

# BEGINNING OF RELIGION

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## *Summary*

In the last two decades, the study of Palaeolithic religion has come to be of increasing concern to both scholars of the history of religion and archaeologists. In this paper the appropriateness of some recent views in the interpretation of the archaeological findings is re-evaluated. The conclusion of this study is that neither evidence of early ritual practises nor of belief in an afterlife can be endorsed. All relevant conceptions of that kind are either products of a certain mental climate at the time of the discovery of the fossils, or of ideologies. The results of palaeanthropological research prove that none of the early representatives of the genus *Homo* was capable of developing a complicated symbol system. Only in the middle Palaeolithic period *Homo neanderthalensis* had developed advanced intellectual abilities. But neither in connection with his hunting customs nor with his domestic activities can any traces of cult practice be found. Only the rare burials can be interpreted as a first sign of religious feelings. But there are no funeral rituals or funeral gifts. All assumptions that Neanderthal man already believed in an afterlife, are mere speculation. Theories of rituals during the lower and middle Palaeolithic belong to the realm of legend.

The search for the origin of religion was one of the main topics of discussion during the first half of the twentieth century. It was Johannes Maringer who interpreted the archaeological findings of stone-age cultures as a possible indication of early belief in supreme beings.<sup>1</sup> Whenever the question of prehistoric religion arises in recent publications, authors still refer to Johannes Maringer or one of his contemporaries<sup>2</sup> to emphasise their particular point of view.<sup>3</sup>

When Johannes Maringer initially set out to portray the belief system of prehistoric man, he was well aware that knowledge about

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<sup>1</sup> Maringer 1956.

<sup>2</sup> James 1957, Narr 1966: 298-320.

<sup>3</sup> See for example Verkamp 1995: 5, and Dickson 1990.

early hominids was hardly sufficient to attempt a reconstruction of their religion.<sup>4</sup> Since then, however, a vast amount of literature dealing with early religion or the origin of religion has been published. Whereas Johannes Maringer carefully interpreted the findings and criticised the documentation of the excavations, his successors are convinced that religion came into being with the birth of the first hominids several million years ago. Their theories are based upon rare archaeological material, interpreted with the aid of ethnographic analogues. The use of ethnographic analogues in prehistoric research is, however, a source of heated debate. The archaeologist André Leroi-Gourhan emphasises the difficulties encountered in tracing the religion of a society of which only material remnants remain. It is even more complicated to gain insight into the mentality of a people whose culture is hardly documented and only scarcely known.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, scholars such as Peter Ucko and Lewis Binford extensively discuss the value of ethnographic analogues to explain the behaviour of early hunter-gatherer communities.<sup>6</sup> They have failed, however, to develop a set of mutually agreed-upon research guidelines and definitions that will clarify analytic approaches to the subject.<sup>7</sup> Therefore scholars continue to use ethnographic analogies to explain possible belief systems of early man without the necessary critical distance. As a result, the presumed religion in Palaeolithic times partly resembles the mentality of arctic peoples, and partly resembles the belief of Australian aborigines, according to the experience and research interests of the scholar.<sup>8</sup> The sparse archaeological material itself hardly allows precise interpretation. Sometimes there are several possible ways to explain the remains, sometimes nothing can be said about the context of the archaeological findings. Despite the

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<sup>4</sup> See Maringer 1956: 298.

<sup>5</sup> Leroi-Gourhan 1981.

<sup>6</sup> Binford 1984, Ucko 1977.

<sup>7</sup> For a recently developed guideline, see Wunn 2000 (in press).

<sup>8</sup> Mircea Eliade, for example, is convinced that arctic shamanism was as much part of the Palaeolithic belief system as the rites of pygmies; see Eliade 1978: 19.

controversial discussions among archaeologists, it seems to be an accepted fact in the field of History of Religion that Palaeolithic man had a specific religion.<sup>9</sup> They performed rituals related to hunting and believed in a master of animals. They buried the dead and acknowledged a life after death. On the other hand, due to traces of cannibalism, they are assumed to have been wild and primitive. Modern archaeologists and palaeoanthropologists are more cautious in their interpretations. They describe only fossils and excavations and hardly ever venture to comment on the mentality of their object of research.<sup>10</sup>

### 1. Religion of *Australopithecus*, *Homo rudolfensis* and *Homo habilis*

While scholars such as Ioan Couliano or Marija Gimbutas assume that there is no actual proof of religious activity before 60 000 B.C.,<sup>11</sup> Mircea Eliade is convinced that even the first hominids had a certain spiritual awareness. For him it is essential that the upright posture of *Australopithecus* was the decisive step beyond the status of mere primates. Therefore this early genus of hominids is believed to have had a sense of consciousness which differs only slightly from that of modern humans. For Mircea Eliade it is proven that both *Australopithecus* and the first species of the genus *Homo* were successful hunters. He takes for granted that these early hominids were already familiar with rituals that are typical of recent hunter-gatherer communities.<sup>12</sup>

The commonly accepted starting point for prehistorical religion is believed to have been about 6 million years ago, when the common ancestor of modern apes and human beings lived somewhere in the African bush. The fossil remnants of this common ancestor, a true missing link in the evolution of man, has not been discovered until

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Gimbutas 1987: 505-515, Heyden 1987: 127-133, Ripinski-Naxon 1995: 43-54 and Otte 1995: 55-75.

<sup>10</sup> Henke and Rothe 1994.

<sup>11</sup> See Eliade and Couliano 1991: 27, and Gimbutas 1996: 3f.

