

Cave bear worship in the Palaeolithic

Consideraciones sobre el culto al Oso de las Cavernas en el Paleolítico

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ABSTRACT

As a result of detailed discussion under different points of view, this study has neither endorsed evidence of any early belief system nor of cave bear worship. All relevant conceptions of that kind are either products of a certain mental climate at the time of the discovery of the fossils or of ideologies. The current hypothesis of the existence of an ancient bear cult is based partly on discoveries, but mainly on ethnographic analogies. However, the discussion of religious customs among recent hunter-gatherers proves that what remains of the practise of their cult differs markedly from the fossil remains found in the Mousterian bear-caves. An examination of the fossil bone formations from a palaeontological point of view makes clear that supposed ancient bear cult sites are bone beds of natural origin. The characteristic appearance of the sites is a result of the activities of the bears themselves and of geological and sedimentary processes. Conceptions of cave bear worship during the early and middle Palaeolithic period belong to the realm of legend.

Key words: Cave bear, worship, Palaeolithic

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1. THE SCIENTIFIC BACKGROUND

Up to now anthropologists have taken for granted that a bear cult, which is common in recent hunter-gatherer communities, was already practised during the middle Palaeolithic period. The opinion that Palaeolithic man already had a complicated religion with certain apprehensions of the holy and different rituals, can be found in nearly every religious reference work. FRITZ HARTMANN (1957: 403) writes for example: "The magic of the hunt belongs to this typically human conception of the world."

The concepts in the interpretation of the archaeological findings are based on excavations in the caves of the Alps during the first decades of the twentieth century, where the remains of cave bears were detected. The excavators got the impression that the arrangement of the fossil bones could hardly be due to nature, so they attributed this to the activities of *Homo neanderthalensis* who were assumed to have killed the animals and arranged their bones during certain ceremonies. In historical and even recent times nearly everywhere in the Arctic, primitive peoples knew about rituals connected with the hunting of the bear (EDSMAN, 1957: 841). The first excavators of the caves, Emil Bächler and Karl Hörmann, took these ceremonies of circumpolar peoples to prove their hypothesis of an ancient bear-cult in prehistoric times (MARINGER, 1956: 95ff). In the following years several discoveries of similar bear-caves seemed to support the hypothesis of cave bear worship. Emil Bächler himself discovered bear bone deposits at

the Wildenmannlisloch in Switzerland and in Slovenia's Mornova Cave. In 1946 André Leroi-Gourhan excavated seven cave bear skulls arranged in a circle in Furtins Cave, Saône-et-Loire. In 1950 Kurt Ehrenberg secured a deposit of long bones arranged together with cave bear skulls in the Salzhofen Cave in the Austrian Alps (LASCU *et al.*, 1996: 19-20, MARINGER, 1956: 91 - 96). The latest find of supposed traces of prehistoric cave bear worship was published in 1996. In the Rumanian Bihor-Mountains Christian Lascu et al. discovered a cave rich in palaeontological cave bear deposits (LASCU *et al.*, 1996). Scholars such as Johannes Maringer or ÅKE HULTKRANTZ (1998) refer to the reports of the excavators, when they interpret the deposits as the remainder of cult practise. The historian Karl Narr also gives an account of the deposits of cave bear skulls and long bones, but remains sceptical (NARR, 1957: 10).

2. INTELLECTUAL ABILITIES OF *Homo neanderthalensis*

The assumption that *Homo neanderthalensis* practised the cult of the bear, is based on several fundamental requirements. One of the presuppositions is that the intellectual abilities of *H. neanderthalensis* were sufficient to develop any religion, and, as a consequence, that there are empirical facts proving the existence of a symbol system in the Palaeolithic period.

From an anthropological point of view, the European Middle Palaeolithic is characterised by *Homo neanderthalensis* (HENKE & ROTHE, 1999: 272f). This

early representative of the genus *Homo* lived over a period of nearly 100 000 years, during which the landscape, climate and living conditions changed dramatically. These environmental changes might have contributed to the special anatomical features of Neanderthal man. Surely the need to adapt to a frequently changing habitat forced *H. neanderthalensis* to develop sociocultural abilities which were closely related to the progressive evolution of intelligence and psychological abilities. The intellectual skills of Neanderthal man are, however, the source of heated debate. As the British archaeologist and psychologist Steven Mithen emphasises, the obvious lack of creativity is only due to the meagre interaction between the different domains of the mind. Cognitive fluidity only took place between the domains of social and linguistic intelligence (MITHEN 1996: 143 and 147ff). Other authors share a different opinion. In general the lithic culture of Neanderthal man is the Mousterian, which is still simple compared to the technology of the upper Palaeolithic. On the other hand the lithic cultures are not strictly related to the one or the other human species. *Homo neanderthalensis* too was found together with the technically more advanced and creative tools of the Upper Palaeolithic, and fossils of *Homo sapiens* were found together with the more plain tools of the Mousterian culture. Therefore direct relations between a certain human species and its lithic culture cannot be proved. Technical skills of the younger *H. neanderthalensis* and early *H. sapiens* obviously did not differ. Those facts lead to the assumption that there is no palaeanthropological evidence

