

# Is this the infancy of art? Or the art of an infant?

## A possible Neanderthal face from La Roche-Cotard, France

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Speaking of the rapidly accumulating evidence for Upper Palaeolithic art in the last decades of the nineteenth century, the prehistorian Gabrielle de Mortillet observed its developed character, noting that, 'C'est l'enfance de l'art; ce n'est pas l'art de l'enfant.' Since then, we have grappled with methodological issues of how to detect artistic activity in the archaeological record before iconic images appear, and with the related issue of the development of the cognitive foundations of image making: was it gradual and early or relatively rapid and recent? Did art develop through several technical and cognitive stages, *sensu* Leroi Gourhan? If a long antiquity can be recognised, was it still restricted to *Homo sapiens* and therefore an element of 'modern human behaviour', or was it also a characteristic, however rare, of other human species?

In recent years a handful of natural objects with similarities to the human form have been recovered, which share the characteristic of apparently having received minor modification to accentuate their human character. Such *pierres figures* or *proto-figurines* as they have been called, include the Berekhet Ram female dating to 250-280,000 BP\* and others from apparently early Upper Palaeolithic contexts. The recent publication in French and English of a possible representation of a face from a clear European Middle Palaeolithic context, will crystallise the issues of the origins of art and behavioural abilities of the Neanderthals.

The cave of La Roche-Cotard (Indre-et-Loire) was discovered at the beginning of the twentieth century and excavated in its first decade and again from the 1970s. During the latter campaigns, the 'Neanderthal face' was recovered from a clear Mousterian horizon (Layer 7). The piece was first published in the journal *Paleo* (Volume 12, 2000), and has now been published in English in the journal *Antiquity* (Marquet &

Lorblanchet 2003). The alluvial sands of Layer 7 represent a beach of the Loire river on which Neanderthals had stopped, lit a fire and probably prepared herbivore meat, leaving behind numerous unretouched flint flakes, several tools and a small faunal assemblage, all lying horizontally in the layer suggesting an *in situ* horizon said (on what grounds we are not told) to date to 'c. 32,100 BP'. The 'face' itself is a natural block of flint through which a natural tubular perforation (tube) runs. The piece measures 105 mm in maximum dimensions, is trapezoidal in shape, and takes the appearance in planform, it has to be said, of an unsuccessfully flaked disc core (see picture). A 74mm long bone splinter was found wedged inside the tube, both of its ends snapped, and was wedged inside the tube by sediment deriving from Layer 7 and by two small flint flakes at one end. Several flakes have been removed from the periphery of the piece - to shape it, according to the authors - including one from the central body of flint through which the tube runs, which the authors take to represent a nose. The overall effect is of a head (somewhat reminiscent in my opinion of John Merrick, the 'elephant man!') with eyes represented by the pro-



The mask of La Roche-Cotard at Langeais in Indre-et-Loire (France). Copyright J-C Marquet

truding ends of the bone splinter and the modified central body representing the nose. The authors understandably point to the flake removals and the fact that the bone splinter has been wedged into the piece as suggesting that it was deliberately modified by European Middle Palaeolithic humans, ie, Neanderthals.

To the authors, therefore, the piece represents a true example of a *pierre figure*, ie, a natural artefact possibly already possessing some resemblance to a human face, which was further modified by fairly simple means to bring this resemblance out. The authors point to the existence among Neanderthals of burial, use of red ochre and other possible symbolic activity (eg, the cupmarks on a limestone block associated with one of the La Ferrassie burials) to suggest that evidence is accumulating that '...the great cultural and spiritual change which would soon provoke the blooming of European figurative art between 30,000 and 11,000 years ago' had begun.

