



Upper Pleistocene steppe of North Eurasia: Implication for the shamanic hypothesis

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the possibility of a long-term persistence of archaic patterns of human behavior in the ethnographic record, and the reliability of the archaeological evidence from the Last Glacial steppes of North Eurasia for the shamanic hypothesis. In the light of the shamanic hypothesis, we investigate the patterns („levels“) of past landscapes, potential evidence of rituals at archaeological sites, artifacts of symbolic meanings, and mortuary practices. The general models, imported from ethnology, and the single fragments of archaeological evidence are described separately and then compared. In the future, this evidence should be discussed in an interdisciplinary manner, as components of a unique and complex system.

RIASSUNTO

L'articolo, basandosi sulla documentazione etnografica, indaga la possibilità che alcuni comportamenti umani di origine arcaica continuino a protrarsi nel tempo, con particolare riferimento ai ritrovamenti archeologici effettuati nelle steppe post-glaciali del nord Eurasia e relativi alle pratiche sciamaniche. Alla luce delle ipotesi sullo sciamanesimo abbiamo esaminato i livelli dei siti archeologici, ritrovando manufatti dal significato simbolico utilizzati anche nelle pratiche mortuarie. I modelli generali, indicati dall'etnologia, e i singoli frammenti ritrovati presso i siti archeologici vengono dapprima descritti separatamente e poi comparati. In futuro, si dovranno accendere dei dibattiti in ambito interdisciplinare su queste prove in quanto sono elementi di un sistema unico e complesso.

INTRODUCTION

One of the major problems in the application of the shamanism model in Palaeolithic prehistory is the simplicity and the self-evidence of such an approach. Following the ethnological record, shamans from all continents share similar techniques, ideas, and rituals (Eliade 1974, Vallet 2003), so that one may either expect distant analogies in modern human behaviour over the actual world, or one common root of shamanism that would have lied deeply in the Palaeolithic. Evolutionists, on the other hand, argue that features observed in the actual world result from a long-term process of progressive changes. For evolutionists, one may expect something like "proto-shamanism" during the Palaeolithic, at best, and in any case something unparalleled in the present world.

Since its beginning in the late 19th century, Palaeolithic archaeology and palaeoethnology used ethnological data for interpretation of the archaeological record, and Russian Palaeolithic archaeology, specifically, profited by the North Asian data that were first at hand. However the application of ethnological observation to the past was purely empirical at that time, and sometimes mechanical. Therefore, positivist reactions during the early 20th century criticized these approaches for their non-systemic approach and random selection of the collected data. Since the late 20th century, as ethnoarchaeology has been formed as a discipline equipped with its own methodology, and in context of the post-processualist concern for archaic symbolism, shamanic record is being reconsidered (e.g., Price, ed. 2001).

One of the actual trends in the return of shamanism into Palaeolithic archaeology is the argument of common neuropsychological basis of human consciousness and behaviour. Techniques of ecstasies and the use of drugs, in order to achieve altered states of consciousness, are one of the major arguments developed

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on the basis of North American, Australian and South African ethnological records (Wellman 1978; Sales 1992; Lewis-Williams – Dawson 1988). This model is applied to the archaeological record of the western European caves as well (Clottes 2004; Welté - Lambert 2004; Lewis-Williams 2005).

This paper centres on the rich Upper Palaeolithic record of North Eurasia, and on subrecent or recent ethnographic record of North Asia, a region considered as the “cradle of shamanism”. Should we emphasize the relationships between climate, environment, and hunting-gathering lifestyles, and neglect the complex ethnic and linguistic history that followed during the Holocene, one may expect that certain archaic patterns of human behaviour are preserved in ethnological record of this vast region. This is evident in profane activities such as hunting techniques and strategies, or the building and the heating of simple traditional huts, but it is more problematic in exploring human mind, ritual behaviours and symbolism (Anisimov 1958; Aleksejev 1980). Along the centuries, shamanism was so affected by institutionalized ideologies such as Buddhism, orthodox Christianity, and (most drastically) Communism, that the danger of an incorrect application is extremely possible.

THE MAMMOTH STEPPE: TIME AND SPACE

The archaeological record in North Eurasia demonstrates that, after the ascend of humans owing traits of modern anatomy, emerged new patterns of behaviour such as the use of items for body decoration, a variety of “art” objects, and symbolism in general. In literature, this change is related to longer planning depth (Binford 1989), more complex architecture of the mind (Mithen 1996), higher-order in consciousness and rituals (Lewis-Williams 2005), time-awareness and the concept of ego (Svoboda 2004).