<sup>12</sup> Eliade 1978: 15.

recently. However, the finding of a new African hominid species in 1994, considered to be at least 4.4 million years old, is closest to approaching the roots of the human phylogenetic tree. This new species was first identified as *Australopithecus ramidus*, but according to the latest anatomical studies it seems to belong to a different genus, *Ardipithecus*.<sup>13</sup> *Ardipithecus ramidus* is probably the ancestor of the so-called australopithecines, who lived in wooded environments of eastern and southern Africa.<sup>14</sup> During the following two million years, the australopithecines developed into several species, which disappeared in part after a comparatively short period. Only one species, most probably the *Australopithecus afarensis*, developed into the first member of the *Homo* lineage. Even the first members of the early genus *Homo* show considerable variability in size and shape, so that they now have been classified as three different species, *Homo habilis*, who is at the beginning of the phylogenetic tree of the genus *Homo*, *H. rudolfensis*, and finally *H. ergaster*, the ancestor of the modern human.<sup>15</sup>

As a result of the latest research in palaeoanthropology (morphology and anatomy) it is impossible to maintain that *Australopithecus* and the early representatives of the species *Homo* pursued the nutrition strategy of hunters. When Raymond Dart published his biological analysis of a childlike skull found in the area of Taung in 1925, he discovered certain anatomical features which made it necessary for him to classify the unknown species as a new biological taxon.<sup>16</sup> *Australopithecus africanus* DART 1925 held, in biological terms, an intermediate position between the well-known apes and the genus *Homo*. These anatomical features of the skull, and therefore the brain, are, however, not linked to intellectual abilities, meaning that the bipedalism of the younger *Australopithecus* could lead to a change of con-

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<sup>13</sup> Henke and Rothe 1999: 143ff.

<sup>14</sup> The phylogenetic tree of *Australopithecus* and *Ardipithecus* is still a main topic of discussion among scientists. See Henke and Rothe 1999: 143ff.

<sup>15</sup> Strait et al. 1997: 17ff.; Henke and Rothe 1999: 177.

<sup>16</sup> See Henke and Rothe 1994: 248.

sciousness. First assumptions, that *Australopithecus* knew how to use fire, were based on a false interpretation of the facts. The blackish patches, which were originally interpreted as traces of fire, were attributable to manganic discoloration. The hypothesis that these early hominids mainly fed on meat, had to be revised. The fossil accumulations of bones found in certain places of the South African savannah were caused by lions and hyenas. From a palaeanthropological point of view it is impossible that the different species of *Australopithecus* with their low brain volume of 310 ccm up to 530 ccm were able to think in abstract terms. It is true that early hominids pursued the strategy of progressive brain development and therefore managed to occupy a new ecological niche as carrion-eaters. This strategy proved to be quite successful during the first steps of the evolution of man, but does not mean that *Australopithecus*, *Homo rudolfensis*, *Homo ergaster* and *Homo habilis* had necessarily better intellectual facilities than modern day chimpanzees.<sup>17</sup> From a different point of view, the archaeologist Stephen Mithen comes to the same conclusion: He pleads for a certain model of the mind's development during evolution, deduced from evolutionary and developmental psychology.<sup>18</sup> Hominids as well as young children seem to have intuitive knowledge in four fundamental behavioural domains. Content-rich mental modules provide young children, and probably our ancestors, with certain abilities, such as social intelligence,<sup>19</sup> intuitive biological knowledge,<sup>20</sup> technical intelligence,<sup>21</sup> and linguistic intelligence. Those domains of the mind determine the way a young child starts learning about language, other minds, and their natural and physical surroundings. During individual development and evolution the multiple, specialised intelligences start working together, so that knowledge and ideas can flow between the former modules.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Grzimek 1972: 517, and Goodall 1990.

<sup>18</sup> Mithen 1996: 42ff.

<sup>19</sup> Whiten 1991.

<sup>20</sup> Atran 1990.

<sup>21</sup> Spelke 1991: 133-168.

<sup>22</sup> Mithen 1996: 64.

But the ancestor of *Australopithecus* and *Australopithecus* himself still had a primitive mind with only powerful general intelligence, a specialised domain of social intelligence and several minor mental modules comparable to the mind of recent apes and monkeys.<sup>23</sup> This means that *Australopithecus* was absolutely not capable of performing rites or developing any religious ideas.

A further crucial step in the direction of hominisation was the preparation and use of tools by the earliest representatives of the genus *Homo*, as Mircea Eliade emphasises. He is convinced that the very slow advancement of the first lithic cultures is not connected to a low intelligence.<sup>24</sup> Eliade takes for granted that early humans of the lower Palaeolithic made their living mainly by hunting. As a result those early hunters should have developed a reference system between hunter and killed animal, which first led to a kind of mythical solidarity between hunter and game and was the origin of religiosity.<sup>25</sup>

The hypothesis that early hominids already were successful hunters is attributable to Raymond Dart, who suddenly found himself at the centre of general critical interest due to his exciting discovery of a new species.<sup>26</sup> Since humans, according to Raymond Dart, are the only meat-eating primates, his biological conclusions regarding the classification of the skull of Taung would be supported by evidence of similar behaviour of this early hominid species.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, he looked specifically for fossil bone beds, which he interpreted to be the remnants of the prey of *Australopithecus*. In this context he also discovered densities close to the bone beds, which he thought to be traces of fire. Today it is known that those dense areas are merely manganese discolorations. Dart's thesis seemed to be confirmed by

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 94.

<sup>24</sup> Eliade 1978: 16.

<sup>25</sup> Eliade 1978: 16, 17.

<sup>26</sup> Many arguments against Dart's classification of the "Baby of Taung" are due to scepticism and envy. Henke and Rothe 1994: 248.

<sup>27</sup> Also the hypothesis of Joseph Campbell is based on Dart. See Campbell 1987: 359f.

