

Becoming Human: Innovation in Prehistoric Material and Spiritual Culture

Colin Renfrew and Iain Morley (eds.)

Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 282 pp. (paperback), \$29.99.

ISBN-13: 9780521734660.

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A book with 'innovation' in the title and a picture of beautiful Chauvet Cave rhinoceroses on the front cover is instantly appealing to anyone interested in cognitive evolution, cave art, or the origins of modernity. Yet the title is broader than the contents of this book. The cover image more accurately sums up the main focus of this edited volume—the meaning of Franco-Cantabrian cave art.

This book is not a reference guide, nor a collection of state-of-the-art discoveries, nor an exploration into theology. Rather it is a conference proceedings resulting from a unique meeting held in 2004 at Les Eyzies, where theologians and archaeologists discussed the origins of religion. All of the contributors to *Becoming Human* are illustrious, being either Professors or Directors of something, with the exception of the first editor's wife and co-editor. Fortunately for the editors, the contributors to the volume all follow the key aims of the Les Eyzies conference, which were, according to Professor Renfrew (pp. 2–3), "to consider the early emergence of the various qualities which we may consider particularly human" and to find "at what point in the archaeological record [we can] document the emergence of ritual, and of what we might regard as religious behaviour".

The crossover between theology and archaeology was to me a completely novel idea and very intriguing, but disappointingly it hardly appears in this collection of papers. Sadly, there is no evidence of what were surely fascinating discussions at the Les Eyzies symposium. All but two chapters appear to have been written before the conference. Exceptions are the contributions by d'Errico and van Huyssteen. They both clearly address the inter-disciplinary dialogue between human origins and theology, or lack thereof. But while d'Errico only mentions it in his introduction, van Huyssteen sustains a discussion of it throughout his paper, in effect making it a central focus of his chapter. More predictably, the other authors just repeat the usual data and the views we are already familiar with from their journal articles. They are reluctant, or perhaps unable, to engage with the idea of bringing academic theology into prehistory.

Two chapters stand out—Jane Renfrew and J. Wentzel van Huyssteen. They are true gems which alone make the book worth buying. Jane Renfrew was an unknown author to me in the area of hominid cognition, but she gives a fascinating tour of rare finds supporting the case for Neanderthal symbolism, highlighting details that readers might

have neglected until now. For example, one of the child burials at La Ferrassie was covered with a cupmarked stone (p. 52). Her references are a useful starting point for people working on Neanderthal cognition. The chapter by van Huyssteen delves into the gulf that lies between theology and the "sciences" (represented by archaeology and paleoanthropology in this case). It shows that this author sees both sides of the divide and tries very concretely to bring the two approaches together. This chapter would make thought-provoking reading for scholars and laypersons of all areas, as it is accessible and targeted to theologians, archaeologists, and paleoanthropologists.

Anthropologists might be especially interested in a common strand running through the book which is the inclusion of ethnographic examples. Some of these are noteworthy, such as the universality of music in human rituals, mentioned in Morley's chapter, or the taboos against images in many world religions, as Ward explains. The paper by Mellars is a nice blend of ethnographic and archaeological data.

The authors of *Becoming Human* seem unified in the belief that the Upper Paleolithic marked an important turning point in human evolution, whether it was cultural/mental (e.g., Colin Renfrew, Donald) or physical/biological (e.g., Mithen, de Lumley). As Renfrew proposes in his Introduction chapter, the origins of spirituality can certainly be found in the "something more" that comes with the Upper Paleolithic (p. 3). In this book a large focus of many authors is on symbolism, and language to a lesser extent. Although symbolism was not explicitly agreed upon as a key indicator of the "something more," I suspect this choice relates to the lack of discussion about the definition of the subject of interest, if it is "religion" or "spiritual culture." Most chapters begin with the author introducing his or her definition of religion—Renfrew, Taçon, d'Errico, Mithen, Lewis-Williams, Morley, and Conkey all give different definitions. The reader is left wondering why, in the presence of at least two professors of theology, these archaeologists have been left to grope for definitions of religion. One is astonished that the book did not begin with the chapters of the theologians, who should be the best placed to provide authoritative definitions of religion and spirituality. Reading the book in the order it is presented, one wonders throughout the whole book what the theologians have to say. It seems quite inappropriate that the theology professors' contributions were left to the very end of the book,

in a separate section, almost as a post-script. Van Huyss-teen comes the closest to defining the “something more” with his nicely encapsulating phrase “human mental life includes biologically unprecedented ways of experiencing and understanding the world” (p. 244).

