

THE MANY FACES OF ALTAMIRA

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ABSTRACT.- This paper tries to explore some dimensions of the uses of the past in the present. The discovery and validation of Altamira serves as an example of how myths and beliefs have conditioned the research about the most important assemblages of Palaeolithic art. Professionals should be prepared to recognise how their interpretations are mediated by their own background.

RESUMEN.- En este trabajo se pretenden detectar ciertas dimensiones de los usos del pasado en el presente. El descubrimiento y la autenticación de Altamira sirve como ejemplo de cómo mitos y creencias han condicionado la investigación de los conjuntos más importantes de arte paleolítico. Los profesionales deberían saber reconocer hasta qué punto sus interpretaciones están mediadas por su propio entorno.

KEYWORDS: Palaeolithic Art. Anthropology. Research conditions. Present uses of the past.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Arte Paleolítico. Antropología. Condiciones de la investigación. Usos del pasado en el presente.

1. INTRODUCTION

It has sometimes asserted that archaeological research lacks contemporary relevance. On the contrary, cases of archaeological discoveries that have practical value today are not hard to find; take for example the rediscovery of dew irrigation and more recently Kolata's reconstruction of the ingenious and productive raised field system of Tiwanaku (Kolata 1993). They have other, less practical, dimensions of meaning, as well. Prehistoric monuments themselves have been turned to use by the modern world in many ways, acquiring an overlay of meaning that is seldom explored by prehistorians. That seems to be particularly true for two kind of sites: those with human interments, and those with important assemblages of wall art -the major painted of the Franco-Cantabrian region-. Most discussion of Altamira and the other painted caves centers (as it rightfully should) on the meaning of the decorations as cultural manifestations from the prehistoric past. With my colleagues, I have published several articles trying to interpret Altamira's decorations from that standpoint. Such interpretations only tell one part of the story. Other dimensions of meaning are also important.

One example of present uses of the past is well known to any prehistorian who has worked in the field. Very often, the countrymen living near an important prehistoric site have fabricated fanciful tales about it. These we generally smile at and ignore. They may be as imaginative as the stories about Christian saints that have grown over the ages in popular tradition -for example, the idea that St. Cecilia played the organ and sang hymns of praise as she was being martyred. There is probably more relationship between the two domains than is ordinarily suspected.

The study of legends about the painted caves is just one interesting aspect of a much broader field, the investigation of the contemporary "meaning" of prehistoric monuments. This topic is huge, involving as it does the ways in which prehistoric sites and materials, or concepts about the past, whether correct or misguided, are integrated in the countries in which we work into modern systems of belief and action by governments, political movements, art, religious systems, cults, legends, etc. In some cases, the modern uses of the past may be as interesting and relevant to our work as the meaning of our documents for prehistory.

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It is an undeniable fact that, in certain cases, traditional archaeological concerns about age, artifact classification, manufacturing techniques, and functions may be less enlightening than information about how the documents from the past have been interpreted and used in the ages since their production. Well-referenced examples are not hard to find from later periods. The "Shroud of Turin" was produced at a particular time using a specifiable set of techniques. However, its age, the manner of its production, in fact all the details concerning its possible authenticity, are, in the case of that particular artifact, of considerably less importance and interest to anthropologists than the ways in which the shroud has served as a condensation and validation of belief, a stimulus to behavior, and as a nexus of interpersonal and intergroup relations through the centuries.

Like the Turin shroud, many prehistoric sites continue to have an important meaning that has little or nothing to do with their importance as scientific documents about prehistory. It is my belief that as professionals we are obliged to study and report that information. It is an aspect of our documents that may prove of the greatest importance in reconstructing and understanding the origin and transmission of folk belief, or of our own preconceptions and motives as prehistorians. There may be significant patterns and trajectories of belief and behavior that can best be seen -or can only be seen- in the many uses of the past in the present.

Prehistorians themselves have not generally made much systematic attempt to gather information about this topic or to analyze and understand it. Even those who do routinely gather and use such knowledge regard it as somehow trivial and certainly peripheral to more central archaeological concerns. This "insignificant" information seldom appears in monographic reports about Palaeolithic sites. The subject deserves more serious attention: it is relevant not just to prehistorians, but also to other social scientists of a variety of persuasions. No knowledge is ever trivial; supposedly peripheral or unimportant information of this sort frequently has practical implications for research, facilitating easier relations between the archaeologists and the local populace, regional bureaucracies or national governments. Prehistorians who have given it due attention have found their interest rewarded with a better understanding of the milieu in which they operate.

The following outline sketches several aspects of the present uses of the past more specifically, using Altamira as a prime example.

2. THE PAST IN THE PRESENT

2.1. The past is politicized

Ideas about the remote past serve as well-springs of ethnic or national identity. Often, these ideas are condensed on particular prehistoric monuments, just as monuments truly associated with more recent and historic figures in US or Spanish history (say, Independence Hall or the Alcázar de Toledo) have served to focus patriotic sentiment. Particular monuments are regarded as part of the local heritage, to be locally venerated or exploited without interference by others, even by the central government. Where the sentimental charge is great enough, control of these monuments and associated symbols may become a focus of contention between locality and locality, region and nation, or nation and nation. As we are all aware, the interpretation of prehistoric monuments has often been forced into conformity with political doctrines concerning the evolution of society, or used to justify those doctrines and programs based on them.

Some prehistoric sites are the obligatory loci for civil validation ceremonies; unless the sites are used, the ceremonies lack legitimacy. Better-known examples include the triennial Ad Montem festival at Eton, the annual reading of the laws by the Manx parliament on Tynwald Hill, or the use of the Pont-rydd Rocking Stone as a site for political rallies (Michell 1982).

