



## GRAPHIC SYSTEM AND SHARING OF REPRESENTATIONS IN THE NEOLITHIC AGE

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**Abstract** - Graphic system and sharing of representations in the Neolithic age

Researchers would have increased their apprehension of varied iconographies that mark out the story of man if they had suppressed ethnographic comparison in favour of internal analysis, if they had turned down the notion of art in favour of that of the graphic act. But moving from one concept to another is not very easy. The aesthetic dimension is not totally absent because there is rhythm, symmetry in the most schematic compositions. Local or personal styles often interfere with our understanding of graphic systems. Perhaps the practices around the graphic act are more expressive and rich in meaning than the signs themselves. Beyond the signs, we must be interested in actions, information and representations that men share in a moment and in a place. This is possible if we also analyse qualitatively the artefacts discovered at the foot of the decorated surfaces. Our thoughts about these different themes will be illustrated by Neolithic graphic expression in southern France that it is painted, carved or sculpted.

**Riassunto** - Sistema grafico e condivisione delle rappresentazioni nel Neolitico

I ricercatori avrebbero senza dubbio guadagnato tempo nella comprensione delle diverse iconografie che contraddistinguono la storia dell'uomo se avessero superato il confronto etnografico in favore di un'analisi interna: se avessero scartato la nozione d'arte in favore di quella di atto grafico. Ma passare da un concetto all'altro non è facile. A volte, anche nelle composizioni più schematiche, l'estetica è generata dal ritmo, dalla simmetria, dall'equilibrio ecc. Se il sistema grafico delle associazioni e delle contrazioni dei segni è evidente, gli stili locali o personali ostacolano la nostra comprensione dei messaggi. Gli eventi che concernono l'atto grafico sono forse ancora più espressivi e significativi del segno stesso. Oltre ai segni ci dobbiamo preoccupare, degli atti, delle informazioni e delle rappresentazioni condivise dagli uomini in un tal tempo e in un tal luogo, che non è possibile analizzare, ciò che non è possibile analizzare in una prospettiva qualitativa, sono gli oggetti trovati ai piedi dei supporti. La nostra riflessione sarà illustrata attraverso l'espressioni grafiche neolitiche (dipinte, incise o scolpite), ritrovate nel sud della Francia.

**Résumé** - Système graphique et partage des représentations au Néolithique

Les chercheurs auraient sans doute gagné du temps dans la compréhension des diverses iconographies qui jalonnent l'histoire de l'homme s'ils avaient dépassé le comparatisme ethnographique pour passer à leur analyse interne : s'ils avaient écarté la notion d'art au profit de celle d'acte graphique. Passer d'un concept à l'autre n'est pourtant pas si facile. L'esthétique existe parfois parce qu'il y a du rythme, de la symétrie, des équilibres, etc., dans les compositions les plus schématiques. Si le système graphique des associations et des contractions de signes est perceptible, les styles locaux ou personnels gênent notre appréhension des messages. Les événements qui entraînent l'acte graphique sont même peut-être plus expressifs et porteurs de sens que les signes eux-mêmes. Au-delà des signes nous devons donc nous préoccuper, des actes, des informations et des représentations que partagent les hommes à tel moment et en tel lieu, ce qui n'est possible qu'en analysant aussi le mobilier trouvé au pied des supports dans une perspective qualitative. Notre réflexion sera illustrée par l'expression graphique au Néolithique dans le sud de la France, qu'elle soit peinte, gravée ou sculptée.

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THE CONCEPT OF GRAPHIC ACT

The term 'art' is commonly used to refer to the figures or signs which are attributed to a period of prehistory. The term is invoked for the works of the Upper Paleolithic period because they are expressive and aesthetic, but we forget that many of them are simple and abstruse signs. We also arrange more recent works according to this designation, like the iconographies of the Neolithic and Bronze Age periods. These works are essentially composed of signs which are frequently called schematic, but which signs are not schematic? It seems that the term 'art' is especially reserved for corpuses of work about whom the hermeneutic is unknown because they are far away in time (prehistory) or in space (primitive peoples).

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This term is also often used too easily. No one should think he can analyse an iconographic corpus by ethnographic comparison. The internal analysis is favoured. The contextualisation of iconography, which consists of linking up artefacts with the supporting decoration, becomes the essential analytic behaviour. It is beneficial under two conditions: the study of the material must not be reduced to dating the figures and the figures must not be considered as the only reason for frequenting these places. In fact, the researchers talk about decorated sites, implicitly stating that men frequented these sites in order to decorate them. We can imagine that these sites were visited for various reasons. We can think that the signs were simple complements of more complex practices and that they did not constitute the only aim of visiting these sites. Perhaps these one are simply marked sites.