Louis Leakey in the Tanzanian Olduvai Gorge, where the famous anthropologist found remnants of an early hominid, classified as *Zinjanthropus*, along with primitive stone tools. Although there were substantial doubts about Dart's thesis — how could a delicate creature weighing approximately 45 kg be able to kill the large ungulates of the African savannah? — Dart's point of view became generally popular and accepted in the sixties.<sup>28</sup> Only intensive research regarding the behaviour of carnivores and taphonomic and sedimentological processes made it clear that the fossil bone beds were the results of different forces in an ecological system seen as a whole.<sup>29</sup> The layers of the findings were by no means the result of the activities of only one species and certainly not of the weak and delicate *Australopithecus*. As a result of these investigations it is certain that the first humans, including *Homo habilis*, fed on fruit, vegetables and carrion and were not at all able to hunt.<sup>30</sup> On the contrary, the so-called “Baby of Taung” had itself become the prey of a predatory animal. The first stone tools, the so-called choppers, did not serve to kill the prey, but to crack nut-shells and split open the bones of ungulates killed by lions or hyenas, in order to obtain the precious marrow. That was the single part of the prey that was left for *Australopithecus* or *Homo habilis/rudolfensis/ergaster*.<sup>31</sup>

Neither *Australopithecus* nor *Homo habilis* nor *Homo ergaster* fits into the category of a hunter. The mythical solidarity between hunter and victim, claimed by Mircea Eliade for the humans of the lower Palaeolithic, results from false assumptions. Eliade assumes that intelligence, imagination, and the activity of the subconscious of the early hominids differed only slightly from the intellectual abilities of the modern *Homo sapiens*. The results of modern palaeoanthropology

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<sup>28</sup> Even in the late seventies and early eighties the archaeologist Glynn Isaac advanced a hypothesis concerning human evolution based on the assumption that early *Homo* consumed a large quantity of meat (Isaac 1978).

<sup>29</sup> See Binford 1984: 28-57, and Henke and Rothe 1994: 355f.

<sup>30</sup> Binford 1984: 57, and Schrenk 1997: 49 and 72.

<sup>31</sup> Henke and Rothe 1999: 187.

and evolutionary psychology indicate that the intellectual capability of those early forms of hominids is in no way comparable to that of recent *Homo sapiens*. As stone tools and remains of meals prove, the first member of the genus *Homo* had developed only a very small domain for technical intelligence and several tiny mental modules for interaction with the natural world, but had not yet full natural history intelligence.<sup>32</sup> The discrete domain of social intelligence, which the ancestor of early hominids had already acquired, developed during the first steps of human evolution into a more powerful and complex part of the mind. Probably even a primitive kind of linguistic intelligence had started to develop. As Steven Mithen emphasises, the intellectual capability of the *Homo habilis* group was already higher than that of *Australopithecus*, but nevertheless “little more than an elaborate version of the mind of the common ancestor.”<sup>33</sup> Therefore *Australopithecus*, *Homo rudolfensis* and *Homo habilis/ergaster* were at the origin of a development that encouraged the growth of hominids by forcing them to occupy the niche of meat-eaters. They were competitively successful because they developed the intellectual facilities allowing them to use stone tools to serve their needs, but not to think in abstract terms.

Mircea Eliade also assumes that early hominids were able to hunt successfully. There is no archaeological evidence for this assumption. It is certain that both *Australopithecus* and early *Homo* occupied the niche of carrion-eaters. Eliade himself was absolutely convinced that even the first of the hominids had a kind of religion that resembled in one way or the other the religion of recent hunter-gatherer communities. He called upon his critics to present evidence on the non-religiosity of early hominids.<sup>34</sup> The palaeoanthropology and evolutionary psychology has since provided this evidence.

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<sup>32</sup> Mithen 1996: 104ff.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 112.

<sup>34</sup> Eliade 1978: 17.



## 2. *Religiosity of Homo erectus and his Contemporaries*

*Homo erectus* and his immediate descendants were the first hominids who succeeded in leaving the African continent and to settle almost everywhere in the Old World.<sup>35</sup> One of the oldest known European fossils is a jaw of the genus *Homo*, discovered among the pebbles on the banks of the Neckar river at the village of Mauer near Heidelberg. This jaw of *Homo erectus heidelbergensis* is approximately 650 000 to 600 000 years old.<sup>36</sup> Geologically the find belongs to the period of Cromer. This is a period between two long-lasting ice-ages, the Günz- and the Mindel-periods, when a relatively warm climate enabled humans to occupy new habitats. Primitive stone tools from the Neuwieder Becken and the latest excavations at Burgos in Spain prove that the European continent was inhabited at least 800 000 years ago, or even earlier. Information on the life style of *Homo erectus* could only be gained from excavations at Bilzingsleben, where an early settlement of *Homo erectus* could be found. Geologically Bilzingsleben belongs to the Holstein period. This means that the findings at this place are not only 200 000 years younger than the jaw from Mauer, but completely independent of the first appearance of a specimen of *Homo erectus* as a result of an entire ice-age. This period led to a characteristic change of flora and fauna, which formed the landscape and ecosystem during the

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<sup>35</sup> The oldest human fossil of Europe was detected in 1994 in the Gran Dolina of Atapuerca in Spain. These early humans are about 780 000 years old. These hominids, named *Homo antecessor*, seem to differ significantly from the well known (Asian) *Homo erectus* and the African *Homo ergaster*, which means that the early hominids of Africa, Asia and Europe belong to different species. Several scientists emphasise the following phylogenetic tree: *Homo antecessor* developed from the African *Homo ergaster* and succeeded to settle in Europe. Here he became the ancestor of *Homo heidelbergensis*, who himself developed into the European *Homo neanderthalensis*. See Henke and Rothe 1999: 204-217.

