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# The Lady, the Rainbow, and the Horse: Earliest Symbolic Images from the Near East

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Fig. 1  
Figurine from Berekhat  
Ram, Israel, 233,000  
years old

Rare objects recently found at prehistoric sites in Israel may herald a revolution in the current approach to the origins of art and the first artists.<sup>1</sup> These finds suggest that art began hundreds of thousand of years earlier than scholars have believed, and that the creators of this art belonged to a human species that preceded modern humans, *Homo sapiens sapiens*, the latest stage in the development of humankind.

Ever since evidence of portable art and prehistoric cave drawings of the Late Stone Age (15,000–35,000 years ago) were uncovered in southwestern France and northern Spain, scholars have placed the beginnings of art in this period, when modern man first appeared in Europe. This Eurocentric outlook, according to which Europe was the source of all human culture, is still widespread in the West.

In recent years, it has become increasingly apparent that western Europe was not the only center in which human civilization evolved, but one of many. One of the most important centers was the Near East. In archaeological excavations conducted at prehistoric sites in Israel over the last decades, evidence of extremely ancient symbolic human activity has come to light.

## Venus of Berekhat Ram

One of the most remarkable finds is a female figurine (fig. 1) from Berekhat Ram in the Golan.<sup>2</sup> The figurine was discovered between basalt strata (the earliest of which is 800,000 years old and the most recent 233,000 years old), which underwent Potassium Argon dating, a technique originating in the natural sciences.<sup>3</sup> Comparison of the flint tool assemblage found at the site with assemblages from other prehistoric sites places human activity at Berekhat Ram within the Late Acheulean entities, approximately 250,000 years ago.

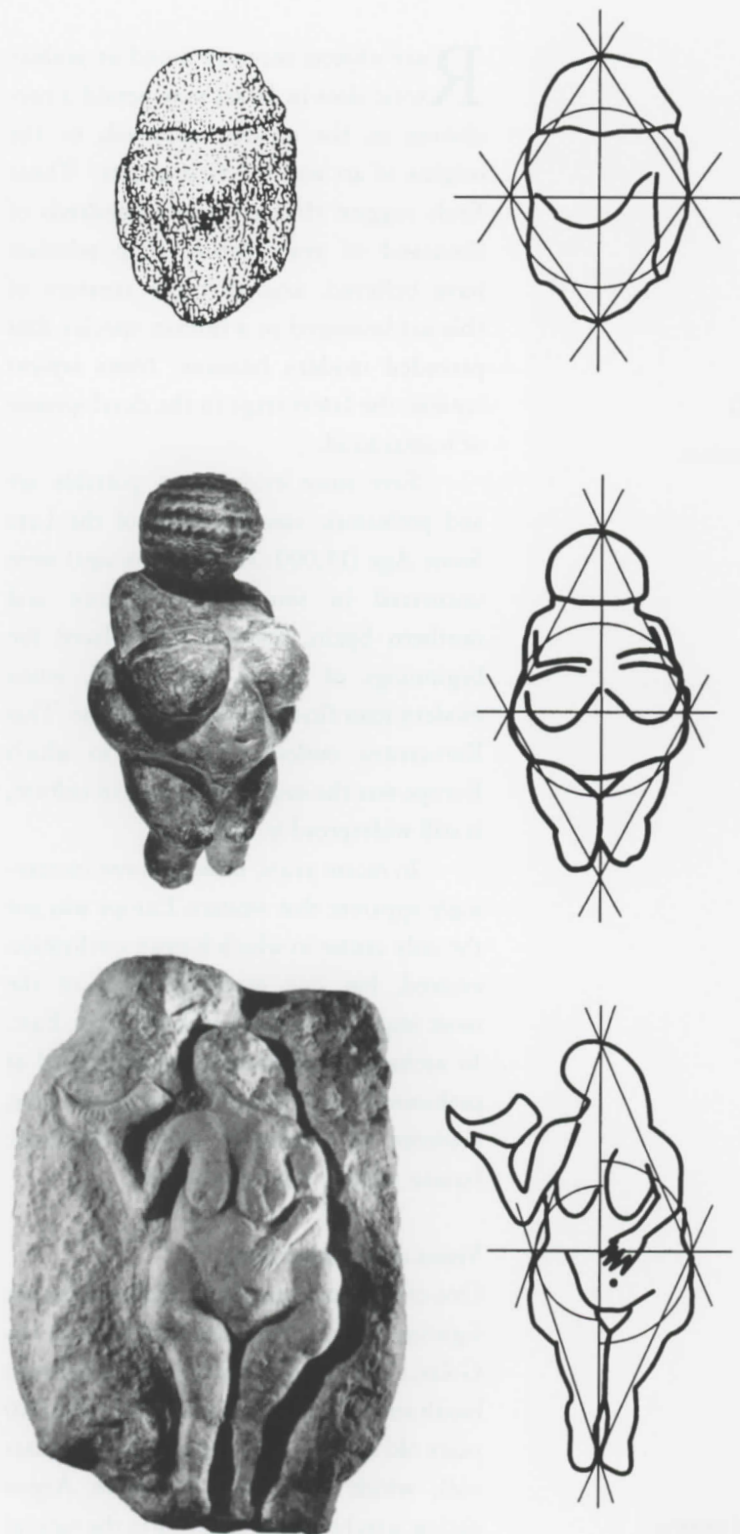


Fig. 2  
Comparative proportions of the Berekhat Ram and "Venus figurines." Above: Berekhat Ram (after Goren-Inbar 1986, 9); center and below: Venus of Willendorf, Austria, and Venus of Laussel, France, ca. 25,000 years old (after Huyghe 1981, figs. 5, 24; drawings after McDermott 1996, 229)