We should be allowed to replace the term 'art' by 'graphic act', which particularly emphasises the value of communication of figures and signs and points to the systemic feature of the iconographic corpus. It seems in fact that the recurrence of the same figures allows us to postulate the possible existence of a code in which the organisation of the symbols generates some meaning. Different conventions (location, size, direction) exist to give to the generic figures different meanings. The variety of associations of figures promotes the expression of different themes. The notion of the graphic act seems the nearest to writing but it is not equivalent. This writing does not necessarily permit the expression of everything and its thematic register is very dependent on practices which take place on the sites and accompany the marking of supports. Similarly, the figures and the signs are not a corpus of permanent and unchanging forms and their morphological variability does not inevitably signify a diversity of meanings. This variability is effective during the entire time of the expression of a specific iconographic corpus. The variations of forms do not constitute chronologic criteria, least of all the sign of a graphic evolution.

In this way, the very high dating for Chauvet's cave (Ardèche) permits us to conceive that the very expressive walled figures were not necessarily the end of a stylistic evolution. So, the terms of realist, para-realist, proto-schematic, pre-schematic, etc, which are used for a long time to express an evolution from realism to abstraction, are obsolete if we consider that the two corpus are contemporary and that several of their themes are common.

These examples encourage us to be prudent in front of these chrono-stylistic tables which interpret the iconographic evolution of sites or corpus according to a linear schema. These chronological systems accord too much importance to the form to the detriment of the content, to the style to the detriment of the syntax.

Therefore, for each iconographic corpus the symbolic source is less extensive than we think. The number of themes is perhaps restricted. In the opposite direction from these cultural constraints, the illusion of a diversity results from a great plasticity of forms. Each person combines the themes according to his perceptual and cognitive appreciation of the meaning that they convey. The morphology of figures and signs is personal and nothing necessarily comes within the scope of a chronologic and stylistic process.

#### THE SCHEMATIC SYSTEM

We propose a hypothesis about the syntactic system of themes and about the relations between signs and other practices by analysing the graphic expression that is named schematically in the fourth and third millennia BC in southern France and in the Iberian peninsula. This graphic expression is paintings, carvings and sculpture.

The iconographic corpus includes five categories of signs with an important morphological variability. These signs are either realistic (identifiable), schematic (details have been suppressed), or simplified (the new sign has no correspondence with the initial figure). These processes and identifications are comprehensible after a long comparative work about paintings and engraving in France and Spain (Hameau 2002, 2003a).

The male figure constitutes the first category of figures. It is represented by a vertical line with four sticking-out appendages. The details of the face or other anatomic elements (hands, feet) are rare apart from the Bergerie des Maigres shelter (Var). The male figure is transformed into a male anthropomorphic figure by reducing the members or limbs (an arrow-shaped motif) or multiplying them (an arboriform motif). There are no limbs: a single short vertical line is a male anthropomorphic figure.

The second category is the bestiary (Hameau 2006). Quadrupeds are represented by a horizontal line with four appendages. They are deer and ibex when the front appendages can be seen. Only the antlers of the stag may be shown (elamorphic or ibex motif). Multiplying the members of a quadruped transforms the figure into a comb-shaped motif.

The idol is the last category of living beings (Hameau 2003b). We use this name because of its etymological meaning, *Eidolov* in ancient Greek, which signifies reflection. In fact, the idol is an anthropomorphic figure because she shows human characteristics but she is rather a supranatural creature. She can be represented in a very detailed form like the figure of Dumas cave (Var): a face with eyes and nose, a body with a curved line for the necklace and with a horizontal line for the belt, two feet sticking out below the dress. She also presents three types of schematisation: a bow-shaped motif (her general form), a facial T (her face) and a U-shaped motif (her necklace).

Therefore, one fact calls attention to the idol. She is the only figure in balance with the microtopography of her support (Hameau 2003b). So, the idol of Dumas cave (Var) leans towards right because she is surrounded by a calcitic deposit and the natural grooves of the wall. In other cavities, she is lying down or inversed. These directions in which she is read often fit in with features of the wall. In a way, the idol is already in germination in the wall, she is already present in the cavity. A simple red line is sufficient for the idol to become explicit. This fact explains the choice of cavities : the idol is a latent form.

