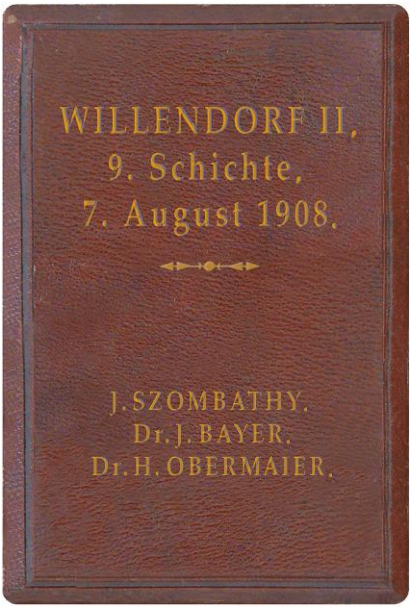
Contents

Veiled in Silence



A copy of the leather-bound box in which the Venus of Willendorf was kept for almost 100 years.

Found on a sunny day on 7th August, 1908,[1] the Venus of Willendorf is one of the most well-known sculptures in the world. Yet she is also one of the most enigmatic. As if anticipating this, after briefly seeing the light of day in 1908, she was enclosed in a specially made box of leather and velvet and consigned to the darkness of a safe in the Museum of Natural History in Vienna. On the box, the designation "Willendorf II" refers to the archaeological site in Willendorf

[1] Angeli, 1989, p. 40-42, Antl-Weiser, 2008, p. 64-82

where the figurine was found, while "Schichte 9" indicates that it was found in the ninth level of excavation. Josef Szombathy was director of the Prehistoric Department in the Natural History Museum of Vienna and it was he who initiated the excavation, while Josef Bayer and Hugo Obermaier were the on-site managers. Where Obermaier was responsible for the technical side of the excavation, Bayer organised the hiring and paying of the workers.[2] Returned to the darkness from whence she had only recently emerged, throughout the twentieth century, the fame of the Venus of Willendorf was based on replicas, drawings and photographic images and it was not until the hundredth anniversary of her being found, that the original was released from confinement and presented to the world at large.

Regardless of how she is seen and with what she is associated, anyone seeing the figure in the round, must concede that the forms have been rendered with skill, care and delicacy. The feet, despite dissolving into nothing at the ankles, do not strike the viewer as being absent. Rather they have been hinted at and that is enough. Likewise, the features of the blank face are not missing as such but rather it is as if the artist has decided to show the face as a mirror so as to ask or say something about womanhood and the human condition. The detailed rendition of what is generally assumed to be hair makes it clear that from a technical point of view, the artist could have shown facial features had he or she wanted to. Indeed everything about the composition of the figure and its execution indicate that this was a highly sophisticated piece, made by someone with a clear idea of what they wanted to convey and a clear conception of how, in formal terms, this was to be achieved.

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[2] Antl-Weiser, 2008, p. 50-51

A copy of the Venus of Willendorf. Original: Gravettian, oolitic limestone, H. 11 cm, Natural History Museum, Vienna.

The darkness in which the Venus was confined for almost a hundred years is echoed by a metaphorical darkness concerning her origins, meaning and function. Lying behind this are the obvious difficulties of how anything can be said about a piece of stone that dates from an age before writing. This is then followed by a concatenation of methodological difficulties. These begin with the fact during the nineteenth century, the attitude was that there should be a barrier that separated "primitive man" from his civilised and superior counterparts in the present. This took the form of assuming that during the Upper Palaeolithic, modern humans were intellectually incapable of postulating that there might be an afterlife. Accordingly they were held to have had no conception of the religious and when skeletons were found that were indicative of a deliberate burial context, with attendant after-life beliefs, great lengths were gone to, either to deny such an interpretation or to shift the dating to a later era.[3] Although this attitude of adamant denial soon faded, there remained the fact when the Venus was found, archaeology was still in its infancy and it was only slowly that techniques were developed which enabled the 25,000 years of the period known as the Upper Palaeolithic, to be divided into different ages, during which different cultures were diagnosed as being predominant. The immediate problems of a genuinely scientific approach to prehistory were thus those of establishing a chronology. Accordingly, despite a plethora of unanswered questions, there was little that could be said about the Venus of Willendorf apart from conjectures concerning her age. In the meantime however, all this has changed.

