



## INTRODUCTION TO THE SESSION IS IDEOLOGY A POSSIBLE TOPIC IN ROCK ART STUDIES?

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### ABSTRACT

*Ideology is a philosophical concept mainly used in close relation to politics and the history of ideas, in establishing relations between aims, ideas and representations. Its use in Prehistoric Art is, though, relatively common, expressing a belief that this art portrays those aims and ideas. A brief discussion on the explanatory potential of the concept and some problems in its usage is presented.*

### RESUME

*L'idéologie est un concept philosophique utilisé principalement en relation étroite avec la politique et l'histoire des idées, tout en constituant des relations entre les buts, les idées et les représentations. Son utilisation en art préhistorique est cependant relativement commune, exprimant la conviction que cet art dépeint ces buts et idées. Une brève discussion sur le potentiel explicatif du concept et certains problèmes dans son usage est exposée.*

### RIASSUNTO

*L'ideologia è un concetto filosofico utilizzato principalmente in stretta relazione con la politica e la storia delle idee, stabilendo relazioni tra scopi, idee e rappresentazioni. Ad ogni modo, il suo uso nell'arte preistorica è piuttosto comune, in quanto esprime l'opinione che questo tipo di arte ritragga tali scopi e idee. Viene di seguito presentata una breve discussione sul potenziale esplicativo del concetto e su alcune questioni relative al suo utilizzo.*

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Prehistoric Art is a particular manifestation of human behaviour: it comprises different graphic manifestations to which people tend to assign a specific meaning. Yet, perhaps the first observation one could make is that, like today, many remains of past graphic manifestations may have had no intention beyond doing them. Moreover, the meaning of rock art panels is, for most cases, lost for ever: we may associate them to other archaeological evidences, we may assume or suggest a given function they might have, but we cannot approach their meaning.

This creates a problem for this session. Ideology has a precise meaning: it relates to ideas that operate as a sort of road map for behaviour. Can we assign such function to rock art in general?

In its origins, rock art has been assigned an ideological-religious motivation, and this perspective is still present in our debates, alongside with the understanding of rock art as a means of communication, or as a sort of language (BREUIL 1952; LEROI-GOURHAN 1994).

Yet, if for some contexts, namely corresponding to evolved agrarian societies, the concepts of religion or ideology are justified, it is highly arguable they may be used when dealing with sites like Lascaux, Foz Côa, Serra da Capivara or the Levantine art. In any of these cases, intention is foreseeable, and through the paintings or carvings we may approach the way those societies perceived the landscape around. One may, in this sense, accept to understand it as a means of communication, but is this ideology?

Accepting that at least some rock art may have been ideologically driven, one should, then, define the criteria for such recognition within a given site.

The first criteria should be its regularity, i.e., the recurrent association of given motives within a given sequence. For instance, a recurrent association of anthropomorphs and deers and an emulation of scene types involving both has been recognised in the rock art of Serra da Capivara (IGNÁCIO 2009). The study of the *Toca do Pinga do Boi* site demonstrated that no more than five themes were represented: isolated, pair of confronting males, sexual scene, group of individuals (deers running or people dancing) and the anthropomorph carrying a deer (interpreted as a sign of symbiosis). Yet, this may stand for a founding myth, and other recurrent associations of this type may simply express a fashion (as wall painting in the

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XXth century), not necessarily carrying an ideological content (even if the act of painting may be, itself, the consequence of an ideological approach). In airports we recognise recurrent signs, and yet hardly anyone would consider this as an expression of common ideology. Regularity is, therefore, a needed but not sufficient requirement to relate rock art and ideology.

The association with other archaeological evidences is a second criteria, also crucial for the dating of the art. But, again, this is not sufficient, since association in space may stand for a mere cultural connection, without clear meaning. In the art of the Tagus (OOSTERBEEK 2008), a topographic relation can be recognised in relation to specific associations of motives, and a global superimposition with the distribution of megalithic monuments has been used to suggest a preferable relation, but none of these cases goes beyond argumentation.

In particular, the specific association to archaeological contexts where ritual activity has been identified is a possible indicator of a link between the art and other human activities. Yet, it does not necessarily demonstrate an ideological sense in such link, since the association of art with ritual may be a performing feature that reinforces identity but does not suggest, necessarily, a code of action for specific aims. As an example, a football match is associated to countless graphic manifestations, but this does not carry any direct ideological content (even if we can argue that football as an important role in current strategies to secure ideological continuity). Archaeological context, and namely the association to evidences of ritual practice, is a strong requirement, but still not beyond reasonable doubt.

It is important to stress that ideology should not be confounded with myth (MULLINS 1972), since this stands at the base of action (a ritual may re-enact a myth which stands as a founding origin of a community) whereas ideology is focused on future aims. It should not be confounded with religion, either, since the later is structured as a transcendental explanatory system, and ideology is by definition immanent to human behaviour.

Ideology should not be confounded with vision of the world. For instance, in a number of rock art contexts one may record a shift from animal centred panels of hunter-gatherers to human centred panels in farming societies. But does this mean a change in ideology? One may argue that hunters have a sight which is oriented horizontally, in order to master the special dimension and, within it, mainly the “moving objects” (animals). Likewise, farmers need to incorporate to a greater detail the time dimension of the landscape, because they depend upon controlling weather implications on soil productivity. Their sight is, then, oriented vertically, progressively mastering the sky indicators and growing an awareness of superiority in the landscape (astral and anthropomorphic motives being manifestations of such an approach). But, again, can we consider this an “ideology”? Is this sight a “plan for action”?

One important component of ideology is contradiction. In fact, ideologies are meant to guide the action of groups, and are largely defined in opposition to other ideologies (even if these are less important, or dominated). In this sense, a third requirement to approach ideologies in rock art would be to recognise diverging patterns within the same time-space framework, i.e., different groups choosing different sets of motives and styles. Indeed, only if the archaeological and historical context suggests conflicts (between groups, either socially, ethnically or other way driven) can we accept the possibility of a “guide of conduct” oriented for a given goal opposed to another recognisable one. This could be the case, for instance, of the rock art of Valcamonica and some other later prehistoric and protohistoric contexts.

The papers in this section will discuss different approaches to the topic, both from a chronological and a philosophical perspective.

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