ADORANTS IN PREHISTORIC ART

Prehistoric Attitudes and Gestures of Prayer

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Adorants are persons performing an act of adoration or invocation to a higher being. This act is always accompanied by a posture of the body or motion of the limbs to express or emphasize a desire or to enforce a request. According to Fr. Heiler, there occur rather many attitudes and gestures of adorants in the historic and primitive world. They vary from standing, kneeling, sitting or squatting to prostrating, from inclining the head or bending the upper part of the body to raising one or both arms or extending them with the hands opened (above to the heavenly powers, down to the chthonic ones) or with spread fingers to uplifting the arms to or above the head, from clasping the hands, joining them to crossing above the breast, to touching an altar or idol to kissing them. Widely spread is also the cultic nudity, at least taking off the head- of foot-gear.

All these attitudes and gestures represent a legacy of past times. They belong to forms of religion which have kept alive throughout centuries and even millenaries. Because of their being an old traditional legacy the interpretation of their meaning and the discovery of their origin are not quite simple. At any rate, they include an ingenious symbolism: in the different attitudes and gestures there we find expressed the special relation of man to a deity, further the elementary religious feeling of weakness, dependence or longing desire.

Since analogous attitudes and gestures are found in social life, in greeting, doing homage and imploring other fellows, especially superiors, they are ambivalent. As to the prehistoric past, only art shows us these attitudes and gestures. But art is silent. The only help are the context of the picture and some knowledge of the then religion.

The most ancient art is that of the Upper Palaeolithic (50/30, 000-10,000 B.C.), the so-called Ice Age Art. It developed in this far remote

period in caves, rock-shelters, on rocks and small objects of bone, horn, and ivory. This genuine art was produced by hunters and was in the first line restricted to animals of the hunting realm, but there appear, however much rarer, also human beings and beings of the transcendant world. Some of their gestures have been interpreted by prehistorians as gestures of prayer.

According to H. Müller-Karpe, 2 all depends upon the question as to how far the cognition of dependence from transcendent beings and of relation to these in the original form of mystic vision and presentimental experience were already conceptionally perceived. As to some palaeolithic statuettes and reliefs, we may eventually speak of attitudes of prayer or an act of offering, if we do not envisage too restricted concrete gestures of later religions, but remember that the fundamental element of prayer consists simply in the desire of a thoughtful communication with the divinity. Anyhow, we are permitted in face of palaeolithic human representations with raised arms, I dare say, to think of praying persons. Already the human figurines, used as pendants and grave goods express to prehistoric man more than a confrontation of the ego with the superhuman nature; they seem to reflect the perception of his creatural condition and the presentiment of his relation to the transcendent world. Müller-Karpe points to C. Schuchhardt 3 who sees in the posture of some statues and statuettes with hands upon or under the breast 4 a gesture of prayer.

There are other more probable examples. A. Marshack 5 refers to an engraved fragment of bone from Laugerie-Basse, Dordogne, with the image of a huge fish, two humanoids with upraised arms and a lone arm below the fish. The context points to an act of adoration according to him in a mythical one. Another engraved bone from the same site depicts hind legs and a phallus of a bull standing over a naked, pregnant woman who is lying on her back raising her hands. Some other engraved lines suggest that the woman may be standing in prayer, in worship or adoration. From the same site and level there

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4 Müller-Karpe (n. 2 above), Pl. 27, A2, 215, 1, 241, 25, 243, 2, 4, 14.