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Palaeolithic Art in Isolation: The Case of Sicily and Sardinia

Margherita Mussi

INTRODUCTION

The archaeological record of Italy is long and complex, suggesting continuous peopling since the Middle Pleistocene (Mussi 2001; Mussi et al. in press). The evidence of Palaeolithic art, however, is rather restricted: Early Upper Palaeolithic (EUP) art is close to nil, including just a few notched implements; the Middle Upper Palaeolithic (MUP), admittedly, is much richer, with some twenty Gravettian figurines, the largest such sample in Western Europe (Mussi et al. 2000; Mussi 2004); parietal art is also documented at Grotta Paglicci, where painted horses and positive handprints were discovered (Boscato and Palma di Cesnola 2000; Zorzi 1962); when Late Upper Palaeolithic (LUP) lithic industries were produced which belong to the Epigravettian, portable and parietal art is known at a number of sites. In the late 1980s, Zampetti (1987) reviewed twenty-one Epigravettian cave sites, and a single open-air site, all of them with zoomorphic art. Three more have been discovered since: Riparo Dalmeri, Riparo di Villabruna, and Grotta di Settecannelle.

I will examine below the artistic record of Sicily and Sardinia, both of them at the periphery of Italy, which, in turn, is secluded from Europe by the Alps. My aim is to contrast the effects of geographic isolation, with the circulation of people and ideas, if any, as documented by portable and cave art.

I am most grateful to the organizers of the Creswell Conference for inviting me to participate, and allowing the visit to the newly discovered Palaeolithic engravings. Filiberto Scarpelli (Laboratorio di Paletnologia del Dipartimento di Scienze dell’Antichità, Università di Roma ‘La Sapienza’) produced the figures.
SICILY

Sicily, currently an island of 25,700 km$^2$ and the largest in the Mediterranean, lies 140 km from Africa, and a few kilometres off southern Italy. The strait of Messina is 3 to 25 km wide, but is far from easy to cross, because of violent tidal currents, and whirlpool, also known as ‘Charybdis’ by Greeks and Romans. The depth is just 72 m at the Sill of Peloro. Because of intense neotectonic activity, however, any palaeogeographic reconstruction is highly speculative. Analysis of the faunal assemblages, which during oxygen isotope stage (OIS) 2 include a limited number of species, none of which is endemic, suggests that intermittent connection with the mainland possibly existed around the Last Glacial Maximum (Mussi et al. in press). The large mammals, found in varying percentages, are the deer, *Cervus elaphus*, the aurochs, *Bos primigenius*, the small steppe horse, *Equus hydruntinus*, and *Sus scrofa*, the wild boar. Fox, *Vulpes vulpes* and, rarely, Wild Cat, *Felis sylvestris*, are also documented. The earliest dated Epigravettian site of Sicily is Grotta dellı́ Acqua Fitusa, in an inner part of the island (Fig. 10.1): there is no artistic evidence, but a hearth was radiocarbon-dated to 13,760 ± 330 BP (F-26) (Bianchini and Gambassini 1973). Many more dated and undated sites with Late
Epigravettian industries have been discovered (Segre and Vigliardi 1983). This suggests a stable peopling of the island not later than 14,000 bp (uncalibrated).

Engravings were discovered around the middle of last century on the walls of eight caves, which cluster in the north-western part of the island. Engraved blocks also exist at Grotta Giovanna, in the south-east. At two caves, Grotta dei Cervi and at Grotta dell’Addaura, a sizeable number of representations were spotted that will be described in more detail.

Palaeolithic art was first noticed at Grotta dei Cervi in 1950, by P. Graziosi and his collaborators (Graziosi 1962). The cave opens on the islet of Levanzo, in the Egadi archipelago off western Sicily. The arm of the sea, however, is quite shallow, and nowhere deeper than 40 m. The area is much more stable than that of the Strait of Messina, and it is assumed that Levanzo was a promontory of Sicily during the Upper Pleistocene.

Altogether, 33 figures 15–30 cm long were spotted in a dark, inner chamber (Fig. 10.2): these comprise twenty-nine animals and four anthropomorphs, one of them a funny pair of running legs, devoid of any upper body. Most animals are equids (12), bovids (10), and cervids (5), but there is also a felid and an undetermined animal. Graziosi underlined the lively and naturalistic, ‘franco-cantabrian’ style of the engravings. The spatial organization of human and animal figures was later examined in detail by A. Leroi-Gourhan (1972): to him, the cave was a fitting example of the model he was by then describing at Magdalenian and earlier sites of Western Europe: bovids and equids are in the centre of the engraved panels, in dominant numbers (Fig. 10.3), while other animal species, as well as humans, are at the periphery. This was also underlined by D. Zampetti (1987), who further refined the evidence documented at this site. At Levanzo, however, the position held by the common horse in Franco-Cantabria is occupied, instead, by the hydruntine horses, the only equid which ever crossed the Strait of Messina and successfully settled in Sicily.