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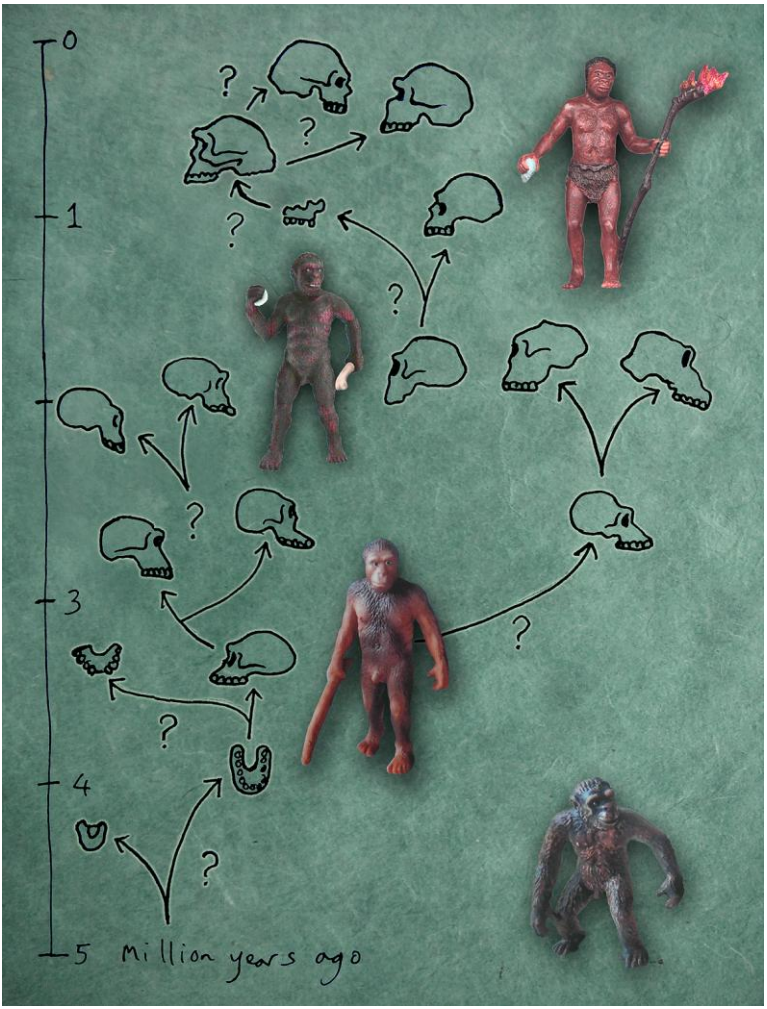
[3] Wüller, 1998, p. 14

In the Beginning

Some twenty million years ago the first walking apes evolved. Although they could walk, these apes lived most of their lives in trees and were correspondingly adapted. But then, seven million years ago, climatic changes caused the rain forests in Africa to recede. This forced the apes to descend from the trees and seek new ways of life on the vast tracts of open landscape known as the savannah. For their lives in the trees, apes had developed broad shoulders, long arms and short legs so that they could swing from branch to branch without having to touch the ground. Yet in the savannah, these adaptions were no longer required and it was advantageous to walk upright.[4] This raised the head and eyes up to a level that exceeded the tall grasses and so facilitated the detection of danger. In the process of adapting to life on the ground, the Australopithecines, the first of the new primates with much improved upright locomotion, developed shorter arms and had a shorter upper body. Soon after, the Australopithecines were followed by *Homo habilis*. With *Homo habilis*, or "handy-man" a period known as the Palaeolithic begins. Named after the combination of Greek words, "palaeo" which means "old" and "lithos" which means "stone" (παλαεο, λιθηος), the "Old Stone Age" is divided into Lower, Middle and Upper periods. The Palaeolithic is the age in history that preceded farming, when our ancestors lived semi-nomadically and made tools out of stone. The tools made by *Homo habilis* consisted of flint pebbles that were knapped in half so as to expose an inner-face. From the inner

