

Introduction

The tradition of sculpture and painting encountered in Old Europe (for a definition of this term, *see* p. 17) was transmitted from the Palaeolithic era. In art and mythical imagery it is not possible to draw a line between the two eras, Palaeolithic and Neolithic, just as it is not possible to draw a line between wild and domestic plants and animals. Much of the symbolism of the early agriculturists was taken over from the hunters and fishers. Such images as the fish, snake, bird, or horns are not Neolithic creations; they have roots in Palaeolithic times. And yet, the art and myths of the first farmers differed in inspiration and hence in form and content from those of the hunters and fishers.

Clay and stone figurines were being fashioned long before pottery was first made around 6500 B.C. The vast increase in sculptures in Neolithic times and the extent to which they departed from Palaeolithic types was not caused by technological innovations, but by the permanent settlement and growth of communities. A farming economy bound the villages to the soil, to the biological rhythms of the plants and animals upon which their existence wholly depended. Cyclical change, death and resurrection, were ascribed to the supernatural powers and in consequence special provision was made to protect the capricious life forces and assure their perpetuation. As early as the seventh millennium B.C. traits associated with the psychology and religion of the farmer are a characteristic feature of sculptural art. This art was not consciously imitative of natural forms but sought rather to express abstract conceptions.

About 30,000 miniature sculptures of clay, marble, bone, copper or gold are presently known from a total of some 3000 sites of the Neolithic and Chalcolithic era in southeastern Europe. Enormous quantities of ritual vessels, altars, sacrificial equipment, inscribed objects, clay models of temples, actual temples and pictorial paintings on vases or on the walls of shrines, already attest a genuine civilization.

The three millennia saw a progressive increase in stylistic diversity, producing ever greater variety of individual forms. Simultaneously, a more naturalistic expression of anatomical generalities gradually emancipated itself from an initial subordination to the symbolic purpose. The study of these more articulated sculptures, their ideograms and symbols and the highly developed vase painting enabled the author to distinguish the different types of goddesses and gods, their epiphanies, their devotees, and the cult scenes with which they were associated. Thus, it is possible to speak of a pantheon of gods, and to reconstruct the various costumes and masks, which throw much light on ritual drama and life as it was then lived.

Through the deciphering of stereotype images and signs with the help of quantitative and qualitative analyses it becomes clear that these early Europeans expressed their communal worship through the medium of the idol. In the miniature sculptures of Old Europe the emotions are made manifest in ritual drama involving many actors, both gods and worshippers. Much the same practice seems to have been current in Anatolia, Syria, Palestine and Mesopotamia in the corresponding periods, but only in southeastern Europe is such a quantity of figurines available for a comparative study.

The shrines, cult objects, magnificent painted and black pottery, costumes, elaborate religious ceremonialism, and a rich mythical imagery far more complex than was hitherto assumed, speak of a refined European culture and society. No longer can European Neolithic-Chalcolithic developments be summed up in the old axiom, *Ex oriente lux*.

When the magnificent treasures of the Minoan civilization were unravelled in the beginning of the twentieth century, Sir Arthur Evans wrote: 'I venture to believe that the scientific study of Greek civilization is becoming less and less possible without taking into constant account that of the Minoan and Mycenaean world that went before it' (*JHS* 1912: 277). While his remark was amply justified, the question of what went before the Minoan civilization remained to be posed. Now it is becoming less and less possible to understand the Minoan civilization without the study of the culture which preceded it. The study of this culture, to which I have applied the name 'Old Europe', reveals new chronological dimensions and a new concept of the beginning of European civilization. It was not a single small legendary island claimed by the sea some 9000 years ago that gave rise to the fabulous civilization of Crete and the Cyclades, but a considerable part of Europe surrounded by the eastern Mediterranean, Aegean and Adriatic Seas. The many islands were an aid to navigation and facilitated communication with Anatolia, Levant and Mesopotamia. Fertile river valleys lured the first farmers deeper inland into the Balkan Peninsula and Danubian

Europe. Old Europe is a product of hybridization of Mediterranean and Temperate southeast-European peoples and cultures.