Cultural unity of Northern Eurasia is framed in related landscapes and climate. The cold, endless steppe, moulded by a mosaic of bushes, green landscapes, and compact conifer forest, housed large herds of reindeer, horses, mammoth and rhinoceros, and was opened to long-distance movements of both animals and hunters. This zone was bordered by glaciers and vast open tundra in the north, and by chains of mountains (Alps Carpathians, Caucasus, Tian-Shan, Altai) and deserts in the south (Fig. 1). The literature uses the term “mammoth steppe” because its biodiversity can not be compared to any type of landscape present in the actual world (Guthrie - van Kolfschoten 2000). Possibly, it was its richness in biomass, meat, fat, protein, that attracted the early modern humans from their tropical and subtropical aboriginals. While in the temperate areas, early modern humans mainly practiced individual hunting of smaller animals, in the northern steppes collective hunting of large herds was encouraged. If lead by common strategy, successful hunting allowed seasonal coexistence of larger human groups (up to 100 people, optimally), and if meat storage was practiced as well, the groups could coexist over longer time-spans during the year. Contrary to western Europe, where “sacred caves” were mostly separated from the settlements, in the larger aggregation sites of the Eurasian mammoth steppe were the places in which mobile art objects were produced and, possibly, used in the rituals.

In Central Europe, and especially in the Moravian corridor, evidence of the Gravettian mobile art demonstrates a remarkable change between the Pavlovian (30-25 ky BP) and the Willendorf-Kostenkian (25-21 ky BP) chronological stages. While the Pavlovian in general is characterized by the complexity of materials, techniques and forms (ivory and bone carving and burnt clay figurines, depicting animals, females and even males, as well as stylized signs of zoomorph, anthropomorph and sexual significance), the later Gravettian sites of Central Europe only provided individual female figurines (“the horizon of lonely venuses” of Willendorf, Petřkovice, and Moravany). The most recent dating of the Brno 2 burial, in which are present a single male statue, also suggests that it belong to the later Gravettian. At 20 ky BP, during the Last Glacial Maximum, this development was in fact terminated in this part of Europe.

Eastern Europe saw an opposite evolution: even if art and decorative objects are recorded early in this area, the formation of settlements with complex art evidence did not occur before the Kostenkian stage, at 24-20 ky BP (ivory and bone carvings, while the fired figurines in clay of Central Europe seem to be functionally substituted by fragmented carvings in soft stones, depicting a similarly broad spectrum of subjects and signs). In addition, effects of the Last Glacial Maximum were not as strong as they were in Central Europe, and after 20 ky BP the Gravettian evolution in the eastern steppes gradually continues into a mosaic of Epigravettian cultural entities. These shifts correspond to the influx of people from west to east, induced by environmental changes that occurred in Central Europe before and around the Last Glacial Maximum.

Even if the Siberian Upper Palaeolithic differs in terms of artefacts typology, and therefore should not be considered “Gravettian”, this region shares many common aspects in settlement dynamics and symbolism with the Eastern Europe. The major Siberian sites such as Mal'ta and Bureĭ are contemporary to the Kostenkian sites. As in Europe, a number of local cultural entities emerged after the Last Glacial Maximum in Siberia, especially along the large, south-north oriented rivers.

Optically, the most visible pattern of unity within the “mammoth steppe” are the decorative patterns and the anthropomorph figurines carved in ivory (Gamble 1982; Abramova 1995). Even if the vision of humans from the Siberian perspective, as recorded at Mal'ta and Bureĭ, differs from slim body, rough facial

expression, and perhaps the patterns of a dress, these differences are rather formal in nature. A single burnt clay plastic from Maina, recalling the practices known in the South Moravian sites, has to be noticed.

THE COSMOLOGY

One of the common ideas in the actual shamanism is that the worlds are multiple, superimposed, and that the shaman is the person capable of travelling from one to another. Human ideas disappeared, but the Palaeolithic mapping of rock art sites in North Eurasia may reveal some patterns of "symbolic landscapes" that may, or may not, overlap with the "economic landscapes". In some cases, the symbolic landscapes reflect a pattern of stratification into the world of everyday life, the underground, and the sky.

Archaeological evidence of human penetration and activities in the underground worlds is available since the earliest Palaeolithic periods, and the most complex evidence is provided by the Upper Palaeolithic caves of the westernmost part of Eurasia. Central Europe, in turn, provided several caves where human bodies were thrown through vertical underground fissures, together with objects (Mladeč, Zlatý kůň; Svoboda 2000, Teschler-Nicola, ed. 2006). "Sacred caves", with symbolic paintings on the walls, are found to the east as isolated occurrences (Kapova Cave, Ourals), and a funeral cave is recorded even further (Upper Cave at Zhoukoudian, North China).