A clue to the age of the engravings is provided by an excavation made at the entrance of the cave, and in full light (Vigliardi 1982). The lowermost part of the deposit was radiocarbon-dated by different laboratories, which provided slightly contrasting results. The dates, nevertheless, cluster around 11,000 to 10,000 bp (uncalibrated). Higher up in the stratigraphic sequence, in level 3, a stone slab was discovered, with an engraved schematic bovid, stylistically quite different from those of the inner cave (Fig. 10.4). It is generally assumed that the latter are earlier, and possibly predate the human settlement excavated at the mouth of the cave.

Grotta dell’Addaura is a small cave in Monte Pellegrino, of c.6 × 5 × 3 m, in the outskirts of Palermo. On a smooth rock surface, a complex scene is engraved (Fig. 10.5). The panel, approximately 2.5 m long, includes a minimum of sixteen anthropomorphs, 13 to 23 cm in length (Bovio Marconi 1953). Most are males.
Fig. 10.2.  *Grotta dei Cervi at Levanzo: cross-section*

Fig. 10.3.  *Grotta dei Cervi at Levanzo: engraved aurochsen and hydruntine horse*
depicted in lively attitudes: standing, with raised arms, carrying poles (Fig. 10.6). Many are grouped, encircling two superposed individuals, who apparently lay on the ground, the uppermost one having bent legs (Fig. 10.6B). In the lower part of the panel, there are several herbivores, 12 to 37 cm in length: deer, horse, and bovids. The last ones, schematic and square-shaped, are stylistically similar to the aurochs on the slab of Grotta dei Cervi. They are clearly superimposed on the other engravings, which are much more naturalistic. A second similar panel, or maybe a continuation of the previous one, also with anthropomorphs and herbivores, is only partially preserved.

Many anthropomorphs display a bulging cap or hairdo, and the face, which is seen in profile, is pointed or truly elongated, with a beak-like appearance. In some instances, the penis and possibly the scrotum are depicted. Only one creature can be sexed as female, after the shape of the breast seen in profile.
Fig. 10.5. Grotta dell’Addaura: map with the location of the engraved panel, and the trench which was excavated nearby.

Fig. 10.6. Grotta dell’Addaura: the engraved wall, with an anthropomorph with raised arms (A) and the ‘Acrobats’ (B).
She might be pregnant, and she carries a voluminous egg-shaped pack on her back. Extending from the lower abdomen of the two males lying down, a pointed shape, made by three converging lines, has been widely interpreted as an aroused penis (but see below).

Most of the attention has focused on the grouped anthropomorphs, including the central two (Fig. 10.6A). I. Bovio Marconi, when first publishing the engravings in 1953, interpreted the scene as an initiation ceremony, with dancing ithyphallic males and a homosexual intercourse. Alternatively, she suggested acrobatics—hence the nickname of Acrobati dell’Addaura, the ‘Acrobats of Addaura’, by which the scene is commonly referred to in the Italian scientific literature. According to Blanc (1954a, 1954b), and Chiappella (1954), too, it was a depiction of ritual activity, but this would have included the ceremonial killing of the two recumbent individuals: they were supposedly strangled by a rope tightly linking neck to feet, which in turn caused priapism. Graziosi (1973) suggested instead gymnastics, and the use of a protective penis sheath.

Anecdotal interpretation is better avoided in the analysis of this complex and unprecedented panel. The elongated, triangular shapes described at first sight as ‘penises’, arousing a heated debate, are scarcely such, in my own judgement and analysis—if anything, because more ‘penises’ can be seen as protruding from the face of some individuals (Fig. 10.6A, 10.6B). The penis of some more figures is actually represented, as said above, but discreetly, and with a realistic length. On the back of the two ‘Acrobats’, three lines are clearly depicted, which are a continuation of the converging ones protruding from the frontal part of the body (Fig. 10.6B). The recumbent anthropomorphs are better described as crossed by lines.