of fundamental difference between the mind of *H. neanderthalensis* and *H. sapiens* (HENKE & ROTHE, 1999: 275, REYNOLDS, 1990: 263 ff). Theoretically at least the late *Homo neanderthalensis* may have been capable of developing a symbol system or thinking in abstract terms, which is essential for any religious thought.

3. SUPPOSED TRACES OF RELIGION

Just as the religion of Neanderthal man was regarded as irrefutable fact, there was hardly any doubt that *Homo neanderthalensis* subjected the heads of the deceased to a special treatment and set them up for ritual purposes. Other scholars are still convinced that Neanderthal man hunted fellow humans to kill and eat them (ULLRICH, 1978: 293 ff, HENKE & ROTHE, 1999: 277). It is said that the victims' skulls later became the focal point of a ritual. Latest investigations in archaeology prove that all finds of isolated heads or jaws are the result of taphonomic processes (HENKE & ROTHE, 1999: 54-56). After a careful re-examination of the original reports of the excavations, FABIENNE MAY (1986: 17 and 33-34) states that none of the descriptions of the excavations is sufficient to confirm the hypothesis of a ritual. Since it could be shown that even the assumed skull deposition of Monte Circeo was not the result of human activities, but the damage to the skull was rather due to the work of hungry hyenas, the last argument in favour of a skull cult is disproved (HENKE & ROTHE, 1994: 527).

Not only head-hunting, even ritual cannibalism is imputed to Neanderthal man. But the facts, on which the theory of prehistoric cannibalism are based, are usually poor. Frequently it was sufficient to assume cannibalism existed, if a skeleton was found incomplete or not in anatomical order (MARINGER, 1956: 81f). It is still considered as strong proof for cannibalism, when split human bones occur, as they were excavated for example at Krapina. However, due to the fact that the excavators operated with dynamite, the condition of the bones hardly allows any conclusions about the cause of death (PETER-RÖCHER, 1998: 41). Scratches on the bones, which were supposed to be traces of stone tools, have not been examined with the help of a scanning electron microscope. Without such an examination the cause of the scratches cannot be detected at all. In the long run there is not a single point of reference which could prove the theory of ritual cannibalism in the Palaeolithic period.

An intended funeral is considered a clear indication of conceptions of life after death (HEILER, 1979: 516, WIBMANN, 1980: 730). Therefore reports of alleged funerals always cause attention, even if cautious archaeologists warn about overinterpreting badly documented excavations. The excavation reports seem to prove that the hunter of the Moustérien already believed in life after death. All documents of the excavations, which scholars of the humanities used to prove their opinion of funeral rites in the Palaeolithic period, were recently examined by FABIENNE MAY (1986: 11 - 35). She comes to the conclusions that not all so called funerals

deserve that name. Only few places, e.g. La Chapelle-aux-Saints or Shanidar allow us to assume that intentional funerals took place at all. It must seem natural, that Neanderthal man knew feelings such as mourning, rage, despair and incredulity at the final loss of a beloved person. Obviously those feelings induced Neanderthal man from time to time, to handle the corpse of the deceased in an affectionate way. This does not mean, that he had to believe in life after death or that he was capable of religious feelings. Especially the lack of any funeral rites proves the absence of a certain common belief. On the other hand those rare funerals can be a first hint of an initial feeling or hope, that there might be a certain form of existence even after death.

4. BEAR-CULT

As archaeological facts prove, the current hypothesis of a fully-developed religion during the Middle Palaeolithic including cult-practice, funeral-rites and belief in an afterlife has to be refuted. Only the assumption of early cave bear worship supports the idea of religious customs originating in the Middle Palaeolithic up to now. Instead of supporting the hypothesis of the magic of hunting, the most impressive arguments against cave bear worship come from the bone deposits itself: Crucial biological objections are to be stated first of all. Both the cave bear (*Ursus spelaeus*), which was extinct at the end of the last ice age, and the brown bear (*Ursus arctos*), which spread all over Eurasia since the Eem period, show a strong preference for cave accom-

modation. There they hide during winter-time and give birth to their young. The caves where the relics of alleged bear worship were found are the natural habitat of the animals, where they spend the long winters and hide their young. In those surroundings, the bears often died of natural causes, for example age, illness or lack of food. Therefore their bone fossils are bound to be found in those places, if they were not carried off by carrion eaters or removed by sedimentological processes. The occurrence of cave bear bones in the caves of the ice age, which served generations of bear families as shelter, is just what a palaeontologist would expect.

