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IBERIAN POST-PALAEOLITHIC ART AND GENDER: DISCUSSING HUMAN REPRESENTATIONS IN LEVANTINE ART

by

Margarita Díaz-Andreu

Abstract: This article aims to examine critically how archaeologists have interpreted gender in Levantine rock art. I will suggest that since the first studies carried out at the beginning of the twentieth century archaeologists' own gender ideology has strongly influenced the way in which gender relations in the past were and still are envisaged. I will propose that the intellectual processes occurring in Levantine art studies cannot be analysed without taking into consideration those in Franco-Cantabrian palaeolithic art. As in this case, there was an extensive use of ethnographic information from Australia, resulting in the production of a similar understanding of gender. Since that time the reproduction of authoritative knowledge can account for the stubborn persistence of certain hypothesis first formulated in the 19th century. The recent analysis of the role of the different gender categories in the production of Australian Aboriginal rock art and that of other areas makes it a requirement to review how gender was and is understood in Levantine art. This article will offer some preliminary suggestions about how a new analysis of gender could approach the study of Levantine art.

Key-words: Post-palaeolithic art; levantine art; art and gender.

Resumen: En este artículo se realiza una crítica sobre cómo la arqueología ha entendido el género en el arte rupestre levantino. Propondré que desde los primeros estudios llevados a cabo a principios del siglo XX la ideología de género de los arqueólogos mismos influyó de una manera clara en la forma en la que se pensó que funcionaban las relaciones de género en el pasado. Por otra parte resaltaré lo útil que resulta atender a los procesos intelectuales que caracterizaron el arte paleolítico franco-cantábrico, pues los del arte levantino no fueron en principio sino parte de aquéllos. Así en los primeros momentos se hizo un uso importante de la información etnográfica proveniente de Australia, resultando en la producción de una comprensión similar del género que desde entonces ha persistido gracias a la reproducción autorizada del saber. Las críticas sobre cómo se ha interpretado el género en arqueología y antropología, y en concreto las que discuten el sesgo androcéntrico de los primeros escritos sobre el arte australiano, reclaman una revisión de los presupuestos sobre los que se han realizado las inferencias sobre el género en el arte levantino. Esta se realiza en este artículo como preámbulo para sugerir cómo en un futuro se podrían plantear nuevos estudios de género en este tipo de arte.

Palabras-clave: Arte pós-paleolítica; arte levantina; arte e género.

This article aims to examine critically how archaeologists have interpreted gender in Levantine rock art. I will suggest that since the first studies carried out at the beginning of the twentieth century archaeologists' own gender ideology has

strongly influenced the way in which gender relations in the past were and still are envisaged. I will propose that the intellectual processes occurring in Levantine art studies cannot be analysed without taking into consideration those in Franco-Cantabrian palaeolithic art. As in this case, there was an extensive use of ethnographic information from Australia, resulting in the production of a similar understanding of gender. Since that time the reproduction of authoritative knowledge can account for the stubborn persistence of certain hypothesis first formulated in the 19th century. The recent analysis of the role of the different gender categories in the production of Australian Aboriginal rock art and that of other areas makes it a requirement to review how gender was and is understood in Levantine art.

Levantine rock art (also known as naturalistic rock art) is found in an area of about 250 km width along the Mediterranean coast of the Iberian Peninsula as far south as Jaén and Almería, together with an apparently isolated spot on the southern Atlantic coast, in Cádiz (Beltrán 1979: 9-11)¹ (fig. 1A). The paintings are found in open air shelters, usually located in mountainous areas. Levantine art is characterised by a naturalistic style, with motifs usually painted in red, and less frequently in either black or white. Human, animal and other motifs such as plants or less identifiable signs are drawn together forming compositions, most of them representing hunting, war and less (?) clearly identifiable scenes, sometimes interpreted as dancing. Despite these generalisations, there is a large degree of variety in Levantine art in terms of color, form, style, rules of composition and techniques of painting (Beltrán 1966: 90); notwithstanding, scholars have analysed it as a whole (Cabré 1915, Beltrán 1968, etc.). In addition, all authors vaguely point to a relation of this art with religious beliefs. Levantine art was first thought to be of a palaeolithic chronology, a dating which was rejected first by Hernández-Pacheco (1924) and more successfully by Almagro (1947), who proposed a post-palaeolithic date, a hypothesis which has prevailed since the 1940s. Recent research has supported this late chronology. Stylistic comparisons with motifs impressed on Cardial Neolithic pottery excavated in the Cova de l'Or site shows that this style can be dated as early as the late centuries of 5th millennium bc, a period known as the late Cardial Neolithic (Martí and Hernández 1988: 36). Levantine art is thought to have remained in use during the Chalcolithic (2500-1800 bc [3250-2250 BC]) and perhaps even later (1988: 41).