<sup>36</sup> The remnants of four individuals of the species *Homo antecessor*, which were detected at the excavation site "La Gran Dolina" near Burgos, belong to the eldest members of the genus *Homo* in Europe. An isolated skull, found near Isneria, Italy, is nearly as old. Early tools from France have an age of between one million and two million years and prove that Europe was inhabited very early.

first conquest of Europe by a hominid. The distance in time between the findings of Mauer and Bilzingsleben is reflected in the development of the culture. While the tools of *Homo erectus heidelbergensis* were still simple handaxes, the *Homo erectus bilzingslebensis* was already capable of manufacturing developed weapons and tools. Theoretically, this made him capable of hunting for game.

Anatomically *H. erectus bilzingslebensis* was more developed than his predecessor. Therefore the way of life of *H. erectus heidelbergensis* must have been even simpler and less advanced.<sup>37</sup> The excavation of the settlement at Bilzingsleben provides insight into the way of life of the younger *Homo erectus*. The archaeological findings of early man prove the following facts: At Bilzingsleben a small group of early humans camped at the shore of a small lake in not more than two or three tents. Here they seemed to have occasionally hunted a beaver or other small animals. Their stone tools were suitable for hunting smaller prey, whereas no weapon was found which would have been effective enough to kill an elephant or a bison. The distribution of the elements of the fauna supports this point of view.<sup>38</sup> Additionally they may have fed on the corpses of dead animals which were probably found frequently along the shore of the lake. Surely elephant and rhino bones, which were found at the working sites and served as support or work material, originated from dead animals that were not killed by *H. erectus bilzingslebensis*. One could conclude that they also ate fish, eggs and vegetables, and that the food was most likely cooked. The people of Bilzingsleben were already aware of a certain code of social behaviour and it is also clear that there was some degree of emotional exchange between certain members of the group. There are no indications of any religious activities. The comparison of *Homo erectus bilzingslebensis* with recent hunter-gatherer communities is not convincing due to the following facts: The popular belief that *H. erectus* successfully hunted larger game, has been disproved. Many of the findings of fossil bone beds which were said to be due to

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<sup>37</sup> See Henke and Rothe 1994: 407f.

<sup>38</sup> Mania and Weber 1986: 20ff.

the hunting activities of the *H. erectus* are in the near vicinity of watering places. Here the ungulates frequently became the prey of predatory animals. Analysis of the individual age of the bones of fossil mammals at Bilzingsleben and other Palaeolithic settlements led to the conclusion that many of those animals died naturally.<sup>39</sup> The first evidence that at least the younger *Homo erectus* was capable of hunting larger prey came from Schöningen near Helmstedt, Germany, where a wooden spear about 1.5 meters long was found in a hunting camp inhabited about 400 000 years ago.<sup>40</sup> *Homo erectus* had a brain volume which was still quite small compared to the brain of recent *Homo sapiens*. Only the younger *H. erectus* is supposed to have been capable of verbal communication, as anatomical investigations have proven. Though there is no direct relationship between brain volume and intelligence, behaviour or certain abilities, scholars are convinced that *H. erectus* was quite primitive compared to *H. sapiens*, as the archaeological findings related to his culture have revealed.<sup>41</sup> The results of evolutionary psychology seem to prove the following facts: Obviously technical skills increased dramatically over those of *H. habilis*. Natural history intelligence and social intelligence were also well developed. On the other hand the technical conservatism of *Homo erectus* over a period of about one million years is striking. The only explanation for this contradictory evidence is to assume that the well developed multiple intelligences of the *H. erectus* were still committed to specific domains of behaviour, with very little interaction between them.<sup>42</sup> Thinking and communication in abstract terms, which are essential for religious awareness, probably developed quite late.

Though excavations like the camp of Bilzingsleben, Markleeberg, Kärlich or Bad Cannstadt and the results of archaeological psychology do not support the hypothesis that early man performed any religious rites, and though the discussion of palaeanthropological facts prove

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<sup>39</sup> Henke and Rothe 1994: 428.

<sup>40</sup> Thieme 1997: 807-810.

<sup>41</sup> See Henke and Rothe 1994: 424.

<sup>42</sup> Mithen 1996: 115ff.

that *H. erectus* was not at all capable of performing complicated rituals, it is still the opinion among scholars of the History of Religion and several archaeologists that ritual cannibalism was common among early human populations. Thus Alfred Rust writes: "Unique finds from Asia prove that cannibalism was exercised in the whole world."<sup>43</sup> Alfred Rust refers to finds of *Homo erectus* in the caves of Zhoukoudian which reveal many similarities to Bilzingsleben.<sup>44</sup> While Alfred Rust is convinced that the presence of several "smashed" human skulls is a clear sign of ritual cannibalism, Johannes Maringer presumes that skulls and lower jaws are the remnants of the deceased which had been kept and worshipped by their family. Similar customs are still evident among members of primitive cultures in Africa or Asia.<sup>45</sup> The palaeo-anthropologists Winfried Henke and Hartmut Rothe express strong and justified doubt about this assertion. The analysis of several craniums of early man gave evidence that the destruction of the skulls was due to the activities of ancient hyena and normal taphonomic processes.<sup>46</sup> The archaeologist André Leroi-Gourhan had already noted in the sixties: "The conditions of the former excavations of Chou Kou Tien make it difficult to even find a map of the site of skulls. The skulls were extracted from solid limestone and not even one of them is near to being complete. After decomposing into tiny sections, they entered the general category of the animal remains. It is difficult to understand how the myth of head-collecting *Sinanthropus* could have assumed a definite form."<sup>47</sup> Another victim of such prejudice is Karl Dietrich Adam with his hypothesis that the skull of *Homo erectus steinheimensis* shows traces of having been subjected to postmortal manipulations.<sup>48</sup> The destruction of the base of the skull is his only criterion for the hypothesis that stone-age man was frequently the victim of ritual prac-

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<sup>43</sup> Rust 1991: 175.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 178.