The corpus of Palaeolithic art, which has greatly expanded since the 1950s, allows for comparisons inside and outside Italy. The peculiar hairstyle or hood is duplicated on a bone engraving from Vado all’Arancio in Tuscany, a Late Epigravettian site for which there is a radiocarbon date of 11,330 ± 50 BP (R-1333) (Minellono 1985–86; Mussi and Zampetti 1997). The very fact of depicting so many anthropomorphs is no longer unique, after discoveries such as La Marche and Gönnersdorf, both of them Magdalenian sites with tens or hundreds of engraved humans (Bosinski 1991; Pales 1976). The theme of the ‘wounded man’ or ‘killed man’ has been described by A. Leroi-Gourhan (1965, 1978), and by J. Clottes and J. Courtin (1992) at several sites, ranging in age from at least 20,000 BP to c.12,000 BP. Within this general group, there are several examples of anthropomorphs whose bodies are crossed by a bundle of

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1 Blanc (1954a: 176) describes the three lines on the back of the upper anthropomorph as ‘poorly rendered feet’ (my translation), but fails to take note of the three lines of the back of the lower individual.
converging or parallel lines, as at Cougnac, Pech-Merle, Grotte Cosquer. I assume that the ‘Acrobats’ are a further example of this theme.

At Grotta dell’Addaura, the archaeological deposit had been wiped out before excavations were undertaken. This is quite unfortunate, because there was evidence that the latter originally covered part of the engravings (Bovio Marconi 1953). In the close vicinity (Fig. 10.5), however, Bovio Marconi excavated a rather disturbed sequence, which included an Epigravettian industry and animal remains, amongst which the hydruntine horse is mentioned. Together with stylistic and thematic comparisons, a further clue to a relative chronology is the rough, square-shaped bovids, superimposed on the ‘Acrobats’ and naturalistic animals: elsewhere, as at Levanzo, they have been dated to the very end of the Upper Pleistocene, and to the early Holocene (Mussi and Zampetti 1997).

**SARDINIA**

The Upper Palaeolithic record of Sardinia is much more elusive than the Sicilian one (Mussi *et al.* in press). The island, of 24,000 km$^2$, lies 120 km west of the Italian peninsula, and 185 km north of Africa. At the Last Glacial Maximum it merged with modern Corsica, and the resulting island was by then the largest in the Mediterranean (Caloi and Malatesta 1974; Fierro *et al.* 1981; Oser *et al.* 1980). The Sardo-Corsican island was severed from peninsular Italy by an arm of the sea, which was everywhere wider than 7 km.

Because of constant insularity, and of the distance from the mainland, during the final Upper Pleistocene the fauna was much more unbalanced than in Sicily, and included exclusively endemic species (Mussi *et al.* in press). The only sizeable terrestrial mammals were *Prolagus sardus*, a lagomorph looking like a short-eared hare; *Megaceroides cazioti*, a cervid the size of a fallow deer; and a little canid, *Cynotherium sardous*.

Direct evidence of human peopling at this time is limited to a fragmentary phalanx from Grotta Corbeddu. It was retrieved by sieving from a deposit which, higher up in the stratigraphic sequence, is radiocarbon-dated between 12,000 and 16,000 ka BP (uncalibrated) (Sondaar *et al.* 1995). No other archaeological remains were found, and criticism of the ‘Upper Palaeolithic’ of Grotta Corbeddu was expressed by D. Vigne (1996). More recently, geomorphological and archaeological investigation in the Campidano plain of south-western Sardinia led to the discovery of a laminar industry within eolian deposits at Santa Maria Is Acquas, next to Sardara (Mussi and Melis 2002). On the surface, Neolithic remains are plentiful. The sands overlying the lithic implements were subsequently dated to 12,000 ± 3,000 BP by optically stimulated luminescence (Mussi *et al.* in press).
It is a unique find, so far unparalleled in the growing corpus of Neolithic and Eneolithic stone figurines of Sardinia. This asymmetrical statuette, with voluminous buttocks and an animal head, has been tentatively attributed to the final Upper Palaeolithic on stylistic grounds (Mussi 2003) (Fig. 10.7). Female figurines, engravings, and pendants, with small breasts, or lacking breasts altogether, and with protruding buttocks which give them a peculiar twisted shape, are known in western and central Europe from a number of Magdalenian sites (Bosinski 1991). The Venus of Macomer fits well into this group. The head, however, is better seen as representing the extinct *Prolagus sardus*. This, in turn, allows comparisons with the therianthropic representations which started to be produced in the EUP. They are well known in the LUP, as at Tolentino (Massi *et al.* 1997), Las Caldas (Corchón Rodríguez 1990), La Madeleine (Delporte 1993).