Levantine art has benefitted from a large number of publications. For the sake of space, however, I will concentrate on a few of them. I will pay special attention to three books and also consider a number of other significant publications. The first

¹ Following Veiga Ferreira and Leitão (1983: 173), Martí and Hernández (1988: 30) point to another area in Portugal. However, later research seems to have rejected such an attribution (O. Jorge, pers. comm.). Sites in Cádiz are Cueva de la Pretina, in Benalup de Sidonia (old Casas Viejas) (Beltrán 1968: 256).

book, Juan Cabré's *Rock art in Spain* (1915), was – to Breuil's dismay (Beltrán 1986-89: 116) – the first major publication concerning this type of art. I will examine in particular the foreword written by the Marquis of Cerralbo. My second analysis will be based on another fundamental book dealing with this art, Antonio Beltrán's (1968) *Levantine rock art*. Beltrán's book has been taken as the main reference for the study of Levantine art for generations of scholars and it is probably the most cited reference regarding this art. Finally, I will consider Martí and Hernández's (1988) book about *The Valencian Neolithic. Rock art and material culture*, as it provides a long needed, new light on the chronology of Levantine art, making it one of the most important recent publications in this field.

Gender archaeology is an area barely introduced in Spanish archaeology (see Díaz-Andreu 1994) and analysis of gender in art are still scant. As a result, publications on Levantine rock art before the 1980s, and even recent publications of fundamental value such as that of Martí and Hernández (1988), can inevitably be criticised from a gender perspective (see also Escoriza 1995, 1996). The aim of this article is not, however, to deconstruct for the sake of it. I think that an analysis of the state of research is needed in order to prepare the ground for future work. In this article I will examine the most common inferences made concerning gender in Levantine art and propose some new ways in which the representation of gender in Levantine art may be explored.

THE SOCIO-POLITICAL AND ACADEMIC BACKGROUND OF GENDER INTERPRETATIONS IN LEVANTINE ART

Gender studies are a relatively new area in archaeology. Most research has been undertaken in the 1990s, this being particularly true in the field of rock art studies. In this area recent publications have explored in some detail the context in which gender interpretations of rock art were undertaken in different parts of the world during the 19th and 20th centuries. All historiographical accounts suggest a marked androcentric bias in rock art studies and several explanations have been suggested. Some authors have stressed the negative effect of the acute imbalance in the gender composition of academia, which during the 19th and most of the 20th centuries was exclusively constituted by male scholars (Russell 1993: 93, see also Díaz-Andreu and Sørensen 1998). In addition, because gender relations were understood as universals, none of the researchers realised that their own gender values were being applied in their investigations and that this obviously affected the results obtained. One of the assumptions generally made was the belief that women were secondary members of society, and accordingly were excluded from ritual communication and, therefore, from being actively involved as rock artists

(see Smith 1991: 45-6 for Australian Aboriginal art). The outcome of this was not only that all research revolved around the believed main actor in society, man, but that even the lowest levels of interpretation were affected. Thus, tasks usually considered to be "objective" such as the sexing and description of motifs were negatively influenced. Research on Australian Aboriginal art again serves as an example of this. As Julie Drew demonstrates, ambiguous motifs were always considered as masculine and never as feminine, inferring that men were the most frequently represented human type, a conclusion which obviously fitted well with the accepted male superiority in society (Drew 1995: 105-106). Moreover, because female representations seemed to be less important, the description of female motifs was undertaken in a less concise way and typologies were less detailed (1995: 110). Androcentrism also influenced art research in a further way, as Pamela Russell has pointed out in the case of the palaeolithic "Venus" figurines. As she indicates, female representations had a strong impact on the men of the prudish Victorian age, especially when they were nude, a fact that influenced the type of interpretations made regarding them (Russell 1993: 93).