<sup>45</sup> Maringer 1956: 64-71.

<sup>46</sup> Rust 1991: 178f., and Henke and Rothe 1994: 428.

<sup>47</sup> Leroi-Gourhan 1981: 49.

<sup>48</sup> Adam 1991: 218.

tices. Between the death of the individual and the later recovery of the fossil, a number of taphonomic processes take place, which have significant effects on the later fossil. One of those effects is the modification of organic matter and its decay, the assortment or destruction of hard sections as well as sedimentological processes. André Leroi-Gourhan was able to show that the cranium and lower jaws are usually well preserved. Therefore it is only due to taphonomic processes that these individual body parts survive, and not at all due to human activities or postmortal manipulation.<sup>49</sup> In this connection it is necessary to emphasise that scholars can only come to a decision based on a series of complex investigations using a scanning electron microscope, as to whether scratches on fossil bones are due to violence caused by a stone tool or the teeth of a predatory animal. Since there are no archaeological findings for the entire Palaeolithic or Neolithic period to prove the opening of the skull by humans, none of the speculations about possible cult practice connected with human skulls is based on facts.<sup>50</sup>

### 3. Religion in the Middle Palaeolithic

From an anthropological point of view, the European middle Palaeolithic is characterised by *Homo neanderthalensis*.<sup>51</sup> This early form of *Homo sapiens* or descendant of *Homo heidelbergensis* lived over a pe-

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<sup>49</sup> Leroi-Gourhan 1981: 45, 55.

<sup>50</sup> Experiments with animal bones have shown that scratches made by stone tools are absolutely equal to scratches caused by sand. Those scratches occur frequently during the process of embedding. It is still difficult to distinguish between traces of human activities and traces of animal bites. An examination is only possible with the help of a scanning electron microscope. See Henke and Rothe 1994: 20-24.

<sup>51</sup> The so-called Neanderthal-problem is, however, a source of heated debate. Only ten years ago many palaeoanthropologists were convinced that Neanderthal man belonged to our species *H. sapiens*. His characteristic features were supposed to be due to the extreme climate of the ice-age. In the meantime most scientists have been convinced that *Homo neanderthalensis* developed directly from *Homo heidelbergensis*, while the modern *Homo sapiens* developed during the same time in Africa and conquered Europe about 40 000 years ago. See Henke and Rothe 1994: 433ff., and Henke and Rothe 1999: 272f.

riod of nearly 100 000 years, during which the landscape, climate and living conditions changed dramatically. These environmental changes might have contributed to the special anatomical features of the Neanderthal man. Surely the need to adapt to a frequently changing habitat forced *H. neanderthalensis* to develop sociocultural abilities that were closely related to the progressive evolution of intelligence and psychological abilities.<sup>52</sup> The frequent environmental changes to which *H. neanderthalensis* had to adapt made life immensely challenging. In the warmer and humid periods of the Eem period, dense forests covered the landscape. Population migration was only possible in the valleys. The fauna consisted of elephant, deer, stag, aurochs, bear and others. Sufficient food-supply in the direct surroundings allows one to believe that Neanderthal man was relatively stationary during this climatic period. The excavated settlement of Weimar-Ehringsdorf was inhabited during this time. During the initial phase of cooler climate the flora changed. Fir and pine trees were common and formed large and humid forests. The winters were cold and snow was plentiful; even in summertime the temperature remained low. Not only non-migrating animals were hunted by Neanderthal man; herds of reindeer, wild horse, bison and mammoth provided sufficient opportunity for hunting. During the coldest periods the forests disappeared, and made room for

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<sup>52</sup> Steven Mithen emphasises that natural history intelligence, technical intelligence, social and linguistic intelligence of Neanderthal man were all well developed, but there was still a lack of interaction between the four domains of the mind. Cognitive fluidity took place only between the domains of social and linguistic intelligence (Mithen 1996: 143 and 147ff.) The author of this article has a different opinion. In general the lithic culture of Neanderthal man is the Mousterian, which is still simple compared to the technology of the upper Palaeolithic. On the other hand the lithic cultures are not strictly related to the one or the other human species. *Homo neanderthalensis* too was found together with the more advanced tools of the upper Palaeolithic, while *Homo sapiens* was found with the simple tools of the Mousterian culture. Therefore direct connections between a certain human species and its lithic culture cannot be proved. The technical skills of the younger *H. neanderthalensis* and early *H. sapiens* obviously did not differ. That means that there is no palaeanthropological evidence for the assumption of fundamental difference between the minds of *H. neanderthalensis* and *H. sapiens* (Henke and Rothe 1999: 275, Reynolds 1990: 263ff).

prairies and tundra. The climate became dry with extremely cold winters and relatively mild, but short summers. The prairies were full of game which migrated with the seasons.<sup>53</sup>