Altamira is used as a conceptually legitimizing source of identity in a related way. Any Spaniard writing a general history of Spain is almost subconsciously and irresistibly compelled to discuss the cave, as though it were a prefiguration of current Spanish character and values. Spanish histories devoted to more specialized topics, such as the Reconquest, the Discovery, or the Spanish American War, often make at least a passing reference to the cave. Latin Americans, too, may find Altamira an essential reflection of their Spanish heritage (see, for example, Fuentes 1992). There is usually no earthly reason why these works need mention Altamira -the cave is not in any way illustrative of their major argument- but its use as a sort of touchstone seems to be felt as a moral obligation.

Territorial claims may be justified by reference to antiquities real, imagined or invented. Basque nationalism has used the painted Palaeolithic caves of France and Spain to justify claims that Basque territory extended much further previously than

it does at present. Apellániz's fine treatment of Palaeolithic Art, *El Arte Paleolítico en el País Vasco y sus Vecinos* (1982), gives so much space to Altamira that it has been cited as supporting this contention (though Apellániz himself certainly made no such claim). Some non-Basques have uncritically accepted these territorial assertions: Isidro Cicero's otherwise excellent juvenile history of Cantabria, *Vindio* (1979), seems to suggest that Palaeolithic residents of Cantabria spoke a sort of Proto-Basque.

2.2. Imposing archaeological monuments serve as landmarks

Where, as often happens, they are prominent features of the landscape, monumental buildings or archaeological monuments give cultural order to the mental maps (and often to printed maps: see for example the British Ordnance Survey series) of those who have to travel about what may otherwise be conceived to be a relatively "featureless" landscape. The Castillo hill in Puente Viesgo is a relevant, though natural, example. Physically prominent archaeological monuments have even been used to direct artillery in modern warfare.

2.3. Prehistoric structures, including caves, may still be used or inhabited today

Some sites have served as byres for animals or human shelters or dwellings relatively continuously since the Palaeolithic. Inhabited structures built into caves or shelters are common in the French Dordogne, and in time of war, troops have been billeted and weapons, explosives and supplies have been stored in prehistoric and historic archaeological monuments. Altamira itself served as a powder magazine during the Civil War.

Many structures that survive from antiquity saw extensive practical service -one thinks particularly of walls, roads, bridges and aqueducts. Many of them have needed periodic attention and repair for continued functioning. Economic utility has been the impetus needed to stimulate restoration in such cases, ensuring their survival.

2.4. Archaeological investigations and famous ancient monuments often have great economic importance

It has been rumored that it is possible to make a decent living by teaching prehistory at the University level, or by doing research in the field. That

seems to be just another modern myth. But archaeology may be economically important to non-specialists in many ways.

The University of Chicago's Palaeolithic excavations at Torralba and Ambrona (Soria) during the 1960's, were seasonally the largest employer of local labor, and the largest single source of cash income for farmers, in an area including a dozen hamlets. In the 1980's at Ambrona, excavators found themselves in a tricky labor-management disagreement (one that was finally resolved to the full satisfaction of the workmen's delegation). In their naïvete, (particularly since they were paying higher salaries for "unskilled labor" than anyone else in the province of Soria) it had not fully struck the field directors that they could be defined as a "Management" with economic interests opposed to those of the workmen the project employed.

With increased tourism and a growing market for souvenirs, the manufacture of modern forgeries may become an important cottage industry. So, deplorably, may the illegal and clandestine sale of real antiquities and the legitimate antiquities trade: one is as pernicious as the other. Where laws about treasure trove permit individual finders to keep a portion of the antiquities they discover, even where there is a cash reward to the finder when excavated remains are turned over to responsible scientific agencies, clandestine excavation and the antiquities market are encouraged. Many years ago, important visitors to Altamira sometimes received small "souvenirs"-pieces of bone, shells, even stone tools, dug from the wall of the Altamira "cocina". I have seen some nondescript pieces purported to come from Altamira in private hands.

Archaeological monuments have been much used in trademarks and advertising. The sale of cigarettes called Bisontes, using as a brand-symbol one of the late Abbé Breuil's copies of an Altamira bison, was the subject of litigation eventually resolved in the cigarette company's favor. In the late 1980's, Ashton-Tate used the Altamira polychromes in an advertising campaign promoting one of its graphics programs for personal computers.

Admissions fees to prehistoric monuments can be a substantial source of income. Altamira is a site with the greatest economic potential. At the height of unrestricted public access, between 400 and 500 tourists visited the cave *each day* in the two-month peak tourist season (*100 Años del Descubrimiento de Altamira*, 1979). Though admissions were not charged at the time, concessions for the sale of refreshments and souvenirs, books, and postcards, were very lucrative.

The accident that a population is located near a priceless archaeological monument may give local peoples and institutions the impression that what is in fact the heritage of all humanity is instead their particular birthright. Were it conceded that one individual, population, ethnic group, or corporation were the sole heir to the cave and its decorations, that entity could theoretically exploit the site for its own short-term gain, and there would be no way to prevent damage to, or even the final destruction of, the site. Some important sites are known to have been damaged or destroyed for economic gain in Cantabria (principally by quarrying, as at La Pila). Altamira itself is still not completely out of danger.