These ideas were theorised during the second half of the 19th century by evolutionism. This theory considered both "primitive peoples" studied by anthropologists and the prehistoric remains dug up by "archaeologists" as representing the childhood of modern society. The scheme had further implications on how gender relations in the past were hypothesised. On the one hand, gender differentiations were naturalised, for in a mirror image of the duality between primitive and modern societies, women were considered to represent the childhood of society. The application of this scheme to the periodisation of human evolution resulted in the belief of the existence of a primeval prehistoric matriarchy. This hypothesis, proposed in 1856 by Johann Barchofen, was accompanied by other postulates, such as the cult of a female deity, the Earth- or Mother-Goddess (Russell 1993: 93). The matriarchy/Mother-Goddess package was extremely successful, not only amongst other contemporary anthropologists such as Morgan and Tylor (and in theories such as the "fertility magic" theory), but in the writings of much later authors and, as I will show later, is still alive today [and unfortunately not only within the Mother-Goddess feminist movement (Conkey and Tringham 1995, Russell 1993: 95)].

Studies undertaken on Levantine rock art were no exception in the field of art studies. Research on Levantine art began at the beginning of the century with the publications by Juan Cabré and Henri Breuil, followed by others such as Eduardo Hernández Pacheco and Hugo Obermaier (Beltrán 1968: 18-23). As was usually the case in this pioneering age, none of them had benefitted from a training in archaeology, and their expectations were very much derived from the anthropological research carried out at the time. It is worth remembering that the possibility of

prehistoric paintings had only been fully accepted in 1902 with the publication of the influential *Mea culpa d'un sceptique* by Cartailhac. As some scholars explain (Clottes and David Lewis-Williams 1996: 137, Ucko and Rosenfeld 1967), from this date archaeologists strained to explain them. The recent publication in London of a book in which Aboriginal art was discussed, Spencer and Gillen's (1899) *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*, proved invaluable for this purpose. Solomon Reinach used it as early as 1903 to develop his theories of totemism for the interpretation of palaeolithic cave art paintings. The first researchers on Levantine rock art were well aware -and indeed were part- of all these debates². This is how ethnographic information originating from research on Australian Aborigines came to be applied to the interpretation of Levantine art. The first researchers on Levantine art reached important professional positions, enjoyed influence over the new generations, and accordingly their opinions reached the status of prestige, authoritative knowledge. The disruption of the academic power systems after the Spanish Civil War had an influence in the studies of Levantine art in terms of the shift from the palaeolithic to the post-palaeolithic dating. However, the theories underlying research remained intact (Díaz-Andreu 1993, 1997a: 20-4, esp.1997b). Moreover, the second major disruption of Spanish academia in the 1970s and 1980s did not affect art studies. This uninterrupted transmission of knowledge explains why the first hypotheses propounded by authors such as Cabré and Breuil in the first decades of the 20th century have been continuously repeated and are still to be found in current studies of Levantine art.

GENDER OF TODAY: GENDER OF THE PAST. A CRITIQUE ON GENDER INTERPRETATIONS IN LEVANTINE ART

The primary and secondary use of anthropological research undertaken on Australian Aboriginal art as the main ethnographic parallel in the study of prehistoric art meant that, as was the case in these original studies (Drew 1995,

² As explained, Levantine art was thought to have a Palaeolithic chronology. In addition, the same authors who dealt with this art also discussed Palaeolithic art. There was a high level of contact between all researchers, made through conferences and, more than anything else, by mail. Breuil maintained frequent mail contact with Cartailhac and other French researchers (Ripoll 1994: 51 and *passim*), and Cabré was influenced by Breuil, although their collaboration was interrupted in 1912 and their relation embittered for a number of years (Beltrán 1984: 11, 1986-89: 116). Having met each other after the discovery of the Levantine paintings in Calapatá (Cretas Teruel) by Cabré in 1903, Cabré established a close relation with the person who would become his protector, the Marquis of Cerralbo (Cabré 1923: viii). The Marquis of Cerralbo, and therefore Cabré, were also aware of the archaeology carried out beyond the Pyrenees. A clear indication of this is the fact that Solomon Reinach congratulated the marquis for his contributions to archaeology at the 1912 International Congress of Anthropology and Prehistoric Archaeology (Cabré 1923: viii-ix).

Smith 1991), a significant androcentric bias characterized the first and subsequent analyses of Levantine art. Also important may have been the fact that all the researchers were men and consequently all the publications were written by men. After a first note written in 1935 by Encarnación Cabré, the first publication by a woman that I have been able to trace was written in 1962 by Julia Sánchez Carrilero. It is very significant that in Beltrán's 1968 book not one of the celebrated researchers on Levantine art was a woman (Beltrán 1968: figs. 8 to 14, see also plates in Ripoll 1994). This transmission in the production of knowledge explains that by then even women's research did not significantly differ from that of their male counterparts.