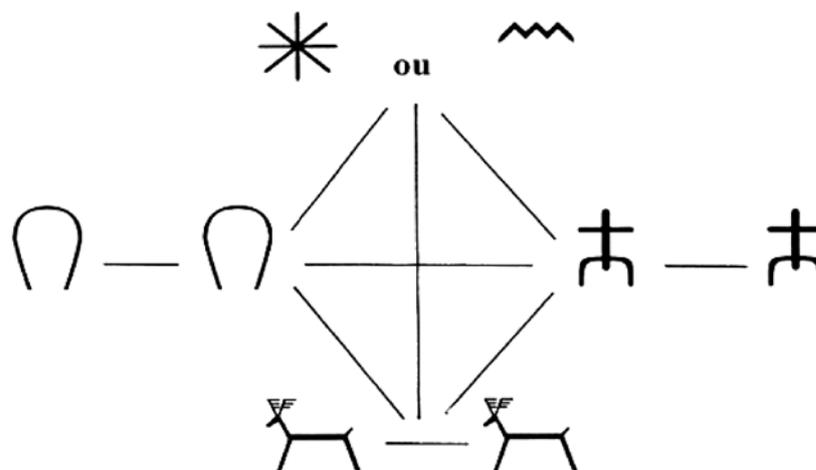
Two other categories of signs are recurrent : the sun-like sign, practically ubiquitous, and the broken line which is rarer. The first one is a circle with rays or simply rays which cross. This sign can be a simple point, the most widespread version. The broken line can be reduced to a simple chevron or amplified to be a hairnet motif.

These five signs represent 99% of the signs which are identifiable. The inventory of other signs just consists of an enumeration of forms which are often specific to a site : grill, arc, axe, circle, clover-like motif, etc.

The scenes are exceptional, the movement of characters or animals is rarely expressed. The graphic schematic expression is not narrative. These are above all themes in restricted numbers. But we can only speak of themes when there is an association of two figures. Then these ones are either juxtaposed (two signs very near) or contracted (two overlapped signs become one simple and new thing).

The most frequent example of association is the doubling of the same figure. The systematically imperfect feature of this doubling proves that we have an association and not a simple repetition. Moreover, we can observe a disparity of size (one sign is smaller than the other one) or direction (one of the signs is drawn upside down). Sometimes, an attribute accompanies one sign but not the other one.

In fact, the most everyday association is the juxtaposition or the contraction of a living being with the sunlike sign or the broken line. A sun motif or a simple point is often placed near a male figure, a quadruped or idol and these can be realistic, schematic or simplified. All the combinations of signs are possible. And when there is doubling of the same figure of a living being, one of the figures is associated with a point and the other one is alone. It is the imperfection of the doubling in another form. Consequently, the graphic schematic system of the Neolithic period can be synthesised by the following schema.



Male figures, quadrupeds and idols can be doubled even if one of the two figures is not the same size, has not the same direction or is drawn in a more schematic version than the other one. Alone or doubled, these figures are regularly associated with the sunlike motif or the broken line. When the same figure is doubled, one is associated with the sunlike motif or the broken line and not the other one.



The iconographic corpus is relatively restricted in spite of a multiplicity of forms for one figure (Hameau 2009). The number of combinations of signs is equally restricted and corresponds to a process which is repeated from one composition to another. The organisation in space of these representations is thus shared. The system that we describe is the same one for all the used techniques : painting, carving, sculpture. This remark is very important because many researchers still have a tendency to separate the painted and carved expression and the contemporary statuary, the famous statues-menhirs. We think that these answer to the same process of schematisation and imperfect doubling as the rest of the iconographic corpus.

#### THE HYPOTHESIS OF TRANSITION RITES AND THE PAINTED SITES

The material found on painted sites indicates very short occupations even if they are repeated: no heavy and cumbersome material which would suggest a prolonged residence. We sometimes find lithic pieces attesting the transformation in situ of minerals. Serpentine to make polished blades for axes and flint to shape arrow-heads were transformed at the Rocher du Château shelter (Savoie) (Thirault 2007). Under the paintings of the Bergerie des Maigres shelter and of the Saint-Michel cave (Var), mediocre local flints have been cut and shaped (Hameau et Chopin 1996, Hameau 2010a). The transformation of raw materials is realised on these sites but these are not the workplaces where lithic pieces are cut and shaped. We observe many attempts to transform a bad-quality material with very imperfect techniques and clumsiness. These observations give us the impression that inexperienced individuals go to the decorated sites, perhaps young men since they have not mastered the technique but they are trying their hand at cutting.

The location and the configuration of sites are no more insignificant. These sites are far away from the daily spaces. Often, getting to the sites is complex and difficult and is marked by the passage through more or less tangible thresholds (narrow valley, river crossing, presence of rocks, etc). Perhaps some caves and shelters were used as cloistering spaces.

In the Fayol cave (Vaucluse) (Hameau 2006a), the eastern gallery bends and opens out into a second open-air hanging porch, 6 metres above ground. At the opening, this gallery is low and narrow. An excavation at this place has revealed the presence of a calcareous slab with the same size and form as the section of the gallery. In fact, this slab comes from a calcareous bank which is lower than the cave. The slab has been transported into the cave, it has been put in and used to block the eastern gallery. Individuals sent to the hanging porch were cut off after the slab was put in place.