Sometimes, local polities give up their economic "rights" to antiquities in their territories only after the central government agrees to pay a substantial regular compensation. That is the case at Altamira. This compact is all that has saved Altamira and its depictions from destruction. Nevertheless, there are periodic outbursts of local resentment about the agreement, in the political arena and the popular media. The fact that the Spanish Central Government placed Altamira under its protection by declaring the cave a part of its National Museum system -it is the only cave classified as a museum in Spain- has provoked some acrimonious exchanges. It is still possible that political pressure could reverse measures the national government has taken to protect the site.

2.5. Archaeological tourism stimulates culture change

Tourism, both internal and (in the case of the most important monuments) foreign, brings substantially greater economic benefits to local food and lodging establishments: to *pensiones*, bed and breakfast establishments, hotels, bars and restaurants. Foreign tourists who visit prehistoric monuments are on the whole better educated, wealthier, and used to a higher standard of living than the average. National governments may find that the provision of adequate facilities or protection for tourists requires them to provide those facilities at reasonable rates, competing with locals, or at least to oversee the treatment of visitors directly. The pull of Altamira, more than that of the Gothic town itself, has had that impact at Santillana del Mar.

As chains of national hostelries spread, they bring with them a standardization of facilities, prices, customs, and language that would otherwise be slow to find reception. Advanced education and cos-

mopolitanism become increasingly common where multilingualism, formal commercial training, and an ability to deal diplomatically with educated foreigners are requisites to the operation of sites and museums. The dress and comportment of well-to-do tourists have an undeniable effect on local modes, internationalizing them.

2.6. The ancient and enigmatic exercises a special appeal, particularly where it is aesthetically pleasing

Handsome and intriguing antiquities or prehistoric monuments have exerted a particular fascination through the ages. They have profoundly attracted later architects, artists, and landscapers, influencing their products.

A symbolic return to the beautiful forms and styles of the past as they were known or imagined was a hallmark of Renaissance artists, of the Neoclassic Revival, of Romanticism. Palaeolithic art has a substantial and economically rewarding attraction for collectors today. For several years, Douglas Mazonowicz has made his living selling masterful lithographs, etchings, and serigraphs based on Palaeolithic paintings from Altamira and other sites. His work has a broad appeal, though some of his reproductions enhance or complete details that are difficult or impossible to see in the originals. (The modernist architecture of Gaudi is a related example: it self-consciously and ingeniously adapts the shapes, textures, and imaginary beasts inhabiting the travertine caves and shelters of his Eastern Spanish homeland). Remote antiquity has a two-edged charm. The other edge of the blade, the dark chaos of the cavern, is reflected in "Grotesque" imagery in Western art (so named because excavated Roman ruins where frescoes and statues of such strange creatures as fauns were found were mistakenly thought to be caves).

In early 18th Century England, no wealthy aristocrat could really gaze with pleasure on his properties unless their romantically tailored landscape included a ruin. A landlord with a good ruin might have a go at restoring it to his own or his lady's taste, to make a more pleasurable showpiece. The rich who were not lucky enough to own a real ruin built artificial caves or tunnels to make up for the lack, decorating them with crystals, shells, and statues of savage beasts. The grotto at Ascot Place, Berkshire, is an excellent representative of the type (Crawford 1979; Piggott 1976).

2.7. Prehistoric sites and relics become the themes and settings of local legends

These seem to fill the need of the folk for an accounting of their presence and "functions". Local folklore has incorporated many of the more visible Palaeolithic caves in Northern Spain. Most of the cave legends from Cantabria, such as those involving the Ojancano and Ojancana (Cyclopes) or the Anjana (Nymphs) are rooted in classical antiquity. Passed along the generations, such stories acquire the power of common knowledge, and despite their implausibility, it is hard to shake them with contrary evidence.

A widespread legend speaks of a golden Moorish treasure, wrapped in a bullhide and hidden away in a Cantabrian cavern. Caves bearing names that sound to the popular ear like references to Moors (e.g. la Mora, Morín) reinforce such myths, despite the fact that Cantabria, a wellspring of the Reconquest, never fell under Moorish domination.

We have heard from dozens of local people that the cave of El Juyo (where we have worked for many years) has galleries that go on for miles, and contains a subterranean stream that emerges kilometers away in another village. The site, opened in the 1950's, has now been completely explored, and neither of these things is true -it is a small cave with a subterranean stream whose emergence nearby has been satisfactorily demonstrated with colored tracers. Yet adults we have shown the whole cave say tath when they were children (that is, before the cave was discovered) they personally visited the site and saw what they could not possibly have seen, and we are convinced that they are not deliberately lying.

Such tales must not be disregarded as aberrations of the uneducated. There are erudite myths as well, such as the seventeenth century tale that the village of Igollo was the site of a palace built by Prince Astur, son of Isis (Io) and Osiris (Io = Iollo = Igollo). The ruins of the "palace" are in fact a natural rock outcrop, not a prehistoric site, but the story is nonetheless illustrative. A heterodox school of local scholarship perpetuates such tall stories -and even wilder ones, about extraterrestrials and Atlanteans in the painted caves- today.

Even professional prehistorians are not above such fantasy. Many otherwise reasonable professionals stubbornly entertain misconceptions that are just as improbable as are popular folk-tales about the caves. These include the unshakable conviction that the commonest way of applying color to the cave walls was as a paint mixed with grease, blood or marrow (no greasy or oily base would penetrate damp walls or adhere as well to them as would dry pigment

or a water suspension), that animals depicted are not the ones whose bones are found in the food debris in Palaeolithic levels at the sites (at Altamira, the mammals on the walls *are* the same ones found in Magdalenian deposits), that *all* Palaeolithic depictions are finished masterpieces -neither children nor unskilled doodlers had any part in their production- (like other sites, Altamira has its share of poorly executed figures), and that Palaeolithic art is always located on inaccessible surfaces -the highest ceilings or deepest recesses of the remotest cave galleries (the polychromes on the Great Ceiling were close to the cave entry, and the ceiling was very low). While each of these affirmations may correctly characterize some particular site or group of paintings, exceptions outnumber the "rules". The most perplexing aspect of these beliefs is their endurance in the face of so much contrary evidence.

