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A SYMPOSIUM ON BARRY COOPER'S PALEOLITHIC POLITICS:
HUMAN COMMUNITY IN EARLY ART

Truth against Arrogance: Insights and Eclipse, Investigation and Insights Again

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Knowledge, rather than being a constant virtue of one's mind, is an acquaintance of an unsteady, precarious character. Contrary to the expectations people like to associate with it, it is neither indisputably gained nor is the keeping of it ever assured. Still, there is the endeavor called scholarship, and a part of that endeavor is the promise to attain indeed unequivocal knowledge about the subjects taken up for study, and then to have this knowledge available lastingly. The promise sustains, boosts, and ennobles the activity of scholarship. It incites ambition, and the ambition sublimates all the hardships and sacrifices that scholarship entails. Without the sting of ambition the existence of scholars would be a rare, indeed a very rare occurrence. This is meant to be a strictly empirical remark, not the slightest moral judgment is here intended. Scholars may justly claim to be engaged, by their search for knowledge, in a noble, if not the most noble project for humans. Still, both the noble nature of their design and their purposeful aspiration to succeed with it pertain to their work. It is, in existential terms, not "pure." Whatever the actual cognitive plan, the "research design," might be, the established auxiliaries of ambition—accepted methods, trusted experiences, habitual judgements, seasoned emotions, professional confidence, collegial sharing of views—accompany it.

Their influence on one's scholarly work varies, of course. It can, in comparative terms, be greater or smaller. Much depends upon the nature of a scholar's self-awareness. Is it a source, we may ask, only of self-regard, of gratifying ideas about one's science, or rather of a critical view on the likely non-scholarly elements in the general and perhaps even one's own practice of that science? However that may be, the auxiliaries of ambition of which I speak are invariably a formative force in the exercise of erudition. But to what extent? And are the people concerned conscious of them? Or are they not? Do they reflect on their "knowledge"? Or are they blind to the uncertainty of it? Do they recognize the limitations of their scholarship? Or do they excel by more or less doctrinairely confining their curiosity?

Such questions arose in my mind when I read *Paleolithic Politics*, Barry Cooper's new book.[1] The story he tells illustrates, in a striking way, the arrogance that scholars can assume vis-à-vis the communication of essential insights rendered by the material they have chosen for their study and against which they have barricaded themselves with—remember the auxiliaries of ambition—an array of ingrained methodological, doctrinal, social, professional habits and preconceptions. In their "science", truth—things unveiled—is eclipsed. It is "lost" barred from everyone who continues to practice that science. Barry Cooper amply portrays the study of Paleolithic art in such a state. A whole scholarly discipline, we are told, remained, throughout its history, blind to the true significance of the objects it was concerned with—paintings on walls in caves, scratches on bones, lines and geometrical figures engraved on rock. The eclipse held, though not exclusively. A few individual scholars emerged, typically on the margins of the discipline, who shed the cloths of professional arrogance and approached those objects with empathy, if not with modesty. Renouncing on a principal dogma of their discipline, they assumed that the humans in the Paleolithic era were by no means "primitives", whose intellectual capacities were much lower than those of humans today. They ascribed to the people of the Paleolithic the dignity of a full humanity. Those people, they held, had a sense of meaning as we have. There was something to be understood in studying those paintings in the caves, scratches on bones, geometrical figures on rocks. However, what was it? What did the people of the Paleolithic intend that could and ought to be understood anew?

Barry Cooper's story, then, is largely a report on the lifting of the eclipse under which Paleolithic studies were put. The major protagonists of the feat were two scholars who, as regards their discipline, had the status of "outsiders": the German researcher Marie König (PP 64—102.) and the American researcher Alexander Marshack (PP 103—192). They quested for truth and they met with arrogance, Marie König more than

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Alexander Marshack, though. Parts of Barry Cooper's report read like a drama, with elements of a detective novel (see, for instance, PP 119f.), for Marie König and Alexander Marshack carried on a struggle, with stubbornly pursued investigations, painstakingly gathering evidence for insights apparently lost and to be regained against the blockades of the discipline.