Naturally, it is difficult to give evidence for activities and rituals performed "in the sky" using archaeological methodology. The Potočka zijalka cave in Slovenia plays a prime role in this hypothesis. Its location in mountaneous Alpine landscape at 1700 m a.s.l. and difficult to climb, and the quantity of polished bones hitherto found (more than 130 items), predominantly in the deep inner part of the cavity, out of daylight, make it a place of possible symbolic significance. In any case, this cave provides an evidence of human penetration highly above of the profane life "level", and leaves a message of this penetration - the bone point cache - in this significant place.

Following the shamanic tradition, there are special places of passage between the worlds, and recent Evenk drawings even depicted (or "map") them as simple circles located in the landscape (Anisimov 1958). A double circle is clearly marked on the famous "map" engraved in the mammoth tusk from Pavlov (Fig. 3). Does it mark a place of symbolic significance?

Several Gravettian sites in Moravia provided large and heavy, polished and centrally perforated discs, made of soft marlstones (Fig. 4). In two cases (Předmostí and Brno 2), these significant objects were associated with human burials. The discussion about their possible function revealed no result. In the Siberian ethnological record, shamans are equipped with similar discs, made of metal in this case, and symbolising the ascent to the underground world (Anisimov 1958). In early China, from the Chou period onwards, discs of the same shape and size, but made of jade, were called "pi" and symbolized the circular sky, while the central hole represented the "lie-chhiu" through which the lightning flashes (Christie 1968, 56). If these objects symbolized "gates" to other worlds during the Upper Palaeolithic as well, than the association with Palaeolithic burials is certainly of significance.

THE RITUALS

As mentioned above, caves of western Europe, with images, models in clay, and foot-prints on the floors, are generally believed to be places for rituals practiced in special places, far from daylight and from settlements. In contrast, in the North Eurasian steppes the potential traces of rituals are concentrated in the largest settlements and in huts. In South Moravia, the case are the clay figurines concentrated around the hearths where they were made (Dolní Věstonice, Pavlov), and in Eastern Europe, similar role is played by fragments of soft-stone carvings (Kostenki). Whatever was the difference in place, material, and form, the favourite images entering into these rituals are similar over the whole Eurasia: large and imposing animals such as mammoths, rhinos, bison, horses, and dangerous carnivores (rather than the smaller preys that formed the real food-base of the past societies) and females (rather than males). Bisons and horses are more frequent in the western caves, while mammoths and lions dominate on the steppes, but all these species occur throughout the whole Eurasian zone.

The figurines, be it of burnt clay or soft stones, were evidently created and destructed in frame of one action, as evidenced by the visible effects of blows, incisions, and thermal shocks (Fig. 5), by the fragmentary state of preservation, and abandonment in the places where they were created (Soffer et al. 1993). Therefore, we may term them as „short-term art“, in contrast to the carvings of ivory and hard stones (Svoboda 1997; 2005a).

The anthropomorph figurines of ivory and stone (the „venuses“) served their purpose for a longer time, or repeatedly. Many of them show external polishing. Certainly, they hardly decorated the interior of a hunter's hut, as we may analogize on the basis of our own modern living-rooms (Fig. 6-8). A closer look shows that some of them are perforated (typically, in the feet area), and some have well articulated body parts, both horizontally (heads, belts), and vertically (breasts, buttocks, legs), as if for a string attachment. If hanging, the symmetry of the body mass allows vertical position. It is probable that the figurines were



attached by string, possibly to a dress. North Asian ethnological record provides us authentic representations of shamans with figurines attached to their ceremonial dresses.

THE MORTUARY CUSTOMS

Study of the variability of mortuary practices in some parts of North and Central Asia where permafrost unable direct inhumation and/or where shamanic traditions are still active, may be useful for the interpretation of certain burials in Upper Palaeolithic sites. Leaving bodies to natural factors, secondary burials, or burials in elaborate overground structures are some of the variety of customs recorded ethnologically.