Prehistory is a surprisingly conservative discipline. Its practitioners make every effort to sustain outmoded ideas until the last possible moment. Misinterpretations created, perpetuated, and disseminated by prehistorians often originate in statements (sometimes out of context) by accepted authorities that incorporate unacceptable oversimplifications or overgeneralizations about very complex phenomena. Some of these fixed ideas persist as the result of didactic oversimplification by teachers trying to drive home a few easily remembered principles; they are passed on from one generation to the next as convenient *aides-mémoire*. Others are harder to explain.

2.8. Prehistoric monuments and popular conceptions about prehistory are often used by fringe cults, esoteric societies and other voluntary associations

This is not the case for Altamira, probably due both to the relative recency of its discovery and the fact that access has been controlled. Other sites have been less fortunate. Mounds, stone circles and gallery graves are particularly frequent victims of these practices. Not too long ago, periodic meetings of local antiquarian societies traditionally took place at famous and imposing archaeological sites; unhappily, some damage to the monuments inevitably ensued. Groups of speleologists still hold reunions at caves, including prehistoric sites, and to commemorate their visits will sometimes set a plaque into the rock, or chisel the group designation or members' names into gallery walls. Fortunately, most speleologists who work in the caves of northern Spain collaborate intimately with prehistorians or include prehistorians in their ranks; those groups are among the first to condemn such vandalism.

A splinter branch of the Rosicrucians, founded by S.I. MacGregor Mathers, was called the Temple of Cromlech, and there are evidently similar named subdivisions in the parent organization. A tunnel-like rock chamber intended, I presume, to suggest a cave or passage-grave was an important ritual symbol for that rite (Mathers 1988).

The use of Stonehenge as a ritual site by the so-called Druid Revival is probably the most familiar example of the cult use of an archaeological site. In recent years, Stonehenge has been fenced by the British Government, to prevent vandalism and incidental damage. The reconstituted "Cornish Bards" are another group assembling periodically at stone circles (Michell 1982).

2.9. Archaeological finds and monuments may be turned to use by established religion

This has not been the case at Altamira, probably because it was only officially discovered quite recently. There has been insufficient time for the site to become incorporated in pious legend in relevant ways. However, other examples are not hard to find. An elephant bone from one of the Acheulean sites near Medinaceli was venerated there as a relic in the Catholic church of San Román, and annually carried in religious procession. It was thought to be a bone of the giant camel who pulled a wagon in which the relics of four Christian martyrs were miraculously transported to their final resting place. A striking case of the association of a Christian saint with a prehistoric monument is a 16th Century French painting now in the church of St. Merry in Paris, showing St. Genevieve using as her sheepfold a now destroyed prehistoric stone circle at Nanterre (Michell 1982: 110).

Caves were used in cult and served as models for early religious "architecture". The occurrence of early Christian relics in some caves suggests that they may have served as places of worship. Caves served as the refuge of hermits. The earliest Christian churches in Northern Spain are the Iglesias Rupestres (mostly circa 9th Century) -rock-cut churches like that at Arroyuelos in Cantabria. These tiny churches were excavated from the living rock following the model of a natural cave. Some of the sacred grottoes of the classical period became shrines of the Virgin in Christian belief. Apparent references to worship in caves are other evidence of the practice. The followers of Priscillian seem to have celebrated initiation rites or other secret ceremonies in caves, a practice finally forbidden under pain of anathema by

the First Council of Zaragoza in 380 AD "nec habitent latibula cubiculorum ac montium qui in his suspicionibus perseverant ..." ("Those who are obstinate in these beliefs should not utilize hidden chambers in sepulchers or hills" [for their reunions]).

Human remains found buried in Roman ruins underlying modern churches are often venerated as Christian saints. It is well known that pagan religious buildings and shrines were frequently converted to Christian use, and that new Christian temples, with associated interments, were built atop older non-Christian religious foundations. Only exceptionally is there documentary proof of the identity of the bones, and where claims are made that the remains are those of a particular individual, the basis is most frequently nothing but pious speculation.

3. THE PRESENT IN THE PAST: DISCOVERY AND VALIDATION OF ALTAMIRA

Other interesting aspects of the past in the present are revealed by a close examination of Altamira's history as a monument of Palaeolithic art. The story of the discovery and authentication of its paintings is a rich field for exploration, with facets whose understanding is important to anthropologists, prehistorians, psychologists, folklorists, and theologians.

As is well known, Altamira's paintings were the first to be organized as Palaeolithic. The cave was found relatively recently -it seems that it was first known to the countrymen around Santillana in 1866-68. Because of its late discovery, legends of classical antiquity are not attached to Altamira. The legends about the cave are more recent. With other caves, mysterious passageways from the known, everyday world to the fascinating and dangerous underworld, Altamira shares in a certain symbolic mystique. There are other equally deep dimensions to the symbolic value of this cave as a monument of Palaeolithic art.