The androcentric bias was also accentuated by the religious and political ideologies held by the researchers. This is an issue that has not been systematically analysed in the historiography of gender in rock art studies. However, the consideration of these ideologies (and identities) is of extreme importance. They shed light on the origins of particular individual stances and ideas, for they constitute an essential factor in the production of knowledge. Regarding religion, during the nineteenth century there was a bitter controversy between darwinists and the defenders of the Bible, and gender had an obvious place in this debate. This was highly political in nature, with very conservative political parties backing up the biblical account of the earliest periods of history. However, despite the importance of religious and political ideologies I will only be able to make some tentative suggestions, for little research has been undertaken in this field. In the case of Breuil, for example, clearly more investigation is needed. In terms of his political ideology, very little is known. There are anecdotes such as the possibility of the Abbé Breuil acting as a spy during his stay in Spain at the time of the First World War (Beltrán 1986-89: 117, see also Ripoll 1994: 132-4), but we do not know much more (at least in the biography written by Ripoll 1994 no mention of this type of data is included). We cannot relate any of these data to his gender ideology. Nor can we see a link between his religious beliefs and his interpretations of rock art studies. In fact, as Paul Bahn (1998: 62) explains, he "made almost no contribution to the reconciliation of prehistory's findings with religious teaching". However, Stephanie Moser (1993: 81) points out that Breuil still stuck to the gender stereotypes of man as hunter and woman as his assistant. Despite this, perhaps because he had conducted research in areas where he had made contact with modern hunter-gatherers and other small-scale societies, he portrayed women in roles which were considered by many other archaeologists as male.

The debate between darwinism and the Bible is, however, clear in other authors such as the Marquis of Cerralbo, the leader of the very reactionary traditionalist Carlist Party (Cabré 1923: v). In the prologue to the 1915 book on *Rock art in Spain* by Juan Cabré, the Marquis of Cerralbo defined women in the following way:

A woman, that enchanting last act of the divine Creation, ideal of nature, beautiful victor of solitude, exalted multiplier of beings, that serve, praise and bless God. She is the basis of the Fatherland, a sublime magician, who brings out man's sensitivity. For the Iberians [i.e. the primitive inhabitants of Spain] this was always the image of a woman. (Marquis of Cerralbo in Cabré 1915: vi)

The introduction written by the Marquis de Cerralbo to Cabré's book also serves as an excellent example of the extent to which these male patriarchs saw their own gender stereotypes in primitive art. He devoted a whole page to explain why female representations in Levantine art seemed to wear clothes as opposed to women representations elsewhere (I should perhaps remind the reader here that at this time this art was assumed to be palaeolithic). According to him, the use of clothes by women had to do with the decency that Spanish women already showed in that remote past. As he put it:

We have to consider as extraordinary the Spanish distinctiveness of always finding dressed women already in [the earlier times of] the quaternary period. We find it in the unmatched dancing group in Cogul. We can see in it a very early example of Sabines, who in this case were not kidnapped because of the fierce defence of their tribe [note tribe = men] of Alpera of them. The dress worn by the women consisted of just a skirt which covered their waist to their knees, leaving bare the rest of their bodies. The skirt was more than a dress. It was the venerable, first testimony of a sublime feeling, the divine feeling of sexual modesty. The skirt prevented alien gazes with obscene intentions [cf. the prudish Victorian man]. The privilege of the woman's love was thus reserved like a concealed treasure for the chosen man (Marquis of Cerralbo in Cabré 1915: viii).

Differences in political and religious ideologies account for some of the differences between the first researchers in Levantine art regarding how they interpreted the ethnographic information coming from Australia, but many common features can be identified in their studies. As in Australian rock art research, **gender relations were understood as universals**, and this meant that the Western ideology of the time was taken as a model. Consequently, the number of genders was confined to two: men and women. This limitation comes as no surprise if we consider that only very recently have anthropology and human sciences come to terms with the possibility of the existence of more than two genders in each society (see for example Herdt (ed.) 1994) and of the cultural and historical differences in the perception of how each gender can be defined.