Despite the common goal of all authors, a wide range of views is evident. This reflects the ongoing debates among paleoanthropologists over the tempo and mode of the evolution of modern human behavior. Some authors in this book favor a gradual emergence along the hominin lineages of symbolism or spiritualism, followed by an explosion with the appearance of *Homo sapiens* (e.g., Renfrew, de Lumley, Taçon, d’Errico). Others argue for a sudden burst of symbolism in *Homo sapiens* preceded by nothing in previous species (e.g., Henshilwood, Mithen), while a few do not mention a “revolution” at all (e.g., Jane Renfrew, Donald, Morley). I do not dare to imagine how such starkly contrasting ideas could have clashed together at the symposium; for instance, Jane Renfrew presents many pieces of solid evidence to argue for symbolism in Neanderthals, but d’Errico then proceeds to criticize and discard most of her data. Such contradictory arguments will be confusing to a reader from theology. For that reason I would only recommend this book to the bravest of theologians who are specifically interested in human evolution. Still, this collection of divergent ideas can only enrich paleoanthropology students, because here is a rare volume where opposite points of view are printed side by side.

Many researchers are determined to show that the origins of humanity lie in their own archaeological site, artifacts, fossils, or practices. I regret that this includes some authors in *Becoming Human*. Probably because of this, the contributors to this volume tend to focus on the geographical area which is their specialty. This is not necessarily a bad thing, however; Paul Taçon’s expertise with the Australian record is welcome and refreshing. Similarly, the reader benefits from Jean Clottes’s vast knowledge of southern French cave art, such as his example of a hand stencil in Gargas of “a baby’s hand held at the wrist by an adult” (p. 197).

Becoming Human will probably find its best use as a source of discussion topics for teaching seminars. These can extend beyond the reach of the book and can be interesting to confront with other areas of research. For exam-

ple, group dynamics figures prominently in some chapters. The idea that spirituality must have emerged with a ratcheting effect because it is too complex to be a single person’s invention is a key point of Henshilwood. Mellars suggests that population pressure led to territoriality, which stimulated identity marking among groups. Similarly, Morley proposes that people feel closer to each other when they have shared interpretations of music and ritual. In the same vein, Donald reasons that such a degree of cognitive unity as evidenced by the long time span of Franco-Cantabrian cave art can only be maintained by a religion of some sort.

The editors were correct to put the mesmerizing photograph of “Excalibur,” the rose-colored handaxe from Atapuerca, on the first page of 24 fabulous color plates which definitely add to the book’s value. The excellent quality of the book’s visual aspect, layout, and images is marred by a few typographical errors—perhaps too many to be overlooked in certain chapters. The figure numbers in Clottes’s paper are all offset by one, between pages 202 and 204. A reference is frustratingly missing from Henshilwood’s paper (Pearce 2002 on p. 35). Some text could have been improved by more rigorous peer-review, such as the comment by Lewis-Williams who refers to “younger researchers today” (p. 137) who spent their youth in the 1960s—these people would be at least 55 years old now! Another editorial oversight is the “big men” phrase used by Mellars (p. 224), which is likely to be considered sexist by some. A more shocking example is Ward’s assertion that “evolutionary biologists currently think that all members of the species *Homo sapiens* derive from just a few, perhaps even two, individuals who lived on the African savannah” (p. 254)—the editors should not have let such a sentence pass. In de Lumley’s chapter, some important sites with hearths dated to 400 kya or earlier are neglected, namely Beeches Pit in the UK and Gesher Benot Ya’aqov in Israel.

Overall, *Becoming Human* is a collection of well-written, thoughtful and thought-provoking papers with many good references for students and researchers to follow up. Despite having no abstracts, most of the chapters have a good introduction with a summary paragraph. The ordering of chapters in the book is probably not important; the reader can easily delve into them separately. In fact, I would highly recommend reading the last two chapters first.