Halil Berktay's Diary

MORE ON CAVE PAINTINGS OUTSIDE EUROPE

Halil Berktay

0018. (30 April 2021)

This instalment is two days late. On Wednesday, 28th April, I uploaded four more articles on prehistoric art into my "Recommended Readings" box: 0018.1.(BBC 7.11.2018) 'Oldest animal painting' discovered in Borneo plus 0018.2.(BBC 12.12.2019) Sulawesi cave art 44,000 years old plus 0018.3.(BBC 23.5.2013) Cave paintings found in Burgos, Mexico plus 0018.4.(BBC 4.12.2020) Ancient Amazon rock art with prehistoric creatures. But I failed to provide any sort of introduction for them. I didn't have the time. I am doing too much, especially teaching too much. Preparing lectures or preliminary notes for discussion, writing exams and answer keys, as well actual time in class, could be taking more than 40 hours per week. This is what life has become like under COVID. And as yet there is no light at the end of the tunnel.

Anyway. In these four articles, note, first, the universality of the phenomenon. What we call Eurocentrism was, in a way, inevitable. As in most other disciplines, modern archeology, anthropology and art history, too, emerged and developed in Europe. And of course European elites initially focused on what was closest to them, what they were most familiar with, i.e. their own history and geography; only in time did their horizons expand to include other peoples and continents. It was at that second intellectual "moment" that the negative aspect came into play: the European gaze, turned outward, came to see and judge everything else by its own standards, what it accepted as "normal" in comparison with which everything else became "abnormal" or "subnormal." So this Eurocentric mentality turned on the Orient produced Orientalism (Edward Said); turned on Eastern Europe it gave rise to East Europeanism (Larry Wolff); turned on the Balkans it resulted in Balkanism (Maria Todorova).

But please let us beware of assuming that nothing has changed or is likely to change in Western academia. This, emphatically, is not the case. On the contrary: with post-1945 decolonization as their "constitutive outside," the leading edge of the humanities and social sciences has evolved enormously over especially the last five decades (indeed, it is this overall process that frames Said's, Wolff's, Todorova's or others' critical approaches and seminal contributions). To reject this positive development is to persist in a smugly Occidentalizing sort of ignorance.

So with regard to prehistoric art, for example, while the earliest discoveries came in southern France and northern Spain, as part of an immense globalization of scholarship new findings are cropping up wherever humans have lived, including remote corners of Southeast Asia (Borneo 0018.1 and Sulawesi 0018.2), Mexico (Burgos 0018.3), or the Amazon rain forest (0018.4). So the connection between tribal, hunting and gathering societies and cave art is firmer than ever. But in the process, please also note, secondly, that this is an expansion in time as well as space. Our notion of the "oldest" keeps sliding further and further back.

Altamira has been dated to 36,000 and Lascaux to 17,000 years ago. In 2018, a painting of (possibly) a banteng in the East Kalimantan jungle on Borneo was dated to at least 40,000 years ago, which made it "the earliest known figurative artwork." Simultaneously, two nearby hand stencils (examples of abstract art) were dated to at least 37,000 years ago, while a third was ascertained to have a maximum age of 51,800 years — all in all, enabling researchers to conclude that "rock art locally developed in Borneo between around 52,000 and 40,000 years ago" (for all, see 0018.1). The next year, other caves in Sulawesi took the "earliest art" back to 47-44,000 years ago (0018.2). But meanwhile, other findings in Europe, published in Science in 2018, took that threshold back to 65,000 years ago, and other scientists said that they had found "humanity's oldest drawing" on a rock fragment in South Africa dated to 73,000 years ago.

Thirdly, note the Neanderthals dimension of such constant backdating: Since 65,000 years ago is far earlier than the known arrival of Homo sapiens in Europe, it reinforces suggestions that the most ancient beginnings of art might have been the work of Neanderthals, further blurring the 1/0 binary opposition view between H. sapiens versus H. neandertalensis that was held for a long time. But this aside, fourth, note the appearance of the first "stories" in art. This is actual hunting scenes in the Southeast Asian caves: the Borneo banteng appears to have a spear sticking in its side, while the Sulawesi anoa seems to be surrounded by men (hunters) carrying spears and ropes for killing or capturing purposes. If these observations are correct (as they might not be; see below), then these become the oldest action narratives that we know (as against single figures not integrated into a story unfolding over time). Fifth, note other bits and pieces of new knowledge, and how they help scholars to fill certain gaps in our knowledge so as to arrive at a bigger and more complete picture: the Burgos (Mexico) paintings reveal a particular region to have been not uninhabited but populated by humans (possibly fleeing to take refuge in this remote area), while the Amazon rainforest images from 12,600 to 11,800 years ago provide us with distinctive images of gigantic Ice Age species that later became extinct. (such as mastodons, giant sloths or Ice Age horses)

Sixth, crucially, note yet again the scientific rigor embodied in all these discoveries. Scientists are not given to jumping to conclusions before they have tested and tried everything. Instead, they cautiously, politely, prudently question their own and their colleagues' conclusions. Have they really made the best use of their evidence? For example, with regard to the Borneo banteng, Alistair Pike, a British professor of archeology, asks whether the calcium carbonate deposit that was uranium-thorium dated to 44,000 years ago was actually part of the same picture as the animal itself: although they are just 15 cm apart, could they have been painted separately and at different times? A similar question arises about the Sulawesi anoa and the hunters surrounding it: were they painted together and simultaneously, or could the hunters have been added at a later point in time? And there is so much that we still don't know. These discoveries, says one researcher, don't tell us much about where art originated. Was there a single centre, or several centres where it emerged? "I think things develop independently," says professor d'Errico: "There may be other areas where people were producing something similar but we haven't found it yet, or that it wasn't preserved," he tells BBC News.
And this is further related to seventh, the protracted drama of humanity's mental development. It may not be a single one-time jump, but a long-drawn-out process: "I think that symbolic thinking and abstract representation have a long history. They develop gradually over 100,000 years if not more. It's probably something that is created, abandoned and then re-created in new form."

I keep emphasizing the same thing again and again: scientism and science (or scientific knowledge) are different things — as with Orientalism and Oriental Studies. There is the discipline, and then there are its ideological offshoots or exacerbations. Let us not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Let us not fall into the trap of belittling, trivializing or relativizing science.