There are, in my opinion, several pros and cons to the argument that this is a real 'face'. As the authors note, a number of unmodified natural flint blocks with tubular perforations were recovered in proximity to the object from Layer 7, as were numerous unretouched flint flakes. This is, of course, not surprising given that the deposit represents a river beach. We can therefore assume parsimoniously that the source of this piece was immediate, and if any deliberate modification occurred it was on site, and probably a relatively brief affair. We might also assume that if the piece had some symbolic 'use life' this was very brief given the nature of the stay at the site. These factors, of course, do not militate against the argument that it is a human representation. They merely inform about its potential nature. The crux of the argument is in the modification, and the likelihood that the bone splinter was deliberately wedged into the tube. We have probably all seen naturally perforated stone nodules on beaches into which flood waters and tides have moved sediments and stones. We are not told, however, whether any of the other perforated nodules from Layer 7 were found to 'contain' small flakes, pebbles or bones, which would weaken the anthropogenic argument. It remains to eliminate this natural process. We cannot ascertain the original dimensions of the bone splinter as it had been snapped at both ends, and we cannot, I assume, rule out the possibil-

ity that it was snapped naturally (or during processing) before or after its insertion into the tube.

If the association of the nodule, bone and flint 'wedges' is, by contrast, a product of human agency, the next task would be to eliminate a more prosaic function. Presumably, analysis of the bone splinter and interior of the tube may inform as to whether the piece was used to create friction, eg, for simple pyrotechnology, or because the stone was intended to be used to shape the bone splinter. The small removals on the periphery of the block are mainly on one edge, and, it may be argued, facilitate access to the tube or at least the passing of the bone splinter to and fro within it. Once these hypotheses are eliminated, the argument for this being representational art will be much stronger.

If it is representational art, the piece certainly does raise fascinating questions. The apparent date of Layer 7, 'c. 32,100 BP' makes it broadly contemporary with the Aurignacian, and certainly very late for Neanderthals in the Loire, during which time full three-dimensional carving of bone and ivory was practised by anatomically modern humans at least elsewhere in Europe. What can we make of this? Two extremes come to mind; either it represents a nascent artistic ability among Neanderthals, or, by contrast, more 'evidence' of the acculturation of Neanderthals by anatomically modern humans. Simple interpretations of this nature, however, may not get us very far in understanding the significance of *pierres figures*. Making the assumption that this is a deliberate representation of a face by a Neanderthal, there are a number of points that can be made which may steer our research agendas in this light. First, natural objects with similarities to *the human form* and no other at present constitute this earliest category of possible art object. Is this any surprise, given the familiarity with the human body that we can probably assume goes back very far into human evolution? As chimpanzees are apparently able to recognise themselves in mirrors we might assume that they have a general concept of *the chimpanzee form*. Does the recognition of such in the odd natural object by humans therefore really tell us very much about cognitive evolution?

A two-stage process might be involved. First is the *recognition* of the similarity of an object to the human form. Secondly follows the simple modification to

*embellish* this. Does the latter imply that a critical cognitive threshold has been crossed? Given the fact that removals have occurred on the piece, we cannot really understand whether the piece did or did not resemble a human face before modification, ie, whether it *suggested* an association to the modifier or 'artist'. If it didn't then the modification to create a resemblance

from scratch is even more remarkable. These issues will have to be addressed. Whatever ongoing analysis will reveal, the piece will no doubt contribute towards the 'modern' behaviour argument. In particular, it should stimulate a mature debate as to *how* art and other modern behaviour evolved. (*more follows*)

## Reference

Marquet, J-C & Lorblanchet, M 2003 A Neanderthal face? The proto-figurine from La Roche-Cotard, Langeais (Indre-et-Loire, France). *Antiquity* 77: 661-70.

## Editor's note

The recent description of a lightly modified quartzite figurine from the Acheulean site of Tan-Tan, Morocco (Bednarik 2003) contributes to the general argument presented here that the human form was the earliest image to be recognised in natural objects and to be represented in the development of art. Pettitt's "possible art object" category could also include a natural dolomite form resembling a headless human with two legs and truncated arms found among Middle Stone Age occupation debris at Mumbwa Caves, Zambia. The 'Venus of Mumbwa' is from deposits dated to the Last Interglacial (~120 ka) (Barham 2000).

Barham, L 2000. *The Middle Stone Age of Zambia, south central Africa*. Bristol: Western Academic & Specialist Press.

Bednarik, RG 2003. A figurine from the African Acheulian. *Current Anthropology* 44(3):405-413.