Altamira's paintings vividly display the sophisticated symbolic and expressive capacity of our early ancestors. They reflect the antiquity of behavior very like our own, suggesting our own indestructibility -a comforting and appealing thought indeed. Like the tomb of the pharaoh Tutankhamen, Altamira seems to evidence immortality. Like the bodies of some saints, its sanctity is certified by its incorruptibility. The public does not want to hear that the paintings at Altamira are deteriorating, and when they are so informed, they react in disbelief, sure that

the community of scientists is trying to sequester the site and its paintings for financial gain or other nefarious ends. (These attitudes could be overcome with an appropriate educational campaign, but the Government has yet not understood the need to mount one).

Like the pyramids, or the Dome of the Rock, Altamira produces reverential feelings in its visitors. It is no accident that, when referring to important decorated caves, students of Palaeolithic art inevitably resort to the undefined term "sanctuary", even though most non-trivial definitions of the word do not seem to fit the empirical evidence from the caves well. Despite that fact, there seems to be general agreement that the term is appropriate. This ill-defined concept strengthens quasi-religious feelings of awe that have an unconscious influence on prehistorians who study and evaluate the depictions, even at the level of their basic description. If the caves are sanctuaries, it follows that their figures must be supposed to illustrate themes of fundamental importance to prehistoric people -magico-religious themes that somehow affect the reproduction of the game. As Ucko and Rosenfeld (1973) have pointed out, while that may be true in some cases, in just as many others it may not.

Only Leroi-Gourhan (1967 and elsewhere) and Laming (1959 and elsewhere) explicitly specified the evidence they believed would support the claim that decorated caves were sanctuaries, and their procedures for recognizing the complementary oppositions on which they based their conclusions are not rigorous enough to be replicable. Nevertheless, the idea continues to dominate interpretation. The reasons why this is so may run deeper than most prehistorians suspect. They can be seen in operation in great relief in the story of the discovery and authentication of Altamira's paintings. The treatment given to the site shows remarkable point-for-point parallels with the treatment of Christian religious shrines and sanctuaries. I believe that is no accident.

3.1. The Discovery

William Christian's book *Apparitions in Late Medieval and Renaissance Spain* (1981) analyzes legends about visions and the establishment of religious shrines. With surprising frequency, they involve the discovery or disinterment of a sacred image by an animal, often a herdsman's dog. The dog is a creature standing astride the threshold between the natural and the cultural worlds. A child or countryman may be taken to the image or led to a place of apparition by the animal. The ecclesiastical investi-

gators considered poor rustics, particularly men, or young children to be the more reliable reporters: they were apparently believed too simple and honest to deliberately try to deceive. Reports by women or the well to do were less likely to be credited. More than a third of the cases examined involve the discovery of an image underground or in a cave, and another eighth is associated with springs. Caves and springs are themselves liminal places. It is of course a fact that caves were frequently used as hiding-places for "valuables", including church paraphernalia, and dogs will dig in disturbed ground, or enter crevices. Nevertheless, too many of the shrine-foundation tales involve such behavior. Christian undertakes a fascinating analysis of the contexts and symbolic meaning of apparitions, but the part of his work that is most relevant to this essay is the evident parallelism between the stories of discovery of religious shrines he documents and those about the discovery of our painted "sanctuaries".

Obviously, some of the caverns a dog or sheep might enter could contain Palaeolithic decorations. The proportion of painted caves that are said to have been discovered by animals is small, because so many had accessible entries that were well known to all the locals. However, this proportion increases when one considers just those principal painted caves discovered in recent years whose entrances are stated to have been previously closed or hidden from sight.

In fact, the two most famous Palaeolithic Art sites, Lascaux and Altamira, are supposed to have been revealed in just this way, and in both cases, there is reason to think the story is not literally true. At Lascaux, on September 12, 1940, four boys -Ravidat, Marsal, Agnel and Coencas- wandering over a hillside saw their small dog "Robot" enter a burrow. Trapped inside, the dog began to bark, and in rescuing him the boys tumbled into a prehistoric wonderland. This story has been widely popularized and is still generally believed. But it is known to be untrue: the youth of the discoverers is usually exaggerated; the first entry was on September 8; only two of the four official "discoverers" were present on Sept. 8 (Ravidat and Coencas); the dog story is apparently apocryphal; although the cave was still unexplored, its entry had been known to the locals since before the First World War, and perhaps for centuries; last, the formal discovery of the cave was not accidental, the youngsters set out deliberately to explore it, with a lantern Ravidat, an apprentice mechanic, had built just for such explorations (Delluc and Delluc 1979).

The outlines of the Altamira story are strikingly parallel to the legend of Lascaux. It is said that Altamira's discoverer, the countryman Modesto

Cubillas, was out shooting with his dog in 1868. The dog chased a fox down a hole, and unable to retreat, barked until its master released it by pulling some fallen boulders away from what turned out to be the entrance to the cave. Now, two decades had passed before any part of this story was published, and the name of the hunter was only added in the 1960's. One suspects that the tale may have been embellished, particularly since the site was locally known as the Cave of Juan Mortero, and it is reported that before Sautuola worked there, the cave entry had been used to store traps. Of course, there is no necessary contradiction here -all this information may possibly be true- and after all, these are relatively meaningless details that seem to have nothing to do with the meaning of the art. On the other hand, if everyone thinks the story about the hunter and his dog is really trivial, why is it so insistently repeated?

Though there is too little evidence to establish this as anything more than a crude working hypothesis, I personally believe that such strict parallels as those in the discovery legends about religious shrines and painted caves suggest that we may find other parallels between them in popular belief. Certainly, we ought to look for such parallels. If found, their presence and content may help us understand just what so many prehistorians, including specialists in the study of Palaeolithic art, mean when they call the painted caves "sanctuaries", and just what that otherwise indefinable set of qualities that indicates "sanctuary" may be to them. One might perhaps discover that decorated Palaeolithic Caves are regarded as a subset of a more readily definable category of religious sanctuaries, or perhaps more likely, that both are conceived as subsets of a more general symbolic category of locales at a deeper structural level.