[4] Tomkins, 1998, p. 65



The first walking ape, *Dryopithecus* (bottom right), evolved some 20 million years ago. 17 million years later the Dryopithecines were followed by the Australopithecines, *Homo habilis* and *Homo erectus* and a host of other relatives. After Tattersall, 2000, p. 38-44.

Like *Homo habilis*, *Homo erectus* was a scavenger and used hand axes for butchering meat found as left-overs. This is confirmed by marks found on fossilised bones.[5] Bifaces were made in the immediate vicinity of carcasses and it is reckoned that *Homo erectus* could make a biface in five minutes.[6] To achieve this degree of proficiency in making hand axes, a modern human should reckon with a two-week learning curve. Whilst competently made and often exhibiting strikingly elegant forms of symmetry,[7] it is possible that at the beginning of his time on Earth, *Homo erectus* made hand axes without higher-order consciousness. On this view, the reasons for ascribing higher-order consciousness to *Homo erectus* are not so much his tool-making abilities as the fact that he was the first hominoid to tame and use fire. Fire was most likely used both for warmth and for scaring predators away, with this latter suggesting an ability to follow intentionality. Also suggesting that *Homo erectus* had higher-order consciousness is the fact that he was able to successfully adapt to various conditions in various parts of the world. Showing that *Homo erectus* had a very definite limit in following orders of intentionality, is the fact that in selecting stone, he consistently used low-grade material that was immediately at hand and ignored better quality material that was further away.[8] This implies that he was unable to abstract and see that using better quality material would result in axes that lasted longer and which would thus save time. Following an analysis of tool-use and tool-making that was conducted with the aim of assessing *Homo erectus'* ability to follow intentional-

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[5] Leakey, 1994/1999, p. 100-104, Tomkins, 1998, p. 96

[6] Ibid.

[7] Cole, in: Coward *et alii*, 2015, p. 247

[8] White, 1995, p. 14

ity, it is reckoned that he will have been able to follow two orders of intentionality and this at best.[9] For *Homo erectus*, tools were simply tools. Although they had purposes, they had no social significance and did not symbolise other, more abstract concepts.[10] What enabled *Homo erectus* to be so adept at making bifaces and possibly to tame fire, was a high level of "mimic-culture".[11] Mimic-culture is when we swim, ride bicycles and do other such tasks without thinking about them and it is from *Homo erectus* that we have the capacity to learn complex skills in this way. In the case of making stone axes, this resulted in a high degree of technical skill without there necessarily being a precisely entertained inner template of what was being aimed at.

Where *Homo erectus* made one biface from one flint nodule, the Neanderthals, *Homo neanderthalensis,* used a much more efficient and precise technology. This change is one of the features that characterises the changeover from the Lower Palaeolithic to the Middle Palaeolithic. After working a nodule into a core, Neanderthals then knapped blades away from the core as and when required. These were either used as scrapers or were hafted onto a stick with leather thongs so as to make a spear. Here again, the simplicity is deceptive and there are various abstraction processes going on. Apart from the abstractions involved in the idea of using cores, the shaft must also be prepared and the leather cured before it is cut into strips. That Neanderthals used spears to hunt, constitutes in itself evidence of a more advanced ability to follow intentionality than that possessed by *Homo erectus*. This is because in order to hunt successfully, one must be able to

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[9] Cole, in: Coward *et alii*, 2015, p. 256-257

[10] Ibid., p. 257

[11] Donald, 1991, p. 169-177

Life during the Ice Age

Having followed the River Danube up from the Balkans, around 40.000 years ago, the Aurignacians then spread from Central Europe out towards the North, East and West and soon covered the whole peninsular. After Reich, 2018, p. 88.

