

CHAPTER 5.

THE PALAEOLOGIC ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORD AND THE MATERIALITY OF IMAGINATION: A RESPONSE TO J. WENTZEL VAN HUYSTEEN

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Two of the most fundamental questions that can be asked about human nature and the shared human experience are, “what makes us human?” and its corollary, “what is unique and distinctive about us?” In his chapter, J. Wentzel van Huyssteen argues that what makes humans unique is the ability to alter the world around us, to shape the world as it shapes us, an ability made possible through our “distinctively human imagination.”[1] Our imagination means that we can conceive of new ways of being and communicate through language and other symbols—ultimately allowing for the possibility of religiosity and religious thought. This imagination is no epiphenomenon of human evolution, but an intrinsic evolutionary force which, alongside genetics and biology, has shaped our developmental trajectory. Van Huyssteen is not alone in emphasizing the evolutionary importance of the human ability to modify and shape our surroundings, whether through the specific use of symbols, semiotics, or more broadly through processes of niche construction, although his contribution is notable for bridging anthropological and theological perspectives.

As van Huyssteen comments, research into what makes us human is, by the very nature of the question, an interdisciplinary endeavor.[2] The aim of this response is to contribute to this endeavor by providing an archeological perspective on the argument and evidence advanced by van Huyssteen. While van Huyssteen is a theologian, and there are several sections of the chapter which speak directly to his field, much of the data and frameworks he discusses derive from the archeological and evolutionary anthropological literature. As such, rather than commenting on how archeological data can support or refute van Huyssteen’s thesis, I offer thoughts from within the field of archeology on the data and models employed in his chapter, thereby situating his argument more firmly within our disciplinary discussions. My response focuses on three areas: 1) whether the distinctively human imagination—and the characteristics of consciousness, language, and symbolic behavior which it implies—is species specific (unique to *Homo sapiens*) or whether it is shared by other members of the genus *Homo*; 2) the evidence for the emergence of this imagination in the archeological record of the Pleistocene, and; 3) the link between a distinctively human imagination and religiosity, and the implications for our understanding of religion in the Paleolithic.

How Unique is the Distinctively Human Imagination? Defining “Human”

Humans are unique in being able to decide whom we include in the category of “us” and what the criteria for inclusion are. Among the extant species whose behavior we witness today, it is clear that even our closest primate relatives—chimpanzees and bonobos—do not share our distinctively human imagination and its capacities for language and symbolic behavior. However, there are many species of hominins in our genus *Homo* who are much more closely related to us (e.g., *Homo heidelbergensis* from c. 600,000–200,000 years ago and *Homo neanderthalensis*, Neanderthals, from c. 400,000–40,000 years ago). The study of these hominins is better placed to shed light on whether this imagination is unique to *Homo sapiens*. Unfortunately, these species are extinct and, as a result, we are left to infer their behavior and capacities from their fossils and the often-paltry remains of their material culture left in the archeological record.

While it is not uncommon within archeology to refer to all members of the genus *Homo*—from approximately two million years ago up to and including ourselves—as “human,” van Huyssteen seems to reserve that moniker for *Homo sapiens*. Building on work by anthropologist Agustín Fuentes, van Huyssteen identifies the transition between “becoming human” and “being human” as key: the process of “becoming human” occurring from the appearance of our genus to the emergence of *Homo sapiens*, and “being human” referring to evolution within our species since its emergence.[3] Within the framework of this transition, the distinctively human imagination is a key part of the explanation for why *Homo sapiens* thrived while other closely related hominins have become extinct.

Although seemingly clear-cut, this transition is often difficult to pin down. While less so than in the past, archeology is nonetheless a “discovery” field; well-thought-out paradigms are easily shifted, not by changes in thinking, but by amendments to the database. The field of human origins research is particularly susceptible to these shifts, and the evolutionary transition between “becoming” and “being” human is no exception. Two recent discoveries serve as cases in point. New dates and fossils from the site of Jebel Irhoud in Morocco push the date of the earliest known *Homo sapiens* back to c. 300,000 years ago[4] (from the previous evidence at c. 200,000–150,000 years ago[5]) and move the location of the earliest fossil evidence for our species from Ethiopia in East Africa to North Africa. Similarly, new discoveries can also radically alter our understanding of the diversity of past hominin species. The dating of the recently discovered hominin *Homo naledi*, found in the Rising Star Cave in South Africa, to a surprisingly recent c. 300,000–200,000 years ago is particularly pertinent.[6] This date means that *Homo naledi* overlaps with the known age and distribution of *Homo sapiens* in the region, making it unclear going forward which species contributed what to the archeological record of this time period, a record previously considered to belong exclusively to *Homo sapiens*. Of particular relevance to the current discussion is that it also opens up the possibility that a hominin with many “primitive” features (including a small brain) is responsible for some of the earliest archeological indicators of behavior associated with the distinctively human imagination.[7] Behavioral models which focus on the transition from pre-*sapiens* to *Homo sapiens* need to respond to and accommodate these new discoveries.