The use of universals led to a definition of the male and the female gender made on the basis of Western gender **stereotypes**. Thus, men were considered as brave, politically and economically responsible and active. As opposed to men, women were viewed as maternal, non-involved in important economic activities and passive. I have already alluded to the extreme example of how the Marquis

de Cerralbo understood what a woman was meant to be. Other authors have not been so explicit. The idea of women as fragile individuals is common in early researchers. But as recent as in the 1980s Javier García del Toro (1986-87: 124) described the toes of what he considered to be a female foot in la Risca site (Moratalla, Murcia) as gently painted [*primorosamente pintado*], with the implication that the trouble that the painter had gone to was due to the intrinsic delicacy of a woman's toes.

The belief in universals obviously meant that **gender inequality** was an assumed given in past social relations. Gender inequality was perceived as "natural". The paintings were used as a means to prove this statement, and not as a body of data to check whether inequality already existed at the time when the paintings were made. In studies of Levantine art, men have always been considered to be the *active* members of the society, and consequently also the political and social leaders. As opposed to this perception, women have always been portrayed as secondary and passive members of society. Eduard Ripoll Perelló (1983: 27) explicitly exposed this dual understanding of gender in his description on the basic typology of male and female motifs. As he put it "in Levantine art the human motifs" stereotype is in men the slender archer in dynamic attitude... Women are represented... usually in a passive attitude' (Ripoll 1983: 27).

Because women are seen as secondary, passive members of society, it does not come as a surprise that only men are considered to have been the **artists**. This has been assumed rather than explicitly discussed. The exclusive use of the masculine to refer to the artists could theoretically mean the use of an indeterminate. However, a quick look at the textual contexts in which the term "artist" is used soon reveals a perception of the artist as male. To use only one example, that of the painter of the woman's toes discussed by García del Toro (1986-87: 124), the use of the (increasingly unfashionable) dual Western gender classification makes clear that "artist" in this context can only refer to a man, as only men are expected to be sexually interested in the delicacy of a woman's body part and can be bothered to represent it. In addition, in practical terms, ambiguity in the use of the masculine is rarely the case in Spanish, as it is common practice to specify explicitly the possibility of a noun or an adjective *also* being feminine. As far as I know, this specification has never been made regarding the production of Levantine art. However, there is no proof that the production of art was a male enterprise, and therefore we have to infer that the assumption of "man the artist" on the part of archaeologists has no real basis.

Because of the method by which identifications are carried out, all authors agree that male depictions outnumber female ones. In a general overview of Levantine art published by Dams (1984: 19), the imbalance was calculated at a rate of 95.6% men and 4.4% women. However, as the author explained, "*sexed* men

represent 16.85%” (1984: 19). The perception of this disparity is repeated at the level of regional and particular site studies. In the case of Catalonia, for example, Ramón Viñas counted 149 (31.4%) human representations in Levantine style. As he put it “116 are [male] archers, 10 men without an arc, 11 female and 12 indeterminate” (Viñas 1992: 427). Counts on human motifs at the site of El Cerrao in Teruel by Andreu and others (1982: 109) also seemed to confirm this view. The authors considered all 18 representations to be men except one. Despite this overwhelming perception which might indeed respond to a desire to silence women (Moore 1986), at least in certain sites, an accurate analysis of this imbalance makes it necessary to point out that there are some problems to be taken into account regarding how **identifications of male and female motifs** are currently made.

In order to sex human motifs researchers follow different criteria: physical features, dress and activities (fig. 1B). Two problems, however, emerge at the identification process. The first refers to a lack of a clear order in the relevance of each of these criteria. In addition, the absence of certain features (i.e., not only the presence) is also frequently employed to ascribe a motif to one sex category. However, this last rule is not followed in a systematic way, allowing a considerable degree of subjectivity on the part of the archaeologists, and in practical terms, as I will demonstrate, a circular argument. An analysis of the method used by Antonio Beltrán to classify a motif as a man or a woman serves as an example to illustrate both problems. In his article on “Women representations in Levantine Art” he stated that:

“physical features such as breasts; pronounced, bulky buttocks; skirts; in some cases the hairstyle and the type of activity are clear features of women representations” (Beltrán 1966: 90).

Therefore, for this author the presence of particular physical features is one of the main criteria to identify women and their absence means that the motifs cannot be interpreted as such (unless they perform a characteristic female activity, defined as such by the researcher and therefore leading to a circular argument). However, a different rule applies for men. The absence of sexual features in a human motif does not prevent it from being classified as a man. As he put it:

“In order to identify the motifs as women we have to look for particular details which are not always clearly put forward. Thus, the sex appears clearly marked in numerous naked depictions of men, but its absence does not allow us to assert that asexed motifs are female” (Beltrán 1966: 90).