### The Magic of Hunting in the Middle Palaeolithic

The hunting activities of the Palaeolithic man, which Mircea Eliade and other scholars take for granted, are only able to be proved with reference to later periods of ice-age. At the town of Lehringen near Verden an der Aller the skeleton of an elephant had been preserved that had been killed with the aid of a wooden spear, found between the ribs of the animal. This is impressive evidence of the fact that *Homo neanderthalensis* was able to successfully hunt big game. Therefore it can be assumed that Mircea Eliade's precise conceptions of religion during prehistoric times may at least be correct with regard to the people of the Mousterian. He describes this religion as "magic-religious conceptions of Palaeolithic man" as follows.<sup>54</sup> The documents regarding the religion of the Palaeolithic man are obscure, he says, but available. Their meaning can be deciphered if the scholar succeeds in inserting these documents into a semantic system.<sup>55</sup> This semantic system is already given by the results of investigations of recent hunter-gatherer communities. Their similar lifestyle offers sufficient certainty for identical or very similar religions of recent hunter-gatherers and Palaeolithic man. Therefore *Homo neanderthalensis* believed that the animal is a being quite similar to man, but talented with supernatural forces. He was convinced that gods such as the "Master of the Animals" or "Supreme Being" existed. The kill of the animal took place after a complicated ritual. On the other hand rites must have existed, which were linked with a skull-cult and deposits of long bones. Similarly, Ioan Couliano argues that, "either similar models of well-known primitive peoples are referred to, or one dispenses with any model. The History of Religion can only use the first option, as imperfect as it may be. Scholars

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<sup>53</sup> See Henke and Rothe 1994: 525.

<sup>54</sup> Eliade 1978: 15ff.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 18.

have to endeavour to decipher the mental horizon of the people of pre-historic times by using the results of ethnographic and archaeological studies.”<sup>56</sup> John Campbell concludes from the myths of known peoples that there must be close connections between the religions of Palaeolithic man and recent hunter-gatherers. The following conviction is both precondition and result of his investigations: “I find that its main result has been its confirmation of a thought I have long and faithfully entertained: of the unity of the race of man, not only in its biology but also in its spiritual history.”<sup>57</sup> He proves his assumption with the help of a comparison. Under the title “The Stage of Neanderthal Man” the reader finds the detailed description of the life habits of the small and delicate Negritos of the Andaman Islands in the Gulf of Bengal, but Campbell fails to prove the connections between the habits of a people of recent tropical Asia and an anatomically different prehistoric people which lived in boreal climates 100 000 years ago.<sup>58</sup> Another argument of John Campbell’s is founded on archaeological facts. The stone blades of the Mousterian (the material culture of Neanderthal man is mainly Mousterian) are still very similar, a wider range of different tools was unknown at that time. This means, for Campbell, that the custom of tool-making was carefully handed down from one generation to another, comparably to customs of recent bushman culture. This extraordinary attention is due to a certain feeling of the holy, which was connected with the manufacturing and use of the tool.<sup>59</sup> The passing on of Palaeolithic religion to religions of recent hunter-gatherer communities serves as a proof that the myths of recent peoples originated in the Palaeolithic and have been handed down till today without any changes. This means that Joseph Campbell constructed a typical circular argument. Today’s behaviours and myths are taken as proof, in order to postulate the existence of the same behaviours and myths as practised by Palaeolithic man. Then the postulate itself is taken as

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<sup>56</sup> Eliade and Couliano: 1991: 27.

<sup>57</sup> Campbell 1987: v.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 365ff.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. 364f.



a voucher to prove the unchanged existence of those myths from the Palaeolithic up to now.

The opinion that Palaeolithic man already had a complicated religion, with certain notions of the holy and various rituals, can be found in nearly every religious reference work. Fritz Hartmann writes for example: "The magic of the hunt belongs to this typically human conception of the world."<sup>60</sup>

Even if the consequences drawn from the archaeologically secured facts in the past seem frequently exaggerated, several sentences in the volume of Johannes Maringer explain the intention of the authors. It was the common statement that prehistoric man was a mere beast without a developed mind that made the opponents of this point of view look for counter-arguments which are no longer defensible in the light of modern research results.<sup>61</sup> The use of ethnographic analogies to reconstruct prehistoric religion is based on a specific understanding of the evolution of religion. In the nineteenth century Charles Darwin's theory of biological evolution influenced nearly all branches of science. In the fields of the study of religion and anthropology, scholars like Edward Burnett Tylor or James George Frazer developed conceptions of religious evolution which have strongly determined research until today. Tylor as well as Frazer were convinced that they could prove an ascending development of religion from primitive origins to the modern religions of the industrial age. According to this theory the religions of recent hunter-gatherer communities can be classified as relics from ancient times.<sup>62</sup> This means, on the contrary, that it is possible to reconstruct the consciousness of ancient people with the help of knowledge about the religion of today's hunter-gatherer communities. However, only a brief insight into the multiplicity of so-called primitive religions reveals that their contents and symbols are not similar by any means. According to Max Raphael, the faith-conceptions of

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<sup>60</sup> Hartmann 1957: 403. Among the latest literature see, for example, Grim 1998: 1107-1108, and Hultkrantz 1998: 746-752.

<sup>61</sup> Maringer 1956: 59ff.

<sup>62</sup> Michaels (ed.) 1997: 41-60 and 77-89.

recent hunter-gatherer communities cannot be consulted in order to derive from them a certain belief of prehistoric man. Even people living on a relatively primitive economical level up to the present day, have been affected by their past, which has influenced their state of mind. As a result their ideas and religious conceptions changed in the same manner as the belief system of modern communities did.<sup>63</sup> The anthropologist Wilhelm Emil Mühlmann acknowledges the arguments of Max Raphael when he emphasises that all known primitive religions are younger than theological religions.<sup>64</sup> Even if ecological and economical prerequisites of different societies are the same, they do not necessarily have the same or a similar belief system, identical rituals, symbols and practices. Hermann Schulz emphasises: “Kulturell auf das engste verwandte Gruppen können einen religiös-symbolisch und artefaktreichen Ritualismus entwickeln (Sepik-Gebiet) oder innerhalb der elaborierten ritualsymbolischen Medien tendentiell nichtreligiöse, artefakt-arme Programme elaborieren (Kapauku).”<sup>65</sup>

The arguments show that it is by no means sufficient to find proof for the hunting practices of Neanderthal man in order to imply any kind of religion and especially not a definite and well-known religion.