3.2. The Process of Authentication

Further parallels between the careers of painted caves and religious shrines are found in the long process by which the Altamira paintings were finally authenticated. It is so similar to the process through which claims of authenticity for new religious shrines are validated by the ecclesiastical hierarchy that the resemblance can scarcely be coincidental.

The most usual explanation offered by today's prehistorians for the doubts cast on the age or authenticity of the Altamira paintings is that they were thought to be too masterful for their apparent great age. When the Altamira paintings were discovered, the French School of Anthropology was still dominated by its founder, Paul Broca. The doctrines

of established prehistory were sustained by a hierarchy of French authorities, under the primacy of Gabriel de Mortillet. His followers, among whom Emile Cartailhac was one of the foremost, explained, expanded and defended the orthodox line. This influential archaeological Establishment, convinced Darwinians all, is supposed to have decided that the artistic quality of the polychromes was too evolved for the mental and aesthetic abilities of hominids who were still primitive "Cave Dwellers".

In fact, that explanation is by-and-large incorrect. It is both incomplete and anachronistic. By no means all who called themselves anthropologists or archaeologists in the 1880's were confirmed Darwinian evolutionists: such an illustrious and accomplished prehistorian as the Marqués de Cerralbo, much of whose best professional work was devoted to finding the remains of the earliest peoples and cultures of Iberia, in association with the remains of ancient elephants and other extinct fauna, was a catastrophist who long after Sautuola's death maintained that the world was only 6000 years old. Ideas about the trajectories of cultural and biological evolution were by no means as resolved and crystallized as we now think they must have been, and opinions that today seem obviously inconsistent or mutually contradictory were in past often seriously and simultaneously entertained by sound and reputable scholars. While some who could be called "Darwinists" opposed the paintings' authenticity (Lubbock, for example), others of that school did not. Even more to the point, among the most vocal opponents of Altamira's paintings were some outspoken anti-Darwinists: Rudolf Virchow, a principal and influential opponent of the Altamira discoveries, was just as strongly opposed to the theories of Darwin and Haeckel, or to the idea that there were "Ice Age" people at all. Allegations that the Altamira paintings were too accomplished for prehistoric cave dwellers were evidently *a posteriori* rationalizations, used by a minority of critics.

Other evidence shows that the mythic account must be at least partly wrong. By 1880, human skeletons from Upper Palaeolithic levels were known to be quite modern, so the fact that cave-dwellers should have been like us in other ways was not unanticipated by most authorities. In fact, when the Altamira paintings were discovered, art was already a well-known aspect of the orthodox picture of Upper Palaeolithic behavior. Engraved bones were first found at Chaffaud in 1834, and other specimens had been gathered by Lartet at Massat in 1860. Lartet and Christy's *Reliquiae Aquitanae* (1865-75) reported many more. Worsaae, an authority in world

prehistory, announced his acceptance of the Chafaud finds as early as 1869. By 1883, the Museum at St. Germain held 116 engraved and sculpted Palaeolithic objects in bone, antler and ivory.

Emile Cartailhac himself, later their bitter opponent, was at first enthusiastic about the Altamira polychromes; on 30 December 1880, he wrote to Sautuola: "Your site is in every way like those we attribute to the Reindeer Age ... I don't believe that there has been any discovery in Spain more important than yours from the viewpoint of prehistoric archaeology... It would be unusual if the cave painters hadn't also sculpted or engraved animals on bones and pebbles" (letter quoted in Madariaga, 1972: 86). It certainly seems that at the time the discovery of the paintings at Altamira was first announced, Cartailhac did not feel his Darwinian tenets were challenged in the least. It was only later (and for other reasons) that his opinion changed.

Nor was the argument over the Altamira paintings originally based on the supposed fact that the sophistication of the art did not fit de Mortillet's notion of mental and technical progress. It fit his ideas relatively well, as he himself explained in 1881: "art is not a special attribute of certain isolated populations, but one of the general characteristics of the Magdalenian period". But this statement is part of his rejection of the authenticity of the Altamira paintings. When Cartailhac sent copies of the drawings to de Mortillet, the latter immediately rejected them, saying he suspected that Altamira was a fraud designed to discredit practitioners of the infant science of prehistory: "just a glance at the copies of the drawings you send me in your letters is enough to show that this is a farce; a simple caricature. They were produced and shown to the world so everyone would laugh at the gullible paleontologists and prehistorians" (1881 letter to Cartailhac, cited in Madariaga 1972: 83). The Altamira paintings were rejected by the Establishment at the Lisbon Congress of 1880, not because of their sophistication -many thought them naïve rather than terribly sophisticated- but because rumor had it that they were forgeries. A debate that began as a relatively trivial interchange between Sautuola and a few opinionated provincial literati had become intertwined with a politico-religious battle between rival doctrinal authorities. Altamira's advocates were on the losing side, and consequently Altamira too suffered, at least temporarily.