In the Vero valley (Aragon), the group of Gallinero painted caves are testimony of another device (Hameau and Painaud 2008). After a difficult ascent to the first porch, we reach the painted area hanging over the void. The painters reached this place by putting their feet in natural notches in the wall. Individuals also visited the hanging platform at the right of the painted area. But this one is just accessible by climbing on wooden posts. Artificial notches were dug in front of the painted area to accommodate the posts. If this removable device was taken away, the visitors were shut on to this little platform of 10 square metres. No material has been found but coloured lines indicate that men have visited it.

Other configurations of caves or shelter necessitate other tests. It seems that the body and the mind are subjectivised by the space, its narrowness, its hanging location, its streaming, its aspect vis-a-vis the sun or its obscure and cold ambiance. And during the cloistering of the individuals, they had to carry out an unusual technique test: cutting flint or shaping an arrow-head.

For these different reasons, we propose a hypothesis of transition rites for the decorated sites (Hameau 2010b), by relying on the tripartite schema of Arnold Van Gennep (1909): separation, liminality, gathering. We think that these three states, which determine the space, time and social changes of an initiate take effect during the visit to the painted shelters. The social transformation of men exists because they undergo tests during their transition by and through these sites. They are in the liminal phase of the process and it is in the context of these tests that they mark places.

#### TRANSITION AND TRANSFORMATION

The graphic system seems to express this transformation of man through the recurrent examples of associations. The male figure is doubled and this doubling is imperfect because it is not the faithful duplication of the same figure. One figure is in a lying-down or reverse position but the other one is in a straight position; one figure is alone but the other one is associated with a point or a broken line which gives another meaning. We think that these associations express two statues of the same male figure and, in the hypothesis of transition rites, two phases, before and after the transition

by the site. These doublings would be the social mutation of men. It seems that the visitors to the site perpetuate this fundamental social act by drawing it on the walls. And, apparently, the same transformation applies to all the living beings (Hameau 2006a), since we observe the same imperfect duplication for the signs which represent the idol and deer.

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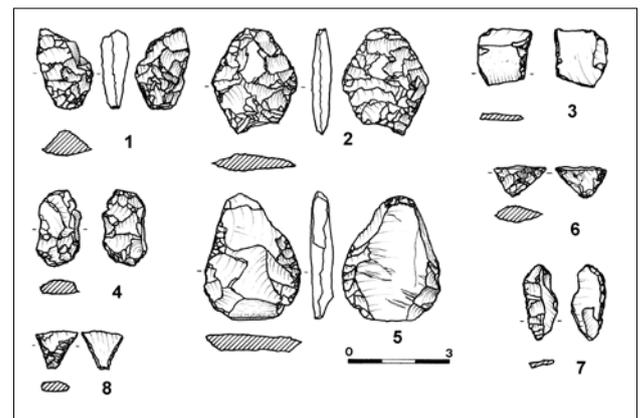
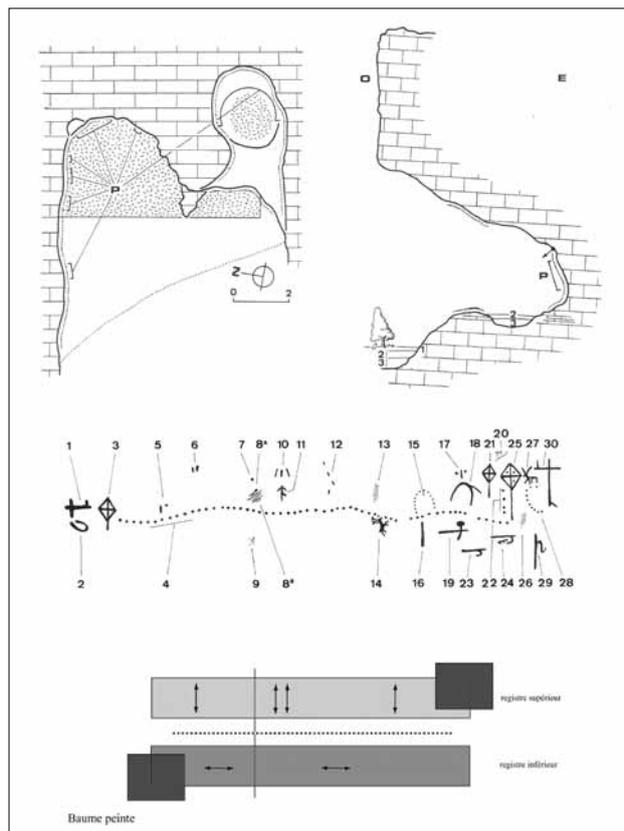


Fig.1 An example of schematic expression : the signs of Baume Peinte (Vaucluse). A horizontal axis with points crosses the wall. Above, the signs are doubled and/or with points. Below, the signs are in reverse position. Right and left, the signs are similar but are in different leaning direction.

Fig.2 Arrow-heads found at the Bergerie des Maigres shelter (Var).