In his book of 1968 he further explained the issue of asexed motifs:

“Most men are naked. Despite this, not all have a penis, not because it is covered either by a loincloth [*taparrabos*] or a short skirt [*faldellín*], but simply because it was never painted, due to simplification” (Beltrán 1968: 42).

He also undertook decisions which *a priori* seem arbitrary, such as the resolution of always translating asexed motifs with a triangular chest as men (Beltrán 1968: 46).

The order of relevance of criteria also varies depending on the author or even the situation. If Beltrán, as discussed above, bases his identification of women mainly on physical features, whereas men are mainly described according to their activities (Beltrán 1968: 42-3), in the case of Ripoll the three criteria – physical features, dress and activities – are taken into account to figure out men and only two of them are explicitly used to unravel women:

“in Levantine art the human motif stereotype is in men the slender archer in dynamic attitude dressed with wide-legged breeches [*zaragüelles*] and sometimes with body ornamentations. Women are represented with bell-shaped skirts and usually in a passive attitude” (Ripoll 1983: 27).

In sum, the use of different criteria and the lack of clarity on their order of relevance leads researchers to a frequent use of circular arguments in order to sex motifs. Preconceptions of what a woman and a man are seem to interfere in the sexual ascription of human motifs.

A detailed analysis of the criteria further reveals how Western ideology on gender has influenced our interpretation of gender in the past. Despite the theoretical importance of physical features given by researchers to sex human motifs, in practice they have a secondary significance, for physical features are not frequently depicted. In fact, most identifications are made based on the other two main features: dress and, more than anything else, activities. These identifications are, as I will show, plagued with assumptions. It might be worth considering the following text written by Forestier as early as 1919. In it a reconstruction of the daily routine in Levantine societies is made:

“The men would gather on the terrace for the performance of some religious rite before starting on a hunting expedition; or, after their roaming through the forests, would indulge in games, or simply rest in content, watching, perhaps, some dancing women³ after a meal of half-roasted meat had been disposed of under the eyes of the chief” (Forestier 1976 [1919]: 151).

Forestier's text seems to be extreme, but this is partly due to the fact that it was not written for an academic market and, therefore, was more explicit. One might think that this type of reconstruction made in 1919 would no longer be possible. However, the extent to which these ideas have remained in more recent literature is, in fact, appalling.

³ However, in the representation illustrating this text the only ones dancing were men!

The most commonly represented scene in Levantine art is hunting. Despite most human motifs in them being asexed, **hunting scenes** are interpreted as male (fig. 1.7). The interpretation partly derives from the researchers' expectations that this activity was exclusively male. These expectations are partly based on the own researchers' experience⁴ and partly on anthropological accounts (cf. hunting magic theory) which, as I have previously discussed, are based on the same type of expectations. Nonetheless, recent anthropological studies have demonstrated that in some societies women, and particularly young women, participate in hunting expeditions (Bird 1993, Park 1998: 274). In Levantine art, however, it is true that the only explicit representation of sex is the occasional depiction of a phallus. A comparable situation is to be found in the **fighting scenes**, an activity also considered to be masculine (figs. 1.4 and 1.6). Despite the presence of human motifs with female features such as wide hips in some of them, they are, nonetheless, interpreted as men (see for example Jordá 1980: 101-3). Finally, similar assumptions characterize the sexual ascription of masked motifs, interpreted as **sorcerers**, or more ambiguously as having a religious character (fig. 1.5). They are always interpreted as men (Beltrán 1968: 44, Dams 1984: 221, Martí and Hernández 1988: 19, 27, 34). The reasons for this sexual ascription are twofold. The first is that only a few of these motifs display sexual features, and these are always penises. Sorcerer never have breasts. Even if the economic productivity of sorcerers is not straightforward, their ritual role is always considered as critical by researchers. Generally, male scenes are mainly associated to hunting magic (Beltrán 1968: 54), the theory first formulated by 19th century anthropologists to explain Australian Aboriginal art.