In many respects the debate about Altamira's authenticity had less in common with scientific investigation than it did with attempts to expunge heresy and the resolution of religious disputes. There

is a relatively formalized set of procedures that is generally followed in the validation and recognition of an important religious shrine by the Church establishment. New shrines, the places where apparitions or miracles regularly occur, have such potential to support or undermine official doctrine that their claim to authenticity must be received initially with skepticism, followed by an onsite inquiry to establish that they are not simply delusions or fabrications. Once this phase is passed, prosaic explanations of the associated phenomena are sought. If the phenomena are inexplicable as purely natural or accidental occurrences without supernatural significance, one must next ensure that they are not traps set by the forces of evil to seduce the unwary from the paths of orthodox belief. Those involved must be questioned and all apparitions, or other apparently supernatural phenomena, must be examined to determine that they are truly beyond the realm of everyday experience, and that they are consonant with the rest of orthodox doctrine. A shrine that passes these tests is sanctioned, but at the same time it is invaded and controlled by the ecclesiastical authority - and in this respect religious validation differs from ordinary scientific verification. These stages of authentication have striking parallels to the peculiar validation process to which several of the most spectacular assemblages of Palaeolithic Art -not just Altamira- have been subjected.

The announcement of the discovery by Sautuola of Palaeolithic paintings at Altamira was at first met with accolades at best, and at worst, no more than the expectable reserve novel new evidence usually excites. Members of the Sociedad Española de Historia Natural congratulated Sautuola when they received his communication and a copy of the paintings; they urged the Ministry of Patronage to underwrite intensified investigations in the Santander caves. Immediately, however, Sautuola found his conclusions about the great antiquity of the figures assailed locally. Principal among the critics was his Cantabrian compatriot, Angel de los Ríos.

At the end of the eighteenth century, there were still in Spain many respected scholars and literati who took both the Bible and the legends of classical antiquity to be valid sources of literal truth: de los Ríos was one of these. Ignorant of the findings of prehistory, he used a fine classical background and knowledge of the Bible to argue, with vigor and skill, that no true prehistory could exist, and that all the paintings could have been produced in historic times. He observed, for example, that peoples who made stone implements need not have been ignorant of metals, since Tubalcain worked copper and iron at a

time when stone knives were still made (Madariaga 1972: 211, 214). No matter how silly or trivial such arguments seem today, many at the time found them quite convincing, when they appeared in the *Eco de la Montaña*. Finally, waspish tongues claimed that the polychromes Sautuola had admittedly not seen during his excavations in 1875 had actually been painted between then and 1880; the evidence advanced was the fact that Sautuola had hired a French painter, M. Ratier, to work in the cave in 1879. (Ratier was of course making copies of the depictions, not painting the figures himself.) Others accused some unknown North American, who would of course presumably know more about bison than would a French or Spanish painter. It is especially noteworthy that these detractors almost universally belittled the artistic quality of the paintings: while their shading and proportions are thought too "mannerist" for prehistoric art, the polychrome figures were nonetheless characterized as "primitive" and "about what one would expect from a mediocre student of the modern school".

Had it not been for its coincidence with unrelated events in French prehistory, this debate might have remained a local one. In 1880 the death of Paul Broca sparked a bitter factional fight for control of the French School of Anthropology, aligning de Mortillet, an opponent of the Altamira discovery, and his colleague Cartailhac (recognized as the foremost French authority on the anthropology of Spain) against others, among whom were the defenders of Altamira. Altamira sadly became embroiled in the war for succession. De Mortillet's faction finally won the day, establishing themselves as the most influential of anthropologists in France, and him and Cartailhac as the two most influential prehistorians.

The "official" authentication of Altamira coincided with the onset of the battle. To resolve questions raised about their authenticity, the French anthropologists sent E. Harlé to examine Altamira's paintings in person. Harlé, apparently at first inclined to consider the paintings authentically ancient, heard the local calumnies circulating about Sautuola and forgery, and, deciding that so much smoke must indicate some fire, finally concluded that the figures were recent products. His 1881 report (hasty and full of errors of fact) rejects claims to antiquity for the paintings, but does exonerate Sautuola, making him an innocent dupe rather than a complicit criminal. From the date of that report until 1902, Cartailhac reversed his field, refusing to admit Altamira's authenticity, without ever himself examining the figures at first hand. He feared, as he said, that they were falsifications by the Spanish "Jesuits" to make the

world laugh at the credulity of the new priesthood of paleontologists and prehistorians. A friend had told him: "Watch out! they are about to play a trick on the French prehistorians. Don't trust those Spanish priests". The phrasing is illuminating (Letters and articles by Cartailhac quoted in Madariaga 72: 186-9).

Cartailhac stuck to his contrary position even after the discovery of other Palaeolithic painted caves in France after 1895, particularly Riviere's work at La Mouthe (whose authenticity he accepted apparently by 1896 or 1897) and Daleau's (1896) discovery of engraved animals covered by Perigordian strata at Pair-non-Pair. He maintained his negative attitude about Altamira despite the urging of other accredited prehistorians who had visited the Spanish site with open minds.

A careful evaluation of Cartailhac's position puts a different light on his resistance to Altamira, one that has nothing to do with disjunction between the painting's quality and current evolutionary theory. It is no accident that Cartailhac envisioned his motives in disbelieving Altamira in terms of a battle with a rival group of ecclesiastical authorities, the "Spanish Jesuits", who represented heterodoxy from his perspective. The debate was in a real sense a religious dispute, based on faith, not experiential evidence. (In fact, Cartailhac himself refused to examine the evidence at first hand, despite reiterated invitations to do so.) The title Cartailhac chose for the 1902 article in which he finally renounced his former position, admitting that his doubts were misplaced, vindicating the (by then) deceased Sautuola and admitting Altamira to its rightful place in the revealed truths of orthodox prehistory, sets an appropriate tone for the recantation of heretical religious beliefs: the "Mea culpa d'un sceptique". It is, to say the least, ironic that subsequently it was Cartailhac himself, aided by his young protégé, the Abbé Henri Breuil (later, and only partly in jest, nicknamed the "Pope of Prehistory" by his admirers), who undertook the restudy and monographic publication of the Altamira site. Cartailhac and Breuil legitimized the "sanctuary" as they placed it under the control of orthodox (French) prehistory.