The female figurine is made of local volcanic material<sup>4</sup> – a small pebble 35 mm long, 25 mm wide, and 21 mm thick. It was incised with a flint tool, which was also used to shape the head, arms, and ample bosom.

The oldest figurines known to us before the discovery of this object are the prehistoric "Venus figurines" (fig. 2), some 25,000 years old, which, like the figurine from Berekhat Ram, have prominent breasts and vaguely defined limbs.<sup>5</sup> The fact that they lack facial features indicates that they are not human portraits, but rather the earliest representations of deities. Their similarity to the "Mother Goddess" statuettes of present-day hunting societies in northern Asia may suggest a common belief in a female deity, patroness of human and beast, child-bearer and life-giver.<sup>6</sup>

The possibility that the early human species that inhabited Berekhat Ram possessed human beliefs and skills which until now have been attributed solely to "our kind" has sparked a scientific debate surrounding the figurine from Berekhat Ram. Nevertheless, recent microscopic analyses have proved that the object was indeed shaped by humans and not by nature, rendering it the oldest work of art in the world.<sup>7</sup>

One of the dictionary definitions of the word "art" is "the making or doing of things that have form or beauty." In response to Oscar Wilde's epigram, "All art is quite useless," biologist Jared Diamond wrote, "The implicit meaning a biologist sees behind this quip is that art is nonutilitarian in a narrow sense employed within the fields of animal behavior and evolutionary biology. That is, human art doesn't help us to survive or to pass on our genes . . . most human art is utilitarian in the broader sense that the artist thereby communicates something to fellow humans. . . ."<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the figurine from Berekhat Ram raises intriguing questions:

What did its makers wish to convey, and to what extent did other human species resemble us in terms of their mental capabilities?

### The Rainbow and the Horse

A leap forward in time leads us to the prehistoric site of Quneitra in the Golan, where an incised flint plaque (fig. 3), some 55,000 years old,<sup>9</sup> was found. Microscopic analysis of the plaque reveals that the pattern of diagonal lines and concentric semicircles incised on its surface was made by human hands. Engraved objects have also been found at other Middle Paleolithic sites,<sup>10</sup> but the pattern on the plaque from Quneitra represents the earliest known depiction of a symbol. Comparisons with ancient and contemporary symbols of hunter-gatherer societies around the world (fig. 4) suggest that the semicircles represent a rainbow, and the diagonal lines symbolize rain.<sup>11</sup> Some scholars see a connection between the rainbow symbol from Quneitra and the seasonal ceremonies tribal societies perform to this day. This view, like the suggestion that the figurine from Berekhat Ram has cultic significance, is uncorroborated. The importance of these assertions lies in the fact that they recognize the existence of Paleolithic art outside of Europe, and attribute the design of symbols and symbolic behavior to human species that predate *Homo sapiens sapiens*.



Fig. 3  
Rainbow symbol,  
Quneitra, Israel,  
55,000 years old

The prevalent view today is that at the time the rainbow symbol from Quneitra was incised, two types of humans inhabited the Middle East: Archaic *Homo sapiens*, the predecessor of modern man, and the Neanderthals. Until now, no differences in the material culture of these species have been observed. Some paleoanthropologists believe that Neanderthals were not a separate species, but merely a subspecies, while others regard this type as a distinct human species. The discovery of a fragile hyoid bone – the “tongue bone” – in a Neanderthal skeleton found in the Kebara cave in the Carmel mountains<sup>12</sup> indicates that Neanderthals were anatomically capable of speech. If they were mentally equipped to create and use language, they must have been capable of creating and designing symbols.<sup>13</sup> It is also



Fig. 4  
Rainbow symbols. Left: from Quneitra (after Goren-Inbar 1990, fig. 120); center: from Gavrinis, France, 6,000 years old (after Sharkey 1975, fig. 14); right: contemporary rainbow symbol from Australia (after Yifat 1993, *Witchetty Grub Dreaming*)



Fig. 5  
Horse from Hayonim  
Cave, Israel, 30,000  
years old

possible that the Quneitra plaque was made by an Archaic *Homo sapiens*. In any case, this object seems to signify the existence of a human species with a rich and varied cultural world outside the continent of Europe.

The figurine from Berekhat Ram and the incised rainbow from Quneitra shed new light on yet another important find – the horse from Hayonim Cave in the Galilee (fig. 5) – previously known as “the oldest artwork in Israel.” The two earlier objects bear only a general resemblance to symbols familiar to us from Paleolithic art, while the horse is remarkably similar to the visual representations of horses commonly found in cave art (fig. 6).

