

3. A FEW CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT THE BEGINNING OF HUMAN KIND AND ART. PROTO PALEOLITHIC

Ioana-Iulia Olaru¹⁷⁴

Abstract: *This material refers to a topic less present among the preoccupations of Art historians. This fact is surprising, because for so old an epoch as the one which is previous to Paleolithic, the artefacts that have reached our times are the only ones that facilitate knowledge about the human beings from that period. These were represented by Homo habilis, the creator of the first archeological culture from the entire History, called "Olduvayan" or pebble culture, named after the site from Olduvay (Tanzania, Africa). In meridional Europe, on the territory of France and Spain, sites were found and they could be dated back to Protopleolithic, and also in Asia (Mongolia), incisions and traces of fire were also found. Except for the proofs about the settlements and dwellings from the 1st layer Olduvay (the oldest house in History), the figurative "art" of this period is represented taking the shape of the premises of a future Prehistoric Art.*

Key words: Australopithec, Neanderthalian, eolith, hominid, pithecanthrope

1. Introduction

It is certain that we could write the History starting with the Beginning. Starting with the moment of the origins of the Universe or the Earth. Or even with the spring of photosynthetic cells from the beginning of life, or once the vertebrata appeared... but Prehistory, not to mention the artistic one, did not mean only the identification of the moment in which the first human beings got out of the mist of the dim and distant past. Of course, a Historian is always needed in order to understand the events that have reached the peak once man was born and started his evolution. But History does not mean only counting political victories and defeats, economic and religious progress.

Therefore, maybe even more regarding an epoch which is so old and lapped in mystery (having no written document which could guide our research), artistic creations are the only language that helps us recast different development phases of the primitive society, but also the phases through which Art itself has passed, starting with the moment of discovery of beauty in nature. Artistic creations are the ones which show the true value and measure of man's experience, facilitating perception and understanding humanity beforehand and thereafter. And this happens because Art, just like History (which is not, as we have mentioned, only a chain of events), means much more than a classification of an ensemble of images. But, let us start with the beginning...

2. Protopleolithic

...Because, from a historical point of view (in fact... prehistoric), before the two periods that are the focus of our discussion, Protopleolithic existed. Protopleolithic is a period (4,5 million years ago) when beings with features which are somehow similar to human ones started to exist¹⁷⁵. It is the epoch of the "African

¹⁷⁴ Professor PhD., "George Enescu" National University of Arts, Iași, România, email: olaru.ioana.iulia@gmail.com

¹⁷⁵ J.M. Roberts, Odd Arne Westad, *Istoria lumii. Din preistorie până în prezent*, Iași, Polirom, 2018, p. 17

cradle”: certain relics from Africa, anthropological and archaeological ones, have become familiar to us.

Protopaleolithic together with Lower Paleolithic is the epoch of big anthropoid apes that have suffered important changes; later on, it will also be the era of the first representatives (appeared in Africa from the previous species of apes called *Australopithecus*) of the human species (the genre *Homo*), *Homo habilis* (2,5/1,8 million years B.C.), and also of the first representatives of *Homo erectus*, *Homo ergaster* (1,5/1,2 million years B.C.). *Homo erectus* existed up to 100 000 B.C., when he cohabited with *Homo neanderthalensis* and our ancestor, *Homo sapiens*. *Homo sapiens* appeared 200 000-100 000 years ago¹⁷⁶ in sub-Saharan Africa and he met *Homo Neanderthal* in the Close East, he appeared around 500 000 years ago in Western Europe and the Middle East. 70 000 years ago, *Homo sapiens* spreads outside Africa, then (45 000 years before) he colonizes Australia. 15 000 years later (around 30 000 B.C.), the Neanderthaliens disappear. *Homo sapiens* will be the only species that will survive¹⁷⁷.

The animal condition of the primates was surpassed by the vertical position of *Australopithecus* specimens. The famous Lucy from East Africa is closer to a chimp than the nowadays man, having a small head and a very little developed brain, having the underhung of the face and long arms, suitable for climbing trees. But legs, though short, allowed her to have an almost right position and biped walking, making her the first being that can be compared to humans¹⁷⁸. Taking into account the small volume of the brain, and also the shape of the body, close to the human one, *Australopithecus* are situated between monkey and man. They could organize the surrounding space around a centre, given the vertical position of the body. Smaller than modern man, what *Australopithecus* have in common with him, except for the biped walking, some anatomic changes (the bones of the leg and of the feet), and also the top of the toes which are flattened.