As against male scenes, female ones are not considered productive, and instead they are interpreted as **dances** or as scenes of a vague ritual significance⁵, whose role is mainly perceived as irrelevant. Even if a digging scene is represented (fig. 1.1 and perhaps 1.3), archaeologists explain it not as an economic activity, but as a ritual scene associated to fertility (Beltrán 1966: 91, 1968: 147, 167, 225, Jordá 1974: 216, 1991, Martí and Hernández 1988: 33, etc. for a repetition of these ideas in macroschematic art see Martí and Hernández 1988: 29). It might be worth remembering that in the same vein that hunting magic underlay the interpretation of male scenes, fertility magic served as a basis to explain the female ones. Moreover, fertility magic was also associated to the Mother-Goddess

⁴ Until recently hunting has been a well respected activity in the Western world and in Spain still enjoys a wide popular base. In the Western world this activity has traditionally been exclusively associated with men

⁵ Interestingly enough in prehistoric studies women were not theoretically denied their participation in rituals, as occurred in anthropology. However, when a visual reconstruction of such rituals (for example, Forestier 1976: 151) is undertaken, only men are represented.

concept, a hypothesis which has been amply criticised in recent years (Conkey and Tringham 1995). Antonio Beltrán is one of the authors who gives priority to the dancing activity. He considers that women are associated with "rods or sticks held in their hands, [which can be] interpreted as castagnettes to accompany in dances" (1966: 91). Or he described the scene at the Barranco del Pajarejo (Albarracín, Teruel) in this way:

"Almagro interpret them [women] as dancers, and this means that the scene represents a ceremony similar to those of the Cogul [Barranco dels Moros site] and the Barranco de los Grajos [in Cieza, Murcia] sites. However, one of the women is undertaking an agricultural task, digging the soil with a angular-shaped double stick, similar to those found in Dos Aguas [Abrigo del Ciervo, called by Beltrán also as Cinto de las Letras, Valencia (1968: 206)] and Alacón (Los Recolectores site). *Therefore, the dance could be an agrarian one*" (Beltrán 1968: 147, my emphasis).

In sum, the detailed analysis undertaken in this section on how gender has been interpreted in Levantine art makes it clear that there are fundamental problems in the processes by which researchers have ascribed sex to human motifs in their studies. These are firmly based, first of all, on outmoded assumptions on the nature of gender and on how gender relations work in society. Moreover, the understanding of gender is still rooted on the anthropological research carried out on Australian Aboriginal art in the 19th century. Recent critiques of this make it imperative that we review our understanding of gender. The reevaluation deriving from this process will, no doubt, influence in our whole understanding of Levantine art.

BACK TO SQUARE ONE. ANALYSING GENDER IN LEVANTINE ART

Recent studies of the art of small-scale societies and gender have benefitted from the survival of present communities that serve to contrast researchers' opinions with those of living individuals (Drew 1995, Smith 1991, 1995). Ethnoarchaeology is, however, no longer possible in the case of the Iberian peninsula, where changes in the sociopolitical and economic spheres experienced by populations living there have dramatically separated them from the ideological framework in which the depictions were made. The breakdown of the code behind the representation, therefore, constitutes a challenge which unfortunately researchers will never fully be able to meet. These are the limits to the results that our interpretations can achieve. However, in this respect art studies are no different from other fields of archaeological enquiry.

The study of gender in long-dissappeared small-scale societies, and in Levantine art in particular, encounters several problems which researchers should

be aware of. The first one refers to the difficulties they face in their attempt to make a leap from sex to gender. An incredibly complex panorama has emerged from the acknowledgement of the existence of a wide range of possible genders. These include not only genders such as homosexuals and transvestites (Herdt (ed) 1994), but also a great variety of meanings within the two most accepted heterosexual genders – those of men and women. However, the crux of the matter is that we lack the code to decipher whether in the depictions we can infer something more than the representation of the two main genders. In order to make the study of gender possible we are required to assume that the representation of a sexed human motif is directly related to the gender to which the *majority* of individuals ascribe on the basis of their sex. However, given that gender groups are not universals, even our understanding of the meaning behind “men” and “women” will necessarily be incomplete.

A second problem refers to the difficulties emerging from the mythical sphere in which art of small-scale societies is produced. In art of long-disappeared peoples this circumstance means that a direct interpretation of scenes is not possible, as they relate to a set of mythical beliefs unknown to us. Regarding Levantine art, despite the vague allusions made by various authors on its religious character, there is a widespread belief that the meaning behind the depictions can directly be accounted for (Martí and Hernández 1988: 41, Escoriza 1996: 13, etc). This naive view obviously needs to be revised. However, the acknowledgement of the mythical framework in which Levantine art was produced necessarily limits the extent to which accurate readings of art can be made.