I am not the first to have recognized the religious overtones of the Altamira controversy. In 1902, Luis de Hoyos Sáinz referred to Cartailhac's apology for disbelief in the following terms: "this is another example of religious and irreligious jealousies at work. Cartailhac himself admits that was the origin of the process, as I had already heard from lips that may well have influenced his judgment. The criteria framed by the opponents were too narrow, and

the specter of clericalism disturbed the tranquil course of scientific investigation, as on other occasions it has been disturbed by the irreligious. There should be no such thing as a Catholic archaeology, any more than there are atheist or Buddhist mathematics, physics, or engineering. If those who write about archaeology do so in an attempt to attack dogma, the result, besides being non-scientific or anti-scientific, will probably be in bad taste, and certainly superficial and stupid" (quoted by Madariaga 1972: 189).

Had this series of events happened only at Altamira, it could be called an accident, a unique coincidence from which little can be learned. But very similar stories of quasireligious validation can be told about the forced vindication of La Mouthe, Rouffignac and some other painted caves; such stories continue to unfold today. Both the discovery legends and the process of validation of major Palaeolithic "sanctuaries" parallel those characteristic of newly invented religious shrines. It is important to note that these phenomena are not the rule but the exception in prehistory, and their exceptional nature underlines their importance. Ordinarily, the discovery of a new archaeological site, or the recognition of a new tool-type or a new industrial complex, is not challenged in a similar way. We customarily assume that our colleagues are responsible scholars, who would never intentionally mislead us. We commend new discoveries without much question (and sometimes regret it). We do so, that is, unless those discoveries involve important "sanctuaries" with Palaeolithic art or Palaeolithic burials. Then the machinery of inquisition jerks ponderously into motion, sometimes with salutary effect, but on occasion, (and for almost two decades at Altamira) with outrageous results.

A special conjunction of feelings about the mystery of caves and notions about the romance of art privileges the study of Palaeolithic decorated caves. Those special beliefs and feelings are held by the professional prehistorian as well as the average citizen. Neither is particularly good at selfanalysis. In fact, most of us are not even aware that we have such notions. For the layman, it may not be important to understand them. For the professional, on the contrary, understanding motives, attitudes, and ingrained preconceptions is an essential step in the direction of freeing research from unconscious bias. One possible route to that understanding lies in an examination of substantial disjunctions between the tenets and behavior of investigators working on such sites and the ordinary attitudes and usual procedural standards that are applied by competent professionals. When fixed ideas about prehistoric art, or about de-

corated sites themselves (or sites with Palaeolithic burials) run counter to experience, there is such a disjunction. Where stricter standards of validation, or very much different standards, are demanded for one class of prehistoric data than would ordinarily be applied in the best research (as is the case for the authentication of such decorated monuments as Altamira) another area of disjunction appears. A careful examination of these situations, in an attempt to understand the basis of disjunction, is surely one of the obligations of those who study Palaeolithic sites. For, unless we understand why the "special" sites are "special", and why we treat them so differently than we treat other archaeological evidence, we cannot study them dispassionately or analyze them without unconscious bias.

I realize that I have outlined a rather remarkable story about Altamira. I have claimed that fabricated tales about the discovery of new Palaeolithic sites with monumental assemblages of Palaeolithic art, and the way those assemblages are validated by the archaeological profession, are formally and substantively so analogous to the circumstances associated with the discovery and validation of newly revealed Christian shrines, that it can be no accident. There are reasons to believe that the behavior associated with the Palaeolithic sites is not directly modeled on that surrounding Christian shrines, but that these two manifestations of belief, reverence, and validation of experience have the same origin at a deeper structural level. I still can not pretend to understand that origin; I believe it to be promising material for further serious investigation.

4. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

In this exercise, I have tried to explore some dimensions of the uses of the past in the present. I have not just tried to pour old wine into new bottles. In fact, I fear that we prehistorians sometimes overlook fine old wine in its own bottles, that would be easily found if we looked hard enough. I believe that the study of prehistory must be more than the recasting of old data in the framework of a new narrative with contemporary appeal. It must try both to understand the past, and what the past means today to laymen and prehistorians alike.

The present undeniably impinges on the past. As prehistorians we interpret our data in ways that are conditioned and limited by our backgrounds, our preconceived ideas, and the settings in which we work. But that does not mean there can be no "truth" about the past. Our task is not to write new fairy tales

about the past -we have a responsibility to be faithful to our documents. An interpretation not consonant with our evidence is worthless -a "feigned hypothesis".

As scholars, we have an obligation to add to knowledge and understanding wherever we can. An appreciation of the ways in which the prehistoric past, rightly or wrongly construed, is made to serve the present, and the present affects our views of the past, cannot help but provide useful and interesting information on the generation of myths, the development and spread of popular traditions, and the functions of folk-belief (whether those beliefs are sustained by the uneducated public or by professional

anthropologists). By careful investigation we may hope to understand how delusions come to have the force of tradition and how the processes of occupation-related mythogenesis operate. These are important fields to all interested in folklore and belief. Such explorations add new dimensions of texture and relevance to the study of prehistory. They have immediate practical value, helping us see how we may smooth our relationships with the public at large, and with civil and religious authorities in the areas we study. I firmly believe that the exercise may make us aware of the constraints of the present on the past, and move us closer to a real understanding of the past in all its complexity.

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