Alexander Marshack was more successful than Marie König in challenging "the doctrinal insistence on never being able to know what Upper Paleolithic art meant" (PP 135). In communicating his perceptions—perceptions of the knowledge the people of the Paleolithic in his view had had—he used a language to which the positivists in the field were able to relate. He spoke of "codes" that he had "cracked", of "patterns" that he had found, of "storied notations" that he thought he could relate, of a "language of signs" he had learned to understand. What had happened? *Ein Aha Erlebnis*, in the Husserlian sense, Barry Cooper writes (PP 107). Alexander Marshack experienced something that let him break through all the barricades of the discipline. Looking in 1963 "at an article [he] had clipped from *Scientific American* about a year earlier" (PP 106), the researcher interested in the origin of calendars had a "'feeling' that something was missing", as to a particular object described in the article: a bone tool handle, shaped between 20,000–25,000 years ago, and found in the course of an excavation at Ishango in what was then the Belgian Congo. There were markings on the bone of which the author of the article, Jean De Heinzelin, wrote: "The pattern of these notches leads one to suspect that they represent more than pure decoration"(PP 107).

A sensing without *Erlebnis*. This arrived, however, when Alexander Marshack took the markings on the bone seriously and searched for what they might say: "I decided to try a hunch, based on ideas suggested by the book I was writing. In fifteen minutes I had 'cracked the code' of the Ishango bone" (PP 107). What had been hiding in plain sight, Barry Cooper comments, was a pre-calendric but yet calendric document. The people in the Paleolithic, as Alexander Marshack continued to demonstrate, possessed the intelligence and knowledge for establishing and using celestial and lunar calendars.

This was indeed a breakthrough. Humans are known for telling stories. The community they form with each other is largely a matter of storytelling (see PP 6). In discovering that the "notations" on the objects which he was examining "were open-ended in their ability to tell a story" (PP 130), namely a story of appearances and disappearances, vanishing and renewal, as a calendar does, Alexander Marshack re-discovered what for a long time had been discarded: there was a commonality of storytelling stretching over humankind's history. The people of the Paleolithic age were partners in this history, albeit in an "early" phase. Their "language of signs", their "storied symbolizations" expressed what other such languages used by humans in the course of their history expressed: experiences that were equivalent with each other (see PP 130, 138, 140, 162). No, Alexander Marshack maintained, human beings were not "primarily toolmakers", they were above all "symbol-makers" (PP 189). The scratches, geometrical figures, paintings that hitherto had been defined merely as "art", "decoration", or pure "figuration", were symbols, and symbols are carriers of meaning.

For Marie König, this was evident, from the very beginning of her research in the field of Paleolithic studies. Her perceptions and her thinking were marked by an acute sense of symbolic recognition. She emerges in Barry Cooper's book as a person who stood out among her "colleagues" by a considerable literacy in matters of culture. In seeing a painting of a dove in a Christian Church, she would of course have been aware of the context and have therefore known that she did not just look at a bird, but that she saw in the figure of the dove a symbol whose meaning was to represent the Holy Spirit (PP 75). Marie König was not at a loss when she contemplated the geometrical figures—straight lines, crossed lines—engraved on rocks in the forest of Fontainebleau, her major site of research in the field. She held them to be signs and sensed that there was a context which offered the clue to the meaning of those geometrical figures. Like Alexander Marshack, she set out to decipher. Besides, she risked and received indeed considerable hostility directed at her, the mere *Privatgelehrte*, by her male colleagues dominating the field, as she refused to narrow her investigations down to the orthodox views on what a researcher in the field would do. "I don't dig and date", she declared. And she added what amounted to a program: "I interpret (*deute*)" (PP 73).