The proponents of Palaeolithic bear worship did not only think the mere occurrence of bear bones in the caves to be remarkable, but also their alleged assortment and arrangement in which they were found. However, there first takes place an amassment of bear bones in certain places by the activities of the bears themselves. The parts of skeletons of the deceased animals, which are originally in their anatomical order, are thrown into disarray or scattered by later generations of bears. Sometimes they are pressed to the walls, where they are relatively protected against further decay (LEROI-GOURHAN, 1981: 39). Also the outweighing of skulls and long bones is a result of a process of natural decay and not due to human activities. The mentioned parts of the skeleton are relatively heavy and compact, so that they are more able to resist decomposition processes than the small vertebrae, ribs, foot-bones or hand-bones. A result of those processes is the natural selection of the bone material (ZIEGLER, 1975: 44 -

45). But not only decomposition influences the state of the bones. During their history the caves were flooded several times, as the accumulated sediments prove. Such floodings do not remain without influence on the fossil material. With high water levels and stronger currents all loose material is either rinsed away or carried for a certain distance and then dropped at a place where there is a weaker current. During these processes the anatomical bone order is radically altered. Therefore the accumulation of several skulls in one place and the absence of other bones is due to geological and sedimentological processes and not to human intervention. The floating ability of sediments can be reduced by prominent parts of the walls or unevenness of the floor, resulting in some bone parts being deposited in the proximity of obstacles. A concrete example of this effect is the discovery of several skulls deposited in a crosslike pattern in the Cold Cave of the Bihor Mountains. The obstacle, which reduced the transportability of the skulls crucially, was a stone, at which the fossil skulls were deposited (LASCU *et al.*, 1996: 30 plate. 3). Just as little as the assortment of the bone material is proof of human activities, so the adjustment of the fossils is an unnatural process. The movements of a transport medium, be it wind, sediment or water, are transferred to the material to be transported, so that the movement in a special direction leads to its assortment. Therefore the assortment of bear skulls is not due to human activities, but to the flowing water or other transport mediums in the caves. The bear caves show exactly what a palaeontologist would expect.

Nothing suggests that the natural process of decay and sedimentation was at any time interrupted or disturbed (WUNN, 1999, S. 6 ff).

5. THE ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALOGUE

Even a detailed discussion of the finds of cave bear bones under an ethnographic point of view leads to the same results (WUNN, 1999: 3 - 23). The careful and critical use of ethnographic analogies, on which the theories of a cave bear cult is founded in the end, just serves to prove the non-existence of Palaeolithic cave bear worship. The East-Asian Ainu, the North-American Ojibwa, the nomadic tribes of Northern Europe and other peoples living in the Arctic region still know the magic of the hunt and especially the cult of the bear. All those hunter-gatherer communities have a complicated religion with detailed ideas about gods and goddesses or the so-called master of the animals, an afterlife, the realm of the dead, or ghosts and spirits. The cult of the bear is not the only sign of the religiosity of Arctic peoples, but is integrated into a complicated symbol system. The bear festival of the Ainu for example starts with the capture of a young bear, which is transported into the village and carefully brought up by the villagers. After a certain period the bear is slaughtered accompanied by complicated rituals and ceremonies. According to Ainu belief the bear is a deity, which visits the realm of man for a certain period. If the deity wants to travel back into his own realm, he has to leave his material body. Therefore the Ainu kill

the bear to help the deity to return. The dead bear is showered with gifts and treated with honour. After the ceremonies the skull of the bear is put on a long stick, which is erected at the holy fence of the village. All Arctic people deal similar with the remnants of the dead bear. Only the nomadic tribes of northern Europe carefully bury the skeleton of the killed game. All mentioned hunter-gatherer communities are not restricted to the cult of the bear, but also know about further rituals in connection to the hunt of other dangerous and important animals. The Ainu for example have similar rituals for the big mammals of the Arctic sea, which belong to their favourite game. In Northern Europe complicated rites concerning reindeer are common. The American Indians' knowledge covers rituals concerning salmon, which is an important food supply. All those ethnographic examples force the following conclusion:

If *H. neanderthalensis* had known cave bear worship, its traces would have been found inside the settlements. The remains of such a cult would have been the bone deposits of Neanderthal man's favourite and most dangerous game, among which, however, the bear did not rank. Recent peoples, who know the bear cult, catch or kill a bear in his winter accommodation and bring it to their settlement. There it is killed and eaten by the villagers under different ritual regulations. The bones of the dead game are put into a holy place or are carefully buried near the village, but never brought back again to the bear's dwelling.

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