In Europe, modern human behaviour does not appear in the archaeological record until some 40,000 years ago. The culture which ushered in this seminal transition, is known as the "Aurignacian". Named after a cave in France, this was where artefacts made by early modern humans with modern human behaviour were first found. Genetic analysis, supported by archaeological artefacts and sites, enables the Aurignacian and its coming into being to be reconstructed as a wave of Basal Eurasians moving from the Middle East into

the Balkans. There, they then followed the River Danube upstream and arriving in Central Europe, from there then spread out in all directions. The landscape at that time is envisaged as consisting of open plains of tundra, with mixtures of grasses, sedges and wormwood plants. Devoid of trees, the exposed hills and open plains will have been home to a variety of animals that included the woolly mammoth, the cave bear, cave lions, wild horses, wolves, wolverines, bison, deer, aurochs, the woolly hippopotamus, hyenas, giant deer, saigan antelopes, ground-squirrels and Arctic grouse. The climate will have been cold, dry and windy, with temperatures in summer approaching 15°C.[12]

During the Ice Age, models postulate that human beings lived together in groups or "bands". These were composed of hunter-gatherers who were spread out according to the capacity of the land to sustain animals and provide food. Bands are envisaged as numbering between 20 and 70 people.[13] This is based on the consideration that where an individual alone in the wilderness seldom survives for longer than a year, a group of five people will be capable of surviving for about thirty years. Meanwhile a group of 25 people is considered to have a good chance of surviving for some 500 years.[14] These considerations are countered by the fact that in groups with more than 100 members, social frictions invariably arise that lead to large groups having to split into smaller groups.[15] During the Upper Palaeolithic, the area required for a group of 50 people in a relatively lush area such as the South of France or Spain, is reckoned to have been in the

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12 Liljegren, in: Burenhult, 2000, p. 86-87

13 Burenhult, 2000, p. 93

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

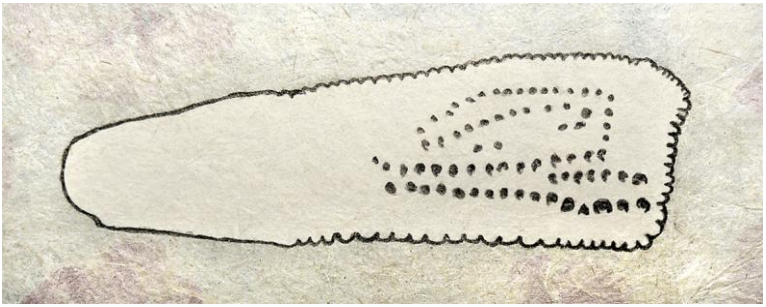
Measuring Time

During the Upper Palaeolithic, the ability of semi-nomadic groups of hunter-gatherers to orientate themselves in time will have been essential to survival. Knowledge that certain animals can be hunted at particular places and at certain times of year is of little use if one is not sure of where one is in the yearly cycle. During the spring, summer and autumn, the changing flora will have provided plenty of clues as to when seasonal changes would take place. Yet during the winter, there will have been long periods when no such signs were available. The moon however, which waxes and wanes over a period of 29.5 days, will have provided a rough and ready means of measuring out the winter months and numerous artefacts have been found that can convincingly be interpreted as moon calendars.[16] These are inscribed with marks which, with one mark representing one day, can be interpreted as recording the waxing and waning of the moon. As there are just over twelve lunar cycles in a solar year, some years will have consisted of eleven moons whilst others will have consisted of thirteen moons.[17] Whilst not as dependable as the solar calendar, lunar calendars will have provided a much needed means of temporal orientation and over time will have always balanced out. With a clear grasp as to how much longer a winter can be expected to last, important factors such as the movements of migrating animals and the appearance of seasonal flora, can be better predicted. Among the Aurignacian moon calendars that have been identified, there is a bone plaque from Abri Blachard in the

[16] Marshack, 1972/1991

[17] Ibid., p. 143

Dordogne region of France.[18] When the plaque was examined with a microscope, it was found that the marks were made so as to record and visually reflect the different phases of the waxing and waning moon.