She applied the art of hermeneutics to a field which, philosophically dried up as it was, cried for a new cognitive departure. Marie König wanted truth and had the corresponding quality of mind: the capacity for wondering, for being open toward things that might be revealed. The truth of things—things of the world, things humans have brought forth—is stronger than human arrogance and its obscuring force. It persists, throughout time and against obscurity. Marie König had such an experience when she realized that similar symbols had been formed by people living at different historical periods and in regions far from each other. There was a likeness of symbolisms beyond time and space. That people living quite apart in space and in different ages would have known of each other could hardly be assumed. The hypothesis of cultural influence had to be excluded. How, then, could the likeness of symbolisms be explained? Marie König thought of the context (and let us remember the dove in the Christian Church). What could the petroglyphs in the

Fontainebleau forest express, what the same engravings—intersecting lines, circles, squares—elsewhere? Of what could they be symbols? What could it be that they conveyed?

It is not reported by Barry Cooper whether Marie König had a "hunch," like Alexander Marshack had had one. But isn't it evident that all humans use geometric measures for orienting themselves in this world, a world, certainly, where you need lines of direction, marks to rely on, indications for shifting course (PP 74ff)? And of what kind of measures would they avail themselves, if there were any? Of those, of course, which the world in which they lived suggested: the course of the sun, the direction its course described, from one point ("East") to another ("West"), the dividing line it marked between one side ("North") and another ("South"), the specific point on the course at which the sun stands straight above and indicates through her rays a vertical line, similar to an "axis." The people of the Paleolithic age were evidently aware of these structuring elements, Marie König inferred, for they reproduced it by their petroglyphs, and elaborated it in successively more comprehensive engravings. This was the context she had sought for an adequate interpretation of the petroglyphs. They were symbols of the "cosmos" within which the people of the Paleolithic age perceived themselves (PP 82ff.)

In 1965, a major representative of the traditional school of Paleolithic studies, the French scholar André Leroi-Gourhan, still formulated this avowal: "When we walk among these figures, in which we can discern an order but not its meaning, we find ourselves in a situation comparable to that of a Martian visitor wandering through an abandoned cathedral on this planet." (PP 234). Instead of stating that there is a challenge to be taken up, André Leroi-Gourhan once again postulated the eclipse that could be sustained only by a shocking arrogance vis-à-vis the fellow humans of the Paleolithic age.

The truth of those "figures," however, reappeared, thousands of years later, in the work of Marie König. She reconstructs in detail, as Barry Cooper reports, the cosmological and consequently existential insights which the people of the Paleolithic age gained through:

> [A] close observation of the heavens and especially of the sun, rising on one side of the sky and setting on the other. Observation and representation of the two sides of the sky, the "world axis", gave additional structure to the cosmos. The axis, however, could not be represented by a sphere or a vault, but only by a straight line. … Even more remarkable, a north-south axis … could not be derived from observation of the rising and setting of the stars but was, so to speak, an act of pure speculation. By the Middle Paleolithic, therefore, humans used their imagination to develop a cosmic focal point where the two axes intersect. … For the first time the cosmos had a center or a focal point: the intersection of the two world axes (PP 82f.).

Cooper, I understand, plans to write a sequel to *Paleolithic Politics*. And, indeed, there is much more to be done here than composing just one volume. As to his analysis, humans in earlier periods of their history *continuously* perceived the world as a "cosmos" and expressed the order of this cosmos by a complex of similar cosmological symbols: axes, crossings, square and circle, center, world pillar or world axis. The continuity certainly suggests that there is an extended field of material to be observed and to be studied. The sequel he thinks about will probably elucidate in more detail cosmological symbolisms developed after the Paleolithic age. It may, I should imagine, reach over to that age in which humans not only perceived but, in fact, recreated the structure of the cosmos in the form of their cities. This was done from the fourteenth-century BCE onwards, as the examples of the cities of Darkutan and Sapallitepa in Uzbekistan show, a region, besides, where the earliest traces of human habitation date back to the Paleolithic Era. Later on, as we know, cities in China, Cambodia, Mesopotamia, were built as architectural mirrors of the order of the cosmos. Once we apprehend the whole dimension of the field of study—rising from the reality of cosmology in the perceptions and the creations of humans—we shall be led to admire even more Barry Cooper's present achievement.

Note

1. *Paleolithic Politics: The Human Community in Early Art* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2020). Hereinafter PP.