In Upper Palaeolithic Eurasia, there were several types of burial evidence as well. First, human bone fragments scattered in the cultural layer, as at Dolní Věstonice (Trinkaus et al. 2000); second, skeletons thrown into vertical cavities, as at Mladeč and Koněprusy (Svoboda, 2000, Teschler-Nicola, ed. 2006), and, third, skeletons deposited within a limited area one over the other, as at Předmostí (Svoboda 2005b). Besides this, there are burials deposited with special care, either in burial pits (Kostenki, Sinitsyn 2004), or in shallow beds protected by structures of mammoth shoulder blades, wood, or other organic materials (Dolní Věstonice, Trinkaus - Svoboda, eds., 2006). In some cases, the position of the deceased suggests a special status. The central, inter-sex personality of the triple burial of Dolní Věstonice II, was accompanied by two young males on both sides (DV 13-15). In ethnographic record, inter-sex personalities („berdache“) certainly played a significant social role. The older man buried in the same site (DV 16) was lied in a hut, next to a central hearths, and, after recent analysis by M. Nývltová-Fišáková (pers. comm.), possibly equipped with complete bodies of animals and birds. On the other hand, rich burial equipment with decoration items and special artefacts, as recorded for the older males of Brno 2 or of Sungir, is less meaningful in terms of shamanic hypothesis: children, to whom one would not ascribe specific spiritual abilities, were also richly equipped in the Upper Palaeolithic sites.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, patterns concerning Upper Palaeolithic site location, traces of damage on objects of the „short-term art“, traces of wear on figurines of the „long-term art“, and some mortuary customs were considered. Naturally, one could expand this way of reasoning to other archaeological situations and objects.

Using the ethnographic record of archaic Eurasia in order to approach the lost worlds of the Pleistocene mammoth steppes is a complex process that should be solved in collaboration with several disciplines. The general models, imported from ethnology, and the single fragments of archaeological evidences should be described separately, than compared, and studied in an interdisciplinary manner, as components of a complex system.

Fig. 1. Map of the mammoth steppe, showing extension of the Gravettian and the Siberian Upper Palaeolithic.

Fig. 2. Siberian shaman.

Fig. 3. Pavlov, engraving of a symbolic landscape (?) showing the location of a double circle. Photo by Martin Frouz.

Fig. 4. Pavlov, fragment of a marlstone disc with central perforation. Photo by Martin Frouz.

Fig. 5. Pavlov, a mammoth plastics made of burnt clay and fragmented by a thermal shock. Photo by Martin Frouz.

Fig. 6. Moravany, female figurine. Photo by Martin Frouz.

Fig. 7. Gagarino, female figurine. Photo by Martin Frouz.

Fig. 8. Mal'ta, female figurine. Photo by Martin Frouz.

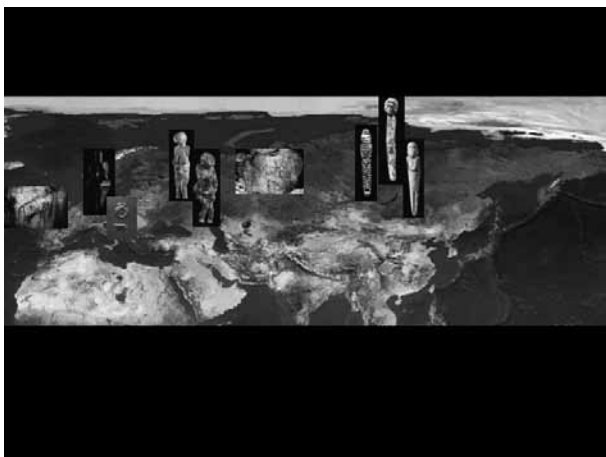


fig. 1



fig. 2



fig. 3



fig. 4

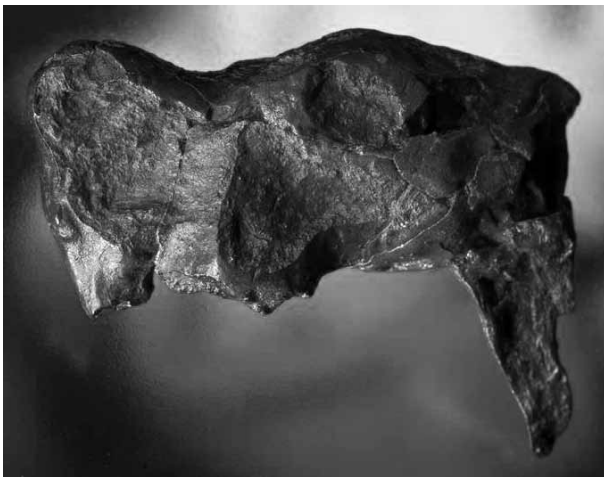


fig. 5



fig. 6



fig. 7



fig. 8



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