A drawing of the bone plaque from Abri Blachard. Original: Aurignacian, mammoth ivory, L. 10 cm, Musée d'Archéologie Nationale, Saint-Germain-en-Laye, Paris.

This was done using 24 changes of point and stroke in a way that resulted in a series of 69 marks. Examining the marks and notches engraved around the edge of the artefact in the same way, revealed a further 63 marks. On the other side of the plaque, an additional forty marks brought the total up to 172, which is very close to 177 or 29.5 x 6. This suggests that the calendar documents a period of approximatly six months, with the decision to mark first the upper face and then proceed around the edge before turning the plaque over, possibly being associated with a change of season.

Similar to the plaque found at Abri Blachard, is a plaque, from Abri Lartet in the Gorge d'Enfer which is also in the Dordogne. This too can be interpreted as a moon calendar

[18] Ibid., p. 44-49

Not Completely Naked

After being found, the Venus of Willendorf was taken to the rooms of the village inn where the archaeologists conducting the excavation lived and where, at the end of the day, they wrote up their reports.[19] It was here that the Venus was washed and the full extent of the masterful execution became apparent. Washing also revealed that the figurine was adorned with zigzag bracelets on each arm. This is a feature that occurs on the marl Venus of Kostienki I, who in addition, is depicted with a chest adornment and a neckpiece.

A copy of the marl Venus of Kostienki I with lingerie and bracelets. The head was deliberately broken off before burial. Original: Gravettian, limestone, H. 11.4 cm, The State Hermitage, St. Petersburg.

[19] Antl-Weiser, in: Lammerhuber, Kern & Antl-Weiser, 2008, p. 14 & 30

On closer examination, such adornments can be seen on numerous other Venus figurines from the Gravette. These it was assumed, represented adornments made of leather but it is now acknowledged that they may well represent lingerie made from woven and twinned plant fibre.[20] Aware of the differences in the materials that they were representing, care was taken by the makers to use different techniques when depicting different kinds of woven and plaited materials.

A copy of Venus 3 of Kostienki I. Original: Gravettian, mammoth ivory, H. 11.2 cm, The State Hermitage, St. Petersburg.

[20] Marshack, 1991, p. 378, Marshack, in: Lawson, 1991, p. 22, Soffer, Adovasio & Hyland, 2000

A clay fragment from Pavlov, shows a female torso adorned with a belt. This has been carefully depicted using a technique that suggests that it was either plaited or twined.[21] Archaeologists estimate that in the average culture, the ratio of perishable to durable products, is in the order of 20:1 and during the Gravette it can be assumed that this will have also been the case.[22] There is thus a strong argument that not only are the Venus of Willendorf's bracelets woven but that her ornate hair-do is in fact really a radially woven cap.[23] Other Gravettian Venus figurines appear to be wearing such caps and one can suggest that during the Gravette women kept their hair contained within such caps. From the Upper Palaeolithic not a single comb has been found and as the only way of cutting hair will have been with flint blades, it would seem that hair must have been a matted, tangled affair which, to make themselves more attractive, women kept under cover.