Archeological Evidence for Imagination

Let us consider the evidence for van Huyssteen’s distinctively human imagination in the Pleistocene archeological record. To borrow a phrase from his chapter, at some stage in our evolutionary history language, intentionality, and cooperation worked to lock in the “more than material as our permanent

state of being.”[8] Phrased this way, the most challenging aspect of this imagination from an archeological perspective is that it is, by definition, ephemeral. The central conflict for archeologists who wish to contribute to this line of research is the need to engage with the “more than material,” while at the same time acknowledging that materials are the primary focus of archeological study. One component of this imagination, which is an obvious exception to this ephemerality, is the symbol (defined here as something that represents something else by association, resemblance, or convention.)[9] Symbolic thought, a way of infusing meaning into the world, is a key element of van Huyssteen’s argument for a distinctively human imagination. Through their materiality, symbols are also the most common focus of archeological enquiry into questions of human distinctiveness, cognition, and imagination, and, as such, they will be my focus here.

The study of symbols in the Pleistocene is intrinsically linked with the search for evidence of cognitive and linguistic abilities equivalent to our own. The creation of symbols, along with other behaviors such as the burial of the dead and the production of blades and composite tools, usually fall under the much-debated rubric of “behavioral modernity”—a turn of phrase which allows for the possibility of the uncoupling of modern behavior and biology (the appearance of *Homo sapiens* in the fossil record). In seeking to determine when and where symbols were first used, and whether the use of symbols is specific to *Homo sapiens*, we must acknowledge the limitations of the archeological record and bear in mind one of the truisms of archeology: absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. There are many reasons why evidence of symbols and symbolism could be absent from Pleistocene contexts beyond the fact that the people present might have lacked the ability to think symbolically. Symbols might have been made from materials which are unlikely to survive, such as wood; they could have been restricted to ephemeral contexts (for example, painted on bodies); or we might be looking for them in the wrong places. Additionally, as we search backwards through the Pleistocene, the more likely older material is to have been disturbed or destroyed by natural geological and chemical processes.

Contrary to the data presented by van Huyssteen, the archeological evidence for symbols and symbolism indicate that thinking symbolically is not restricted to *Homo sapiens*. While the famous cave paintings of Lascaux and Chauvet, which van Huyssteen cites, are remarkable feats of imagination and skill—and as he suggests, potentially interpretable in terms of religious or shamanistic activity—they are part of a long history of Pleistocene symbol-making, the beginnings of which we see as early as half a million years ago.[10] In fact, the results of a recent study demonstrate that the majority, if not all, of the first appearances of the main material culture categories used by archeologists to denote symbolic behaviors predate the appearance of *Homo sapiens*. [11] These include figurative art, beads, and the use of ochre. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that both the quantity and the range of instances of symbolic behavior increase in the later Pleistocene with *Homo sapiens* (from c. 100,000 years ago). We need to tread a fine line to give these two patterns appropriate weight. Clearly, we cannot view symbolic behavior as the sole product of *Homo sapiens*. Similarly, there is little to be gained by treating the more sporadic evidence of symbolic behavior in earlier hominins as directly equivalent to the range and quantity of those seen in the later Pleistocene record of *Homo sapiens*. Archeological studies demonstrating the positive effect of the higher population densities and greater intergroup connectivity of *Homo sapiens* (compared to earlier hominins) on both the generation, use, and maintenance of cultural traits (including symbolic behavior), and their resultant visibility in the archeological record, might hold the key to this pattern and are worth incorporating into van Huyssteen’s argument.[12]

Religion in the Paleolithic

Finally, I would like to return to the link between van Huyssteen's distinctively human imagination and religion. To van Huyssteen, there is not one without the other, and the characteristics which make humans unique, such as imagination, language, and symbolic behavior, have always included the propensity for religious belief. As van Huyssteen says, there is an "evolutionary naturalness to religious imagination." [13] One element in support of this position is the ubiquity of religion today, although it goes without saying that "religion" in the Paleolithic, if it did exist, would have been very different from religion as is practiced and organized today. From a non-theological disciplinary standpoint, part of the difficulty engaging with this element of van Huyssteen's argument is that (as far as I can discern) he provides no firm definition of what religion is or entails which might assist archeologists in their attempts to study this phenomenon. Archeologists usually conflate evidence of "religion" with evidence of symbolism, and, in particular, of ritual practices, including mortuary activity and the apparent presence of ritual spaces. As with symbolism, there is a debate about when these activities emerged, although firm evidence of mortuary activity is found later than the earliest evidence of symbolism [14] and there is a sense that it is not until the appearance of *Homo sapiens* that the most convincing and widespread evidence of religious behaviors appear. [15]