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

I have described above the meagre evidence from Sardinia, and two selected cases from the much more conspicuous Sicilian record. More can be added, as far as Sicily is concerned, such as a discussion of the lively, naturalistic aurochsen and hydruntine horses engraved on the walls of Grotta Niscemi, close to Grotta dell’Addaura: they duplicate, if in a simplified way, the classic scheme of *Grotta dei Cervi at Levanzo.* Or the very characteristic Azilian pebbles, also discovered at *Levanzo,* but out of context, which are a further, direct link to peninsular Italy and to western continental Europe (Graziosi 1973; Mussi and Zampetti 1997). The Sicilian sites, furthermore, deserve much more than a sketchy description, which scarcely takes into account different phases and superposition of engravings, not to mention the possible use of red painting at *Levanzo.*

Some points, however, have been illustrated: there is an adaptation to insular environments, and substitutes are found for animals, such as the common horse, which failed to cross the straits; endemic species, such as *Prolagus sardus,* also enter the record. Distance and geographical barriers, however, did not impinge significantly upon the circulation of people and ideas. Themes and stylistic aspects that developed on the mainland are duplicated on remote islands. Large social gatherings, which counteracted isolation and allowed the exchange of people, items, and ideas, are actually suggested by the very scene depicted at Grotta dell’Addaura: whatever the

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6 Therianthropic refers to male half-human, half-animal figures. Female figures are better described as theriogynous.
specific, ceremonial activities and/or creatures involved, much more than a
dozen adult males are represented. This, in turn, implies experience of
gatherings where several local bands met. As said elsewhere, the 25,000 km\(^2\)
or so of Sicily, at a density of 0.02 inhabitants per km\(^2\), which is perfectly
reasonable for hunter-gatherers, corresponds to an overall population in the
range of 500 inhabitants (Mussi 2001: 289) that is, to a self-sustainable human
group from a demographic viewpoint (Wobst 1974, 1976).

The development of nautical skills in the late Upper Pleistocene of the
Mediterranean has been demonstrated by C. Perlès (1979). Artistic and arch-
eaological evidence from the two major islands points to an active network of
information exchange and, in the case of Sicily, to a stable population.

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\(^7\) Sets of lines, parallel to shapes in the foreground, suggest that a second or a third individual
might be represented behind some anthropomorphs. This is the case, most notably, of the
‘Acrobats’. Preservation is also incomplete, and animal as well as anthropomorphic outlines have
partially or totally disappeared.


The Creswell Crags project is at the heart of regeneration in this former rural coalfield area. Indeed, Jon Humble (English Heritage 2003) has described the project in glowing terms as, ‘quite possibly the best and most successful example of an archaeology-led project for social and economic regeneration anywhere in the UK’. The organizers of the conference recognized the importance of the art to the local community and, with this in mind, the conference was held in the local community centre and a series of evening lectures were arranged, aimed specifically at a public audience. These lectures were to explain the work of Palaeolithic archaeologists, place the Creswell art in the wider context of prehistoric cave art around the world, and explain how and what such art might tell us about our Palaeolithic predecessors. It was a clear aim of the conference that the importance of the Creswell engravings should not be lost to obscure academic literature.

The early registration for the conference gave an idea of the wide range of people who were to attend the conference. The Guardian newspaper had run an article that day entitled ‘Dancing Girls and the Merry Magdalenian’ and the mood at registration was almost festive as delegates caught up with colleagues and eagerly enquired of each other as to who had already seen the art. As they registered, delegates were invited to sign up for cave tours; little encouragement was needed. Later, conference delegates were joined by local people keen to attend the first public lecture. All generations of the Creswell community were represented in the audience, from the young to the very old, all eager to learn more about the art that had put their community in the news. Several people recounted stories of their childhood games in and around the caves of the Crags. The details of the lectures given at the conference can be read in the papers of this volume, so here we would like rather to recount something of the flavour of the conference, the impressions of those who attended and some of the discussions that arose from the lectures.

