



Book Reviews

IMAGES OF THE ICE AGE BY PAUL G. BAHN

Oxford University Press, 2016. 496 pp, 314 figs (including many col photographs), 4 maps, ISBN 978-0-19-968600-1 (hb) £30.00

This represents the third edition of a book Dr Paul Bahn originally issued in collaboration with the late Jean Vertut (who was the acknowledged leading photographer of Ice Age art) in 1988. Since that time our knowledge of the subject has been much advanced with the discovery of many new sites and the development of recording and analytical techniques; thus the book has been updated and expanded

In particular, many previously unannounced open-air rock art sites from around the world have now been recognized to the extent that it has been said elsewhere that the only countries where some form of rock art (but not necessarily dating from the Ice Age) has not yet been found are Holland and, perhaps surprisingly, Poland. These open-air sites together with the recent discoveries of several marvellously decorated caves in the traditional regions of Palaeolithic art – France and Spain – have much increased the scope of the study.

The subject-matter of Ice Age art is pre-eminently of animals, but there are also many depictions of human beings and very many so-called 'signs' and marks of unknown meaning. This art is engraved or painted on suitable rock surfaces of caves or open-air sites and, very occasionally, clay sculptures have also survived. Many examples of so-called 'mobile' or portable art on bone, antler or stone - with much the same subject-matter as the cave and rock art - are known but given the many millennia since the last Ice Age, works on perishable materials such as wood or textiles almost never survive. Some appropriately dated small baked-clay figurines of humans and animals also exist but are very few.

The art ranges from the very large (measured in metres) and publicly visible, to the tiny, hidden and deliberately arcane. The images are sometimes obvious and easily read but are often obscure, confusing and hardly legible. The geographic spread of the art is global with finds dated to the Pleistocene from all the inhabited continents.

Bahn's new survey covers the nineteenth century discovery and slow acceptance by the scientific community of the authentic antiquity of the art, together with its recording, dating, interpretation, conservation and so on. His many relevant publications over the past forty years, often in collaboration with other specialists, allow him to refer authoritatively to more detailed discussions than are possible in a popular book; and his notes and references are extensive and useful. As may be expected, the photos and other illustrations are appropriate to the text and, frequently, beautiful.

As already said, the most striking development since the publication of the first edition of this book has been the discovery and recognition of a great deal of rock art in the open air. Bahn mentions examples – mostly, but not entirely, of animal images – in Siberia, Spain, Portugal, Germany and Egypt among other places. He likens the acceptance of these images as Palaeolithic, mainly on stylistic grounds together with available circumstantial evidence, to the authentication of the cave art at the start of the twentieth century. It had been understood at that

time by Emile Cartailhac, Henri Breuil et al that much Ice Age art must have been produced outside of the caves but little evidence had been forthcoming then. As Bahn remarks, “In reality we have no idea how important or frequent the decoration of caves was...but it is extremely probable that the vast majority of that period’s rock art was produced in the open air... It was by no means limited to the dark, mysterious caves – they are merely the places where it has been best preserved.” (p 216).

Images of the Ice Age has chapters on the problems of discriminating what was actually depicted in the caves and on the rock surfaces, how to arrive at dates for the depictions, and the theories about what it all might mean. Bahn does not dwell on his own team’s discovery of Palaeolithic parietal art in Church Hole , Creswell Crags on the Derbyshire-Nottinghamshire border, which could exemplify these topics – an engraving, now described as an ibis, was initially assumed to be part of some other engraved animal; or, what is now considered an image of a bison, but was formerly thought to be an aurochs; and so on.

In his review of the various theories regarding the making and meaning(s) of the artwork, Bahn comes out very strongly against any blanket approach for the entire corpus. He heartily condemns the ‘shamanistic’ explanations for the cave art, despite their great popularity in some circles over the last generation, and this is because there is almost no evidence of any kind to support such speculations.

Another trend in recent years is a greater awareness of the need to conserve the Ice Age art and the context in which it is found. The famous beautifully decorated caves such as Lascaux, Altamira and Niaux and many others are now either closed to the public or have restrictions on the numbers of visitors. To this end excellent replicas of some sites have been constructed either in the near vicinity of the originals or even on other continents (eg, the Altamira facsimile in Japan). And many sites such as the Coa Valley open-air museum in Portugal are now protected by national or international monument status.

Bahn is a very well informed and convincing prehistorian, and this book is full of interest, even jokes (I’ve never seen so many well placed exclamation marks). He is very judicious in his assessment of the work of others, balanced in his criticisms and generous in his praises. He says in the preface, “The most important event since the last edition has been the appearance of a volume in which Michel Lorblanchet has presented much of his outstanding work in the Quercy caves. ...this book is a treasure-house of knowledge and insights into the whole phenomenon of Ice Age art...at last we have a successor to the monographs of Breuil and Leroi-Gourhan.” And Paul Bahn’s book is not so bad either!

References

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Review submitted: September 2016

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