### Bear-cult

The existence of the cult of the bear in the middle Palaeolithic period is taken for granted. Åke Hulkrantz writes: “Die Kulturen des ark-

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<sup>63</sup> Max Raphael writes: “Man hat diese Schwierigkeit umgehen wollen durch Heranziehen von Aussagen sogenannter primitiver Kulturvölker. Diese nur in sehr engen Grenzen mögliche Analogie übersieht, daß auch diese Stämme eine Geschichte gehabt haben — eine regressive statt der progressiven der Kulturvölker. Es liegt ein unberechtigtes Vorurteil in der Annahme der Einfrierung des Gewesenen; denn die ‘Primitiven’ finden sich, selbst wo sie auf dem Stadium der Jagdwirtschaft stehen geblieben sind, mit den alten Werkzeugen und Waffen einer anderen Umgebung gegenüber: die starken, den Einzelmenschen an Mächtigkeit überragenden Tiere sind ersetzt durch wesentlich kleinere und schwächere” (Raphael 1978: 78).

<sup>64</sup> Mühlmann 1957: 1198.

<sup>65</sup> Schulz 1993: 189.

tischen Raumes sind Bruchstücke einer paläolithischen Jagdkultur.”<sup>66</sup> Friedrich Heiler<sup>67</sup> refers to similar ideas as those expressed by Joseph Campbell, who describes the cult of the bear in an interesting, but hardly well-grounded manner. First Campbell refers to a bear-festival among the Ainu. After the killing of the captured bear and during the ceremonies, the skull of the animal is put at the top of a long stick.<sup>68</sup> In a second step Campbell portrays Neanderthal man in impressive terms: “. . . when the remains of a strangely brutish yet manlike skeleton were found in a limestone quarry not far from Düsseldorf, in the Valley of Neander.”<sup>69</sup> The following descriptions shortly mention the caves of the Alps, where the remains of the bears were detected. The excavators had the impression that the arrangement of the fossil bones could hardly be due to nature, so they attributed this to the activities of *H. neanderthalensis*, who were assumed to have killed the animals and arranged their bones during certain ceremonies.<sup>70</sup> It is true that nearly everywhere in the Arctic primitive peoples know certain rituals connected with the hunting of the bear.<sup>71</sup> The excavators of the caves, Emil Bächler and Karl Hörmann, took these ceremonies of circumpolar peoples to prove their hypothesis of an ancient bear-cult in prehistoric times.<sup>72</sup> In the following years several discoveries of similar bear-caves seemed to support the hypothesis of cave bear worship. Emil Bächler himself discovered bear bone deposits at the Wildenmannlisloch in Switzerland and in Slovenia’s Mornova Cave. In 1946 André Leroi-Gourhan excavated seven cave bear skulls arranged in a circle in Furtins Cave, Saône-et-Loire. In 1950 Kurt Ehrenberg secured

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<sup>66</sup> Hultkrantz 1998: 751.

<sup>67</sup> See Heiler 1979: 78.

<sup>68</sup> Campbell 1987: 334ff.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 339.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. 341f.

<sup>71</sup> Edsman 1957: 841.

<sup>72</sup> Maringer 1956: 95ff.

a deposit of long bones arranged together with cave bear skulls in the Salzhofen Cave in the Austrian Alps.<sup>73</sup>

The latest find of supposed traces of prehistoric cave bear worship was published in 1996. In the Rumanian Bihor-Mountains Christian Lascu et al. discovered a cave rich in palaeontological cave bear deposits.<sup>74</sup> Scholars such as Johannes Maringer or Åke Hultkrantz refer to the reports of the excavators when they interpret the deposits as the remainder of cult practice. The historian Karl Narr also gives an account of the deposits of cave bear skulls and long bones, but remains sceptical.<sup>75</sup>

A detailed discussion of the finds of cave bear bones from a palaeontological and ethnographic point of view led to completely different results.<sup>76</sup> The careful and critical use of ethnographic analogues, on which the theories of a cave bear cult is founded in the end, leads to even contrary results. If *H. neanderthalensis* had known cave bear worship, its traces would have been found inside the settlements. The remains of such a cult would have been the bone deposits of Neanderthal man's favourite and most dangerous game, among which, however, the bear did not rank. Recent peoples, who know the bear cult, catch or kill a bear in his winter accommodation and bring it to their settlement. There it is killed and eaten by the villagers under different ritual regulations. The bones of the dead game are put into a holy place or are carefully buried near the village, but never brought back again to the dwelling of the bear.

The most impressive arguments against cave bear worship come nevertheless from the bone deposits itself: Crucial palaeontological objections are to be stated first of all. Both the cave bear (*Ursus spelaeus*), which was extinct at the end of the last ice age, and the brown bear (*Ursus arctos*), which spread all over Eurasia since the Eem period, show a strong preference for cave accommodation. There

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<sup>73</sup> See Lascu et al. 1996: 19-20, and Maringer 1956: 91-96.

<sup>74</sup> See Lascu et al. 1996.

<sup>75</sup> Narr 1957: 10.

<sup>76</sup> Wunn 1999a: 3-23.

they hide during wintertime and give birth to their young. The caves where the relics of alleged bear worship were found are the natural habitat of the animals, where they spend the long winters and hide their young. At those places the bears sometimes died for several reasons, for example age, illness, lack of food. Therefore their bone fossils are bound to be found in those places, if they were not carried off by carrion eaters or removed by sedimentological processes. The occurrence of cave bear bones in the caves of the ice age, which served generations of bear families as shelter, is just what a palaeontologist would expect.