In the Pavlov Hills, of the numerous clay fragments that were accidentally formed, 79 pieces bear impressions made by fabric and other woven materials when individuals sat down on the ground. Here indications were found of ten different types of cordage, fifteen different types of woven textile and two types of basket making techniques.[24] In addition, the imprints of a knotted net were also found. In another investigation, the patterns of wear on battens, loom sticks and spindles from recent history were compared with the markings on bone artefacts that were assumed to have

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[21] Marshack, in: Lawson, 1991, p. 22

[22] Soffer, in: Angier, 1999

[23] Soffer, Adovasio & Hyland, 2000, p. 517-518

[24] Ibid., p. 513, Table 1

Below Ground

Not famed for its painted caves like the later culture of the Magdalén, the Gravette is nevertheless not without cave art. While the Gravette cannot offer spectacular galleries that compare with the chambers at Lascaux or Altamira, there are works of cave art which are clearly planed compositions, executed by someone competent and with a clear idea of what they were doing. These exploit the natural features of the cave spaces and surfaces and even though we cannot understand the set of full messages that was once denoted, the formal qualities are such that we can still appreciate the images as works of art. In The Panel of Dappled Horses shown overleaf, two horses have been shown side by side but facing in opposite directions so that they both look out and away from the centre of the composition. Above each horse, there is a silhouette of a hand with a third hand in front of the left-hand horse. The heads of both horses are unduly small. In the case of the right-hand horse, the small head is enclosed by a naturally formed, curving edge. This echoes the profile of the painted head that it contains. Thus while we cannot know the meaning of the dappled horses on a content level, we are nevertheless able to read the visual echo that the artist has set up.

Silhouettes of hands are a common feature of Gravettian cave art and often the fingers are shorter than they should be. While explanations such as deliberate mutilation and frostbite have been proposed, experiments have shown that it is possible to achieve the effect of shortened fingers simply by bending joints as required.

A drawing of the right half of The Panel of Dappled Horses. Gravettian (dated to 24,640 BP), Pech Merle Cave, Cabrets, Lot, France. After Clottes, 2008, p. 86-87.

Similarly, conjectures as to what the silhouettes might stand for, range from sophisticated sign language to symbolic petitions for healing along with combinations of both interpretations.[25] These latter hypotheses tacitly assume that whilst standing for the self of the person whose hand provides the silhouette, the hand also stands for this same self, making contact with the world that lies behind the rock. This draws on a shamanic view of the world. In shamanism the world is seen as consisting of an upper, aerial realm, a middle, earthly realm and a lower underworld.

[25] Clottes, 2008, p. 91

Curves, Shapes and Form

Although the Venus of Willendorf and her Gravettian sisters were not just for looking at but were also for holding onto, in a global world, there is a need to share things in ways that go beyond the possibilities offered by physical transmission. While sculptures are physical and haptic and often cry out to be touched, so that with our hands we may feel the physical mass that is before us and the hardness of the stone or bronze that has been skilfully shaped, this is not the only way of approaching a work. Moving around a sculpture, not only do patterns of light and shadow move about, the profiles that define the boundaries of forms also move. Defining a sculpture in terms of lines means that it can be flattened. Reduced to an appropriated size, a copy of a work can be put in an envelope and sent to someone. Alternatively, the shapes can be inserted between the pages of a book and carried about. Reassembling a work that has been flattened in this way, then becomes a process in which we see its formal aspects in a new light. Folding and gluing pieces of paper together, we see how the artist thought about form and how he or she abstracted form so as to say something about us and who we are. The above journey of investigation into the nature of the Venus of Willendorf and what she represents, thus ends with a paper model. Although assembly requires time, aptitude and patience, the process of cutting the shapes out and folding paper around onto itself, provides insights on the formal composition of the work that no amount of words could ever describe. Augmenting, the instructions given below, a photographic, guide is available at:

www.reloading-humanism.eu/mission/a-message-from-willendorf/

4.2 ●●●

The yellow and blue areas on each side are coated with adhesive, as are the yellow, green and blue tabs that extend outwards from just below the points of the crown. The points are then bent downwards and affixed in the following order: yellow, green, blue. The face is formed by joining the violet tabs to the inside of the head so that it curves outwards and down.

4.2 ●

Finally, to attach the head to the body of the figure, the grey tabs around the neck and shoulders are folded upwards and coated with adhesive. Adhesive is also applied to the bottom of the head in a thin thread, along the edges of the paper. The head is then attached to the body and the figure is complete.