THE CONFERENCE: SOME THEMES

The discovery of the art in April 2003 had captured the imagination of academics and public alike and the conference gave the audience the opportunity to hear first-hand accounts of the discovery. Paul Bahn’s vivid account of the discovery and the team’s elation at their success amply conveyed the passion and enthusiasm of the team. For most of the delegates the first time that they had the opportunity to see the art in any detail was the presentation of Sergio Ripoll and Francisco Muñoz. Preliminary reports and
pictures had been only a taster of the images that filled the screen, increasing the sense of anticipation for the cave tours. Well illustrated, vibrant lectures, open discussions, and informal chats, along with the cave tours all contributed to a feeling of involvement sometimes lacking at conferences. This sense of involvement was not limited to the conference delegates. During the last afternoon of the conference Sergio Ripoll and Francisco Muñoz captured images of art that had been spotted during the tours of the cave. After the last public lecture, the laptop was hurriedly set up to show the latest discoveries and the audience was left in little doubt that they were caught up in the middle of one of the most exciting and important discoveries in British Palaeolithic archaeology.

For many at the conference the tours of the cave were the high point of the weekend. Here was the opportunity to view at first hand something that for most would usually be known only from journals and textbooks. Despite the unfavourable weather the first cave tours of the conference were eagerly awaited. A minibus took delegates on the scenic journey from the hall to the Creswell Crags visitor centre. As delegates returned to the hall, somewhat bedraggled but still full of enthusiasm, animated discussions soon began to take place. Throughout the weekend the tours of the cave proved wildly popular and each group tried to linger a little longer, exclaiming over the art already discovered and searching in the hope of new images.

The combination of thought-provoking lectures and the unique opportunity to view Palaeolithic cave art set the stage for one of the key discussions of the conference: ‘How should we interpret what we see?’ The interpretation of Palaeolithic art is a controversial issue, with some cave art specialists holding somewhat entrenched views of how art should be viewed and interpreted. The discovery of parietal art in a new area of the Pleistocene world provided the opportunity to consider the issue of interpretation anew and this was addressed by several of the speakers at the conference.

Derek Yalden’s presentation on zoological perspectives raised important questions about interpreting Palaeolithic art and created lively debate concerning if and how it is possible to understand the relationship between Palaeolithic art and the artist’s environment. This had particular relevance to the Creswell art, as the interpretation of the large engraving near the mouth of Church Hole as an ibex was brought into doubt, due to the lack of evidence of ibex from Britain during this period (although this may be a taphonomic problem rather than a palaeontological reality). If it is sometimes difficult to identify animals from engravings, it is even more difficult to extract the meaning from Palaeolithic art. Should Palaeolithic art be viewed as an accurate depiction of the artist’s world or a medium through which people interpreted and made sense of their environment? Should we expect art to
represent abundant species or scarce species, or perhaps even those species known to the artist only through some collective memory? If we are to view Creswell in its total European context then should we worry that certain animals were not present in the immediate environment? During the discussion Sergio Ripoll conceded that the engraving might not represent an ibex after all and went as far as to revise the drawings displayed on the hall’s wall. Indeed, the engraving is now believed by the team to represent a red deer stag, given the discovery of badly eroded antler tines on what was originally interpreted as a horn.

Paul Pettitt examined some of the more enigmatic figures of the cave by comparing them with the art of the German Magdalenian. He compared the Creswell bird panel at the rear of Church Hole with art from the German Magdalenian sites of Gönnersdorf and Andernach, suggesting that the Creswell ‘long-necked birds’ are in fact highly stylized depictions of the female form found across the Magdalenian world. The theme of Palaeolithic artistic ‘tradition’ was also highlighted by Margherita Mussi’s examination of late Upper Palaeolithic art of Sicily and Sardinia. Drawing upon examples of portable art from Sicily (from the sites of Grotta di Levanzo and Grotta dell’Addaura), and through comparison with the Venus of Macomer, a contemporary piece from Sardinia, she argued that while large geographical areas (in this case, across the sea) were linked through a common symbolism and set of beliefs, there was also clear evidence for the creation of regional symbolism representative of the particular local environments of the two islands.

Speaking in place of Michel Lorblanchet, Paul Bahn offered another way of looking at the art—through the action of its creation. Lorblanchet is world famous for his experimental work and his recreations of cave paintings. Bahn discussed Lorblanchet’s work and showed how by placing the artist at the centre of our discussions of Palaeolithic art we are able to catch a glimpse of how Palaeolithic people viewed their world. Lorblanchet has suggested that the oral spray-painting that is so key to Palaeolithic parietal art may have a spiritual dimension, a projection of the artist onto the wall and into the subject of their painting. The positioning of the art and its accessibility or otherwise may give some clue to interpretation. The most enigmatic figures discovered so far are located in the narrow phreatic tube to the rear of the cave mouth (Pettitt 2003) rather than in the wide cave entrance. Whilst the art at the front of the cave is best viewed in bright daylight these enigmatic figures would have always been in the cave’s dark, restricted interior.
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