Just as important as the vertical position is the beginning of tools usage, 2 million years later¹⁷⁹. For the time being, it is only the usage! And some animals use objects as tools. Their making-up will be a feature specific to humans – a much more complex issue that will take place later on. The usage of tools was possible because the biped position allowed men to use their upper limbs to utilize stones or objects for different purposes (mainly, for food procurance and cooking, but also for its transport – because man is not a mammal that consumes his food where he finds it or procures it). It is confirmed the fact that *Australopithecus* used tools, their morphological structure shows it, but it is not known what tools they used. Probably, the first instruments were an imitation and an extension of the organs of the human body. Similar to « the games of nature », eoliths, these first harsh tools (a sharp stone, a broken branch), through it is sure that they existed – unfortunately, some of them did not stand the test of time (most of them from wood), they can not be distinguished, the others, from the objects produced by natural forces.

¹⁷⁶ Jane Turner, *The Dictionary of Art*, vol.1, New York, Grove's Dictionaries, 1996, p. 221

¹⁷⁷ Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens. Scurtă istorie a omenirii*, Iași, Polirom, 2017, p. 9

¹⁷⁸ Jacques Marseille, Nadeije Laneyrie-Dagen (sous la direction de), *Les grands événements de l'histoire de l'art*, Paris, Larousse, 1994, p. 12

¹⁷⁹ Anthony F. Janson, *History of Art*, New York, Harry Abrams, 1986, p. 26

It was launched the hypothesis that the osteodontokeratic culture existed¹⁸⁰, previous to the usage of stone – characterized by the usage of tools and weapons made from hard animal materials (bones, teeth), and of some objects taken from nature (wood, stone), « not standardized », but only briefly modified in order to be manipulated. They are pseudo-tools, just a little modified, just adapted. Australopithecus did not yet respect two important conditions for an object to be a tool: they did not store them (the found objects had not been thought of as tools, but only temporarily, when it was needed, they were used like this) and they did not repeat interventions (this happened only occasionally).

Lucy's race will disappear, but another group of bipeds will spring, being contemporary with Lucy or later on, again in the region of the Great African Rift: *Homo habilis* (the capable man) – our ancestor. It is a group of individuals having a more developed brain that allowed them a specific social organization: grouping in tribes and also the refinement of stone by cutting in order to be used as an instrument¹⁸¹. We owe to the first *Homo* the conscious making of the oldest tools, by the rough splintering of some silex pieces selectively brought to the place where they were about to be cut¹⁸².

Homo habilis is the creator of the first archaeological culture defined in History (called « Olduvayan » or *pebble culture*) (1 800 000 years – 500 000 years B.C.)¹⁸³, named like this after the site from Olduvay (Tanzania), the region of the Great African Rift¹⁸⁴, a notch with a gigantic digging, with abrupt margins and a height of approximately 100m. Successive layers, visible in the vertical walls, have fossil blankets and they are of black volcanic basalt in the lowest levels, after which comes an enormous layer of sparkling red sediments, having 30m depth, after which comes a greyish sediment surmounted by the last layer of lime that is the soil of the plateau¹⁸⁵. *Pebble industry* is also signaled in other points of Africa: Rhodesia, Sahara, Maroc, Algeria¹⁸⁶. Important discoveries have also been made in Etiopia (Melka Kuntune, Aramis, Hadar, the blankets of the River Omo) and in Kenya (Kanapoi), some fossils being as old as 3,7 million years¹⁸⁷.

A nowadays hypothesis is the one according to which there are sites in Meridional Europe, on the territory of France and Spain, sites which could be dated back to Protopleolithic (here – the dating is 1 800 000 – 900 000/800 000 B.C.) – but the vestiges are only archaeological (some of them of square quartz discovered in Cullar de Baza I, Chilhac, Vallonet), not in Paleoanthropological. On the plateaux facing Montières, on the outskirts of Amiens, just as old blankets were found – maybe even older than the ones that supplied *pebble industry* in Africa – silex stones, some of them carbonized, suggesting the existence of a centre where man had already appeared on the European continent ever since the dawn of the