The proponents of Palaeolithic bear worship did not only think the mere occurrence of bear bones in the caves to be remarkable, but also their alleged assortment and arrangement in which they were found. However, there first takes place an amassment of bear bones in certain places by the activities of the bears themselves, as André Leroi-Gourhan correctly noticed. The parts of skeletons of the deceased animals, which originally are in their anatomical order, are thrown in disorder or scattered by later generations of bears. Sometimes they are pressed to the walls, where they are relatively protected against further decay.<sup>77</sup> Also the outweighing of skulls and long bones is a result of a process of natural decay and not due to human activities. The mentioned parts of the skeleton are relatively heavy and compact, so that they are more able to resist decomposition processes than the small vertebrae, ribs, foot-bones or hand-bones. A result of those processes is the natural selection of the bone material.<sup>78</sup> But not only decomposition influences the state of the bones. During their history the caves were flooded several times, as the accumulated sediments prove. Such floodings do not remain without influence on the fossil material. With high water level and stronger current all loose material is either rinsed away or carried for a certain distance and then dropped at a place where there is a weaker current. During these processes the anatomical bone order is radically altered. Therefore

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<sup>77</sup> Leroi-Gourhan 1981: 39.

<sup>78</sup> Ziegler 1975: 44-45.

the accumulation of several skulls in one place and the absence of other bones is due to geological and sedimentological processes and not to human intervention. The floating ability of sediments can be reduced by prominent parts of the walls or unevenness of the floor, resulting in some bone parts being deposited in the proximity of obstacles. A concrete example of this effect is the discovery of several skulls deposited in a crosslike pattern in the Cold Cave of the Bihor Mountains. The obstacle, which reduced the transportability of the skulls crucially, was a stone, at which the fossil skulls were deposited.<sup>79</sup> Just as little as the assortment of the bone material is proof of human activities, so the adjustment of the fossils is an unnatural process. The movements of a transport medium, be it wind, sediment or water, are transferred to the material to be transported, so that the movement in a special direction leads to its assortment. Therefore the assortment of bear skulls is not due to human activities, but to the flowing water or other transport mediums in the caves. It cannot be said clearly enough: There was no cave bear worship in the middle Palaeolithic period at all. The bear caves show exactly what a palaeontologist would expect. Nothing suggests that the natural process of decay and sedimentation was at any time interrupted or disturbed.<sup>80</sup>

#### Combined burials of man and cave bear

In connection with assumed bear worship the opinion was held that sometimes men and bear were buried together in one grave.<sup>81</sup> As evidence served the excavations at Le Régourdou near Lascaux, where under a hill of debris both the remains of a bear and a Neanderthal man were preserved. The French archaeologist Fabienne May demonstrated that the remains of the bear bore no connection with the human

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<sup>79</sup> See Lascu et al. 1996: 30, plate 3.

<sup>80</sup> Wunn 1999a: 6ff.

<sup>81</sup> Rust 1986: 15.

skeleton, and questioned whether there was a funeral at Le Régourdou at all.<sup>82</sup>

Skull deposits and skull worship.

Just as the bear worship was regarded as irrefutable fact, there was hardly any doubt that Neanderthal man subjected the heads of the deceased to a special treatment and set them up for ritual purposes. Other scholars are convinced that Neanderthal man hunted fellow humans to kill and eat them.<sup>83</sup> It is said that the skulls of the killed later became the focal point of a ritual. This hypothesis is suggested by Ioan Couliano: “Einige Schädel sind in einer Weise verformt, die den Gedanken an ein Herauslösen des Gehirns nahelegen.”<sup>84</sup> Alfred Rust expresses himself absolutely clearly: He is sure that the finds of isolated lower jaws and craniums are closely connected with religious customs.<sup>85</sup> Detailed and critically Johannes Maringer argues the question of the skull cult. He discusses the finds which were considered as proof of the presence of the alleged practices. There is, for example, the crushed childlike skull from Gibraltar or the finds of human remains at Weimar-Ehringsdorf and particularly the outstanding find of the skull of Monte Circeo, which is mentioned by every author as evidence of the described ritual practice. Finally he comes to the following result: “Das Fundbild der Guattari-Grotte spricht klar für einen Kult, in dessen Mittelpunkt der Schädel stand. Ursprünglich scheint er auf einem Stock aufgesteckt gewesen zu sein. . . . Einem heiligen Bannkreis gleich umgab ihn der Kranz von Steinen. Der ganze Höhlenteil erweckt den Eindruck, als habe er den in der vorderen Höhle wohnenden Urmenschen als Heiligtum gedient”;<sup>86</sup> and further, “Die Schädelsetzungen dürften aller Wahrscheinlichkeit nach eine Art Schädelkult darstellen, in dem das Gedächtnis der

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid. 15.

<sup>83</sup> Ullrich 1978: 293ff. See also the overview in Henke and Rothe 1999: 277.

<sup>84</sup> Eliade and Couliano 1991: 28.

<sup>85</sup> Rust 1991: 194.

<sup>86</sup> Maringer 1956: 80.

Verstorbenen gepflegt und ihre Hilfe wie auch ihr Schutz für die Sippe erfleht wurde.”<sup>87</sup> Even André Leroi-Gourhan agrees that the skull of Monte Circeo is an intentional deposition of a skull, but he refuses to draw any conclusions concerning religious customs.<sup>88</sup> On the other hand he can prove that all other finds of isolated heads or jaws are the result of taphonomic processes.<sup>89</sup> After a careful re-examination of the original reports of the excavations, Fabienne May states that none of the descriptions of the excavations is sufficient to confirm or disprove the hypothesis of a ritual.<sup>90</sup> The discovery of a supposed cult site at Teshik-Tash in Uzbekistan, where the skull of a child was set up between