The stone plaque, incised with a horse flanked by vertical lines, was unearthed in the 1960s in an archaeological stratum dated

to the Late Stone Age, the period corresponding to the beginnings of prehistoric art in Europe.<sup>14</sup> Prehistoric wall paintings found in caves in Europe have been interpreted in many different ways. They have been viewed as “hunting magic,” totemism, and shamanism, while the caves themselves have been seen as temples or “information centers,” where the practical and spiritual knowledge of early man was preserved.<sup>15</sup> Horses figure prominently in prehistoric art, particularly among the animal images in caves that were probably used as cultic sites. They were a powerful symbol in the conceptual world of early man and played an important role in myth, belief, and ritual. On the basis of flint tools found in the same stratum, the Galilean horse is dated to the early stages of the Late Stone Age, some 30,000 years ago. It thus represents the earliest appearance of one of the most important symbols in art and religion.<sup>16</sup>

### Conclusion

Prehistoric art focuses on three main subjects: human images, abstract symbols, and animal forms. Ancient art objects recently uncovered at prehistoric sites in Israel – the female figurine from Berekhat Ram, the rainbow symbol from Quneitra, and the horse from Hayonim Cave in the Galilee – may point to an artistic and religious tradition that lasted tens of thousands of years. This spiritual



Fig. 6  
Depictions of horses. Left: from Hayonim Cave (after Marshack 1997b, fig. 8); center: from Niaux Cave, France, 18,000 years old (after Beltran et al. 1973, photo 40); right: from Tito Bustillo Cave, Spain, 15,000 years old (after Bertran and Berenguer 1969, fig. 3)

tradition, engendered by the ancient human species of the Middle East, may be the source of the culture from which the European artists of the Late Stone Age emerged.

These ancient objects offer a rare glimpse into the sources of art. They are the first creations of local artists, who were themselves apparently the first artists in the world. They also afford a new insight into the roots of culture and the history of art.

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\* Photos: © Israel Antiquities Authority/ by I. Sztulman (figs. 1, 3, 5)

<sup>1</sup> The objects were displayed in the Israel Museum exhibition *The First Artists*, made possible through the generosity of Florence and Sylvain Sternberg, Jerusalem. They are currently on display in the Prehistory Gallery of the Israel Museum by courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority. I would like to thank Naama Goren-Inbar and Anna Belfer-Cohen for reading an early draft of this paper and for their advice. Special thanks are also due to Naomi Korn for her kind assistance.

<sup>2</sup> Goren-Inbar 1986.

<sup>3</sup> Goren-Inbar 1985.

<sup>4</sup> Goren-Inbar and Peltz 1995.

<sup>5</sup> The group of so-called Venus figurines known from Upper Paleolithic art has been frequently described in literature (e.g., Luquet 1934; Passemard 1938; Saccasyn-Della Santa 1947; Leroi-Gourhan 1968; Gómez-Tabanera 1978; Bahn and Vertut 1988; Marshack 1991; Delporte 1993).

<sup>6</sup> This interpretation of the "Venus figurines" is not accepted by all scholars. Ucko (1968), for example, is of the opinion that they might have been used either for magic, as toys, or even as instructional objects for adolescents. McDermott (1996) interprets them as self-representations of women. Cauvin (2000) recently suggested that they represent powerful images in the world of Paleolithic man, and not necessarily deities.

<sup>7</sup> Marshack 1997a; d'Errico and Nowell 2000. All analyses proved that this object is human-modified. However, d'Errico and Nowell claim that while it is a symbolic object, it is not necessarily a female figurine.

<sup>8</sup> Diamond 1992.

<sup>9</sup> Goren-Inbar 1990.

<sup>10</sup> For example, engraved and perforated bone fragments from Prolom II, a Middle Palaeolithic cave site in

Crimea (Stepanchuk 1993). Several perforated and incised bones have been found at the Mousterian levels of the Spanish cave of Lezetxiki (Baldeon 1993). The French site of La Quina yielded an engraved bone with long parallel lines (Marshack 1976). One of the La Ferrassie Neanderthal burials contained a bone with incised marks (Marshack 1976, 139). Similar fragments with regular notches are known from Mousterian levels at Cueva Morin (Freeman and Gonzales Echegaray 1983) and other European sites (Cremades 1996). The Bulgarian cave of Bacho Kiro has a Mousterian bone fragment, 47,000 years old, with a zigzag motif engraved on it (Marshack 1976).

<sup>11</sup> Marshack 1996.

<sup>12</sup> Arensburg et al. 1989.

<sup>13</sup> For the cultural capacities of the Neanderthals see, for example, Hayden 1993. For the similarity of the symbolic behavior of the two types of humans that inhabited the Middle East, see Belfer-Cohen and Hovers 1992; Hovers et al. 1995.

<sup>14</sup> Belfer-Cohen and Bar-Yosef 1981.

<sup>15</sup> For a summary of the various interpretations of Prehistoric cave art, see Bahn and Vertut 1997.

<sup>16</sup> Marshack 1997b.

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