In addition, a problem specific to Levantine art relates to the area and time-span in which this style is found. Can we assume that it is possible to make generalisations for representations made in an area of about half a thousand square kilometres during probably more than two millennia? As both Layton (1987: 218) and Ucko (1987) have pointed out regarding Palaeolithic cave art, one might wonder how much of the cave art, which continued for about a period of 5 to 7 thousand years, may be regarded as part of a single synchronic system and, therefore, can be studied as a single unit, as specialists usually do.

All these problems rather than prevent an analysis of gender in Levantine art serve to set the limits to such an analysis. Some alternative insights can, however, be suggested. The recent self-critical assessment of the gender bias in anthropological studies and the acknowledgement by archaeologists of their dependence on anthropological research undertaken in such unfavourable conditions, leads me to propound some preliminary ways in which research could proceed. The first one refers to the need to undertake an urgent revision of the ways in which researchers sex human motifs in Levantine art. In particular, it seems essential that new studies avoid the trap of considering ambiguous and

unsexed human motifs as masculine. The high proportion of unsexed motifs seems to confirm that information on gender was largely insubstantial in art representations. Various hypotheses can be explored to explain this. First, the representation of gender might have been irrelevant because, as both (?) genders were considered to be equally important in society, the inclusion of information on gender identity was thought to be irrelevant in the message the art wanted to convey. The second hypothesis is rather different. It proposes Levantine art as a masculine art; an art that men might have used to represent their own world and to negotiate their own gender position in society. One of the ways of doing this might have been to silence women both by appropriating the representation of the human body as the male body, and by only representing very superficially women's activities. This is the hypothesis that most scholars' interpretations would comfortably accommodate to. I will make, however, a final proposition. Levantine art might not have been a type of art made by men but also by women. New research in anthropology, not only in Australia (Smith 1991) but also in South Africa [where a third of women in each group act as shamans, making them potential artists (see for example Dowson 1998: 338)], makes it possible to consider the prospect of some sites being female ritual spaces, places for female negotiation. A feasible way to check this hypothesis would be to compare the location of sites with female representations with sites with male representations. Results might throw new light on the way women might have negotiated their position in society. Other possible research projects to explore gender in Levantine art would be, for example, to look at the composition of the painting (i.e., the elements used to make the painting) in order to compare sites with female motifs with those without them, or even the motifs themselves.

To conclude my discussion, I will highlight the main issues raised in this article. My discussion has focused on how gender has been interpreted in studies on Levantine art, a pictorial style made by small-scale societies of the eastern part of the Iberian Peninsula from the end of the fifth to about the third millennia bc and perhaps even later. I have proposed that there is a compelling need to review how gender has been interpreted in Levantine art. This requirement comes from the realisation that the understanding of gender has been characterised since the onset of research in the early 20th century by a skewed perception of how gender relations functioned in the past. This biased perception originated from an erroneous understanding of gender as a universal concept, and consequently led to an inappropriate use of modern gender relations as a model to disentangle gender relations in the past. However, recent research in human sciences has demonstrated the existence of a myriad of gender identities which are historically, culturally and socially specific. Moreover, gender identities do not act as fixed perception packets, but their definition is a matter of negotiation, in which mate-

rial culture – art included – is actively used and manipulated. The study of Levantine art has been largely unaware of the debates in gender studies and the inclusion of their results in the studies on Levantine art touches the very basis on which all interpretations of human motifs have been made, and, therefore, the whole set of hypotheses drawn from this art. This article has offered some preliminary suggestions about how a new analysis of gender could approach the study of Levantine art. To begin with, I have proposed that unsexed motifs should not be presumed as masculine, for this leads to circular arguments which invalidate all hypotheses derived from such analyses. In addition, I have argued that landscape studies could offer a first comparative insight on whether sites with male and female representations show different locations in order to check the possible existence of feminine ritual sites. A comparative examination of the painting could also shed light on this issue. These are only some preliminary suggestions for what I consider could be the beginning of a fruitful new area of research.

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Fig. 1 – A. The Iberian Peninsula. Shaded: the area where Levantine rock art is found.
B. Some of the human motifs found in Levantine art, after Beltrán (1968): 1. Cinto de las Letras (Dos Aguas); 2. Cogul; 3. Cueva Remigia; 4. El Cingle; 5. El Cingle; 6. El Roure (Morella); and 7. Mas d'en Josep (Valltorta).