¹⁸⁰ Term having its origins in Greek (osteon = bone; odons, odontos = tooth; keras, keratos = horn)

¹⁸¹ Jacques Marseille, Nadeije Laneyrie-Dagen, *op. cit.*, p. 13

¹⁸² J.M. Roberts, Odd Arne Westad, *op. cit.*, p. 22

¹⁸³ Enzo Bernardini, *Atlas de arheologie; Marile descoperiri ale civilizatiilor antichitatii*, Oradea, Aquila, 2006, p. 12

¹⁸⁴ Olduvay Gorge is a valley having over 100m length, being situated on the North-Western side of Arusha (Tanzania septentrional). It belongs to the Valley of the Great East-African Rift, full of volcanic cones and lakes, spread between the Dead Sea in the north (South-Western Asia) and South Africa. *Ibidem*.

¹⁸⁵ Leonard Cottrell (sur la dir. de), *Dictionnaire encyclopedique d'Archeologie*, Paris, S.E.D.E., 1962, p. 384

¹⁸⁶ Marcel Dunan, *Histoire universelle*, Paris, Librairie Larousse, 1960, p. 7

¹⁸⁷ Enzo Bernardini, *op. cit.*, p. 14

Quaternary. And in Asia, on the stag horns from Nihowan (Mongolia) (the beginning of the Quaternary epoch), fire tracks and scratches made by humans were found.

Thus, at the beginning of the Quaternary, there are proofs that man existed in Africa, Europe and Asia. This fact is not an argument in favour of the thesis that the spring of man had taken place in the same time in more points of this Earth, but that the depreciation in time on the early tracks of the groups allows us to perceive them only when they have reached a specific development¹⁸⁸. Returning to Olduvai, the fossil and tool remains found in the layers of the walls of the notch at the 1st level of the site make it the most important archaeological site in the world. Here, the discovery of a part of a hominid's skull with a bigger brain than the Australopithecus (a late Australopithecus – characterized by vertical walking and by the production of the oldest known tools¹⁸⁹) is a proof of the fact that they are the direct ancestors of man¹⁹⁰, still in this layer were found the first tools made of carved stone, produced by those hominids.

At the beginning, they selected objects, discovering that some stones or sticks have a shape which is easier to handle than others, they are now capable of making the connection between form and function. Stones were found (river boulders) having marks of repeated usage which have been preserved¹⁹¹. They had a sharp edge obtained by alternatively hitting two stones in the right impact angle, thus obtaining a cutting edge of the object later used for carving, cutting, scratching; some of them are the simplest, rudimentary tools made by man and they are the predecessors of bifacials (the latter were also discovered here, but above the layer of the culture Olduvai)¹⁹².

The next step in the evolution of tools was represented by intervention on them : from river stones, tools were obtained by detaching some splinters, thus obtaining the so-called one-faced and double-faced choppers – chopping-tools. The first tools made with attention and which are standardized can be inscribed in typological series: hand small axes made by splintering a few blades from a nucleus, with a sharp point. In the 3rd layer Olduvai, the discovered skull is placed, regarding its evolution, between pithecanthrope and Homo sapiens¹⁹³. The made-up tools represent the advantage of man over the other beings. Two techniques have been mentioned: chipping by hitting and retouching by pressing the stone nucleus. If at the beginning, a tool proved to be multifunctional, step by step it was improved.

3. Settlements and lodging (housing)

Communities were gregarious, without stability, permanently moving in search for food¹⁹⁴. In general, the lodging of the hominids from Protopleolithic did not stand the test of time – being rudimentary set up. With only a few exceptions. In

¹⁸⁸ Marcel Dunan, *op.cit.*, p. 7

¹⁸⁹ Berndt Legath, Ulrich Meer, Ulrich W. Rutenhöfer, Adelheid Schmidt-Thomé, *Istoria lumii in date, Din preistorie până în prezent. Cele mai importante date, personalități și interdependențe*, București, NICULESCU SRL, 2003, p. 10

¹⁹⁰ V. Gordon Childe, *De la preistorie la istorie*, București, Editura Științifică, 1967, p. 44

¹⁹¹ Anthony F. Janson, *op. cit.*, p. 26

¹⁹² Leonard Cottrell, *op. cit.*, p. 385

¹⁹³ V. Gordon Childe, *op. cit.*, p. 46

¹⁹⁴ Ion Miclea, Radu Florescu, *Preistoria Daciei*, București, Meridiane, 1980, p.1 1

the 1st layer Olduvay, it was discovered that a group of early Homo lived within a radius of 13-16m (the distance from where stones for tools were brought). The area was on the shore of the lake which existed back then and was abundant in wild animals (bones of the hunted animals were found, they were broken in order to reach the pitch which was eaten); the found tools indicate their specialization: chimps for removing meat from the bones and tools for wood processing).

The basis (from superposed stones) of the hut found here (the oldest house in History) shows us that this windshield was simple, having a circular basis, being built on stones which are 1,9 million years old ¹⁹⁵, branches and leaves. Near it, there are two preserved places for meat carving, together with tools, animal ashes (the technique consisted in driving animals towards swampy places): of an elephant and, respectively, of a deinotherium. It is, probably, the first identified building of a house, where food was brought in order to be consumed together with family (only man, among the primates, had such places where male returned to their females and babies) and where man rested and eventually "charged his batteries". This fact proves that there was specific planning and a somehow sexual differentiation regarding economic roles¹⁹⁶, but also the possibility of avoiding natural selection.

4. Conclusions - Figurative "art"

In Protopaleolithic, once the first hominids of the type Australopithecus appeared, the first tools also sprang – useful handmade object – belonging to the so-called *riprap culture*¹⁹⁷. The ones made of stones – indicating the hypothetical presence¹⁹⁸ of some traces of human activity (among which we mention the intervention of man and the yearlong usage of them) – these are the oldest proofs of usage of nature objects as tools¹⁹⁹. As for the others, the tools of this culture were silex rocks probably picked from the waters of rivers or from gulleys²⁰⁰, briefly carved at one end in order to obtain a sharp edge, by the detachment of chips or by hitting with rough stones.

The birth of the first tools was in fact initially an operation of choosing from the surrounding environment those stone rocks offered by nature, suitable for different purposes, having sharp points or edges, which were not very much different from the formal accidents of nature. We can not talk for the time being of art, but about being open to it. It is only an aesthetic experience – this preference for specific utilitarian purposes, but also for the pleasant aspect of a thing that existed in nature – also sometimes seen in animals (see the magpies that can not resist the temptation of taking shiny objects, although they do not use them for anything).

Gradually, the creator back then modelled them intentionally, for the time being just a little bit in Protopaleolithic. He carved edges, he sharpened points, he applied the rules that he had already discovered in nature (balance, symmetry). The

¹⁹⁵ J.M. Roberts, Odd Arne Westad, *op. cit.*, p. 22

¹⁹⁶ *Ibidem*

¹⁹⁷ In fact, it is a culture indeed, taking into account the true meaning of the term, because it is represented only by tools

¹⁹⁸ According to some researchers, the fact that there are no other vestiges added in order to complete the ensemble suggests the possibility that they were simple natural chinks (in this case, they would no longer represent tools)

¹⁹⁹ Ion Miclea, Radu Florescu, *op. cit.*, p. 12; Vladimir Dumitrescu, *Muzeul Național de Antichități*, București, Meridiane, 1968, p. 17

²⁰⁰ Ion Miclea, Radu Florescu, *op. cit.*, p. 5

confection of tools by choosing and adapting the practical role is also existent in the animal world. What differentiates these hominids from primates is the fact that they could also make guns or tools for hacking, cutting, hitting or carving objects from softer materials (wood), but also tools for producing tools; moreover, they had the ability to store them in order to use them anytime, at the right future moment. But Art exists only when man connects the utilitarian purpose with the one of representation and self-expression.

Therefore, (only!) premises of artistic creation are to be met now; we can not identify preoccupations for creating the beautiful, but these objects, harmonized from an ergonomic point of view with the human being, prove the expressiveness of form. Except for the criterion of efficiency regarding these boulders, it was probably also used the criterion of aspect, to be as pleasant to the eye as possible, both regarding the selection and processing of stone, chips, blades. The hominid thus proves to have a somewhat aesthetic feeling – the sensitivity to rules of the art that preexisted in nature: recognizing balance and the harmony of shapes, man knows how to choose the right ones, but he also selects the ones that also tend towards perfection from a visual point of view, bringing his contribution and arranging them into the desired shape. Nothing is automatic and instinctive, like in the world of animals.

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