European civilization between 6500 and 3500 BC was not a provincial reflection of Near Eastern civilization, absorbing its achievements through diffusion and periodic invasions, but a distinct culture developing a unique identity. Many aspects of this culture remain to be explored. One of the main purposes of this book is to present, as it were, the spiritual manifestations of Old Europe. Mythical imagery of the prehistoric era tells us much about humanity – its concepts of the structure of the cosmos, of the beginning of the world and of human, plant and animal life, and also its struggle and relations with nature. It cannot be forgotten that through myth, images and symbols man comprehended and manifested his being.

Though profusely illustrated, this volume does not claim to present every aspect of the mythical imagery of Old Europe; the illustrations were selected from many thousands, with a view to showing the most representative examples and not just the most beautiful sculptures or vases. Basic information is derived from the systematically excavated sites, which are listed with full chronological details at the end of the book. The documentation of the illustrated objects is contained in the Catalogue.

NOTE ON RADIOCARBON AND DENDROCHRONOLOGICALLY CALIBRATED DATES AND THE CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE

The discovery and development of the radiocarbon dating technique by Willard F. Libby (*Radiocarbon Dating*, 1952) gave archaeology its most powerful means of discovering the age of prehistoric cultures. Within two decades of its development and implementation radiocarbon analysis had revolutionized earlier conceptions of European Neolithic-Chalcolithic chronology, extending its span by almost two millennia. Prior to this, stratigraphic and typological interpretations had been used to support a theory of the spread of agriculture from the Near East to Europe in the fourth millennium BC. The backbone of this universally accepted chronological outline was the postulated Near Eastern derivation of the Vinča culture with its typical fine ceramics, result of a migration from the Near East *via* Anatolia subsequent to the Troy I period, datable, it was believed, by analogies to historic Egypto-Mesopotamian civilization to just after 3000 BC. Vinča was firmly located within the relative chronology of the European Neolithic-Chalcolithic cultures and so through its supposed historic connection became the datum around which the absolute chronology of European prehistory was estimated. This chronological system is still maintained by a small minority of

European prehistorians who were encouraged by the recent discovery in an Early Vinča context of the Tărtăria tablets, which they consider to be an import from Mesopotamia at about 3000 B.C.

This chronology was completely discredited by radiocarbon analysis, which by 1970 had supplied 300 dates for Old European Neolithic and Chalcolithic samples, placing the beginnings of the Neolithic in the seventh millennium B.C. This called for not only a readjustment in the absolute dating of Neolithic-Chalcolithic culture but also an important rearrangement of the relative chronologies of Europe and the Near East.

However, by the early 1960's it became evident that radiocarbon dates were inaccurate. The accuracy of the process was dependent upon the validity of the assumption (among others) that the radiocarbon content of atmospheric carbon-dioxide had remained constant during geologically recent time. Discrepancies between radiocarbon and calendrical chronologies were soon remarked, following the radiocarbon analysis of wood samples of known age from historic Egyptian and Near Eastern sources; and it has since been demonstrated through the marriage of dendrochronological research and radiocarbon analysis that there have been variations in the level of atmospheric radiocarbon through time, and that these are of two sorts: localized fluctuations, and a long-term trend in which the divergence between the radiocarbon and true ages increases with increasing sample age during the millennia B.C.

Dendrochronology is the study of the chronological sequence of the annual growth rings in trees. Within the confines of a particular environment the ring patterns of different tree specimens can be matched and related one to another, a technique made possible by the fact that annual rings vary in thickness due to varying local environmental conditions from year to year. So a master-chronology can be compiled incorporating both living trees of great age and dead, preserved trunks which can be fitted into the ring-pattern sequence. The bristle-cone pine of the White Mountains of California has provided an unbroken sequence extending back into the sixth millennium B.C. Radiocarbon analysis of ring samples of known age identified the inaccuracy of the radiocarbon dates; and, with the accumulation of sufficient analyses, was able to supply curves and tables of conversion which permit correction of radiocarbon dates to approximate true age. Dates falling between the third and fifth millennia B.C. in 'radiocarbon years' require a corrective addition, increasingly large with increasing age, of a few hundred to as much as a thousand years to align them with approximate true age. Direct comparison of the radiocarbon content of historically dated samples from ancient Egyptian contexts with that of bristle-cone pine samples of equivalent true age has independently confirmed the validity of



Map 1: Old Europe: the area of autochthonous European civilization, c. 7000–3500 BC in relation to the rest of Europe