motif in Quinta da Barca 4, Côa Valley, Portugal, depicting a large quadruped (aurochs, deer, horse?) expelling urine or feces. This image, as other similar ones in Western Europe Pleistocene art, suggests that humans were aware of how different animal species demarcated their territory. (Drawing in Baptista et al. 2006: 171.)

## Conclusion

In these brief lines, the author tried to establish, in a very schematic fashion, the foundations for diachronic approach to rock art that values its role in the process of human hegemonic appropriation of the planet. It is recognized, however, that Bradley is correct when he notes that "the failure of more ambitious approaches has shown that this (rock art) is not the kind of material that lends itself to too much generalization" (Bradley 2000: 66). Nevertheless, while what has been suggested in this paper may generate some over-generalization pitfalls, the main purpose has been to step outside traditional synchronic interpretations of rock art in order to try to begin ascertaining its diachronic universal significance. The ideas presented here obviously need further research and development (namely, analyzing the importance of rock art in landscape creation). However, this endeavor may lead the rock art discipline of study to free itself from an obsessive search for the "true" interpretation of ancient art which many pursue. In a way, it does not matter what do the images meant. Rather, it is a case of how today they are perceived to have meant to their creators. On the other hand, it is recognized that a mere monographic account of techniques, themes or spatial distribution patterns is not entirely satisfactory. May the current approach help to bridge the gap between purely mechanical "cause-effect" approaches to rock art interpretation and the entirely dry description of motifs? The main concern would thus be to try to understand human beings within the full range of the coordinates where our actions unfold, that is, space and time.

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