If, as van Huyssteen suggests, the characteristics that make humans unique, such as imagination, language, and symbolic behavior, also include the capacity for religious imagination and behavior, how would that affect our interpretation of the archeological record of the Pleistocene? His assertion that during the Pleistocene we should not expect to see a separate domain that can clearly be identified as "religious," and that daily material life must have been deeply infused with imagination and spirituality, is likely correct, but it is difficult to reconcile with archeological practice. It does, however, open up some intriguing possibilities. There is a cliché in archeology that we classify an object as "symbolic" or somehow related to religion or ritual because we cannot discern its immediate and/or utilitarian function. Frequently, investigation into the possibility of spiritual or religious beliefs ends with this flippancy, particularly when we are dealing with early *Homo sapiens* or earlier members of the genus *Homo*. Furthermore, the conflation of the evidence for symbolism and religious or ritualistic behavior, while understandable given the available data, results in a narrow focus on only one facet of religion. Given the impoverished nature of much of the artefactual record, further research on the role of religion in the Pleistocene, including how religious imagination emerged and developed, should perhaps consider the behaviors which both facilitate and emerge from ritual and religious practice, including cooperation, compassion, and communal and group learning. [16] While we can never be *certain* of the ritual or symbolic properties of many elements of the archeological record, if, as van Huyssteen suggests, religion is part of the distinctively human imagination, we do our Pleistocene predecessors a huge disservice by reserving this line of enquiry only to instances when our more prosaic interpretations fall short.

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- [2] Ibid.
- [3] Agustín Fuentes, “Human Evolution, Niche Complexity, and the Emergence of a Distinctively Human Imagination,” *Time and Mind* 7.3 (2014): 241–57.
- [4] Jean-Jacques Hublin et al., “New Fossils from Jebel Irhoud, Morocco and the Pan-African Origin of *Homo sapiens*,” *Nature* 546.7657 (2017): 289–92.
- [5] Ian McDougall, Francis H. Brown, and John G. Fleagle, “Stratigraphic Placement and Age of Modern Humans from Kibish, Ethiopia,” *Nature* 433.7027 (2005): 733–36.
- [6] P. Dirks et al., “The Age of *Homo naledi* and Associated Sediments in the Rising Star Cave, South Africa,” *eLife* 6 (2017): e24231.
- [7] This is strengthened by the interpretation that *Homo naledi* engaged in a behavior typically seen as “symbolic” or related to religious/ritual practices—the deliberate deposition of the dead. See P. Dirks et al., “Comment on ‘Deliberate body disposal by hominins in the Dinaledi Chamber, Cradle of Humankind, South Africa?’,” *Journal of Human Evolution* 96 (2016): 145–48; *Journal of Human Evolution* 30 (2016): 149–53.
- [8] Van Huyssteen, “Human Origins and the Emergence of a Distinctively Human Imagination.”
- [9] Marc Kissel and Agustín Fuentes, “A Database of Archaeological Evidence of Representational Behavior,” *Evolutionary Anthropology: Issues, News, and Reviews* 26.4 (2017): 149–50.
- [10] The earliest purported example of symbolism found in the archeological record is that of an engraved geometric pattern on a shell from the site of Trinil, Java, associated with *Homo erectus*. See Josephine C.A. Joordens et al., “*Homo erectus* at Trinil on Java Used Shells for Tool Production and Engraving,” *Nature* 518.7538 (2015): 228–31.
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- [15] Paul Pettitt, “Religion and Ritual in the Lower and Middle Palaeolithic,” *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology and Ritual of Religion*, edited by Timothy Insoll (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011):

329–43.

[16] These behaviors are of course, similarly difficult to study using archeological data, although recent work by Penny Spikins has demonstrated several ways in which behavior such as compassion, altruism and cooperation can be identified/inferred in the Pleistocene (e.g., Penny A. Spikins, Holly E. Rutherford, and Andy P. Needham, “From Homininity to Humanity: Compassion from the Earliest Archaics to Modern Humans,” *Time and Mind* 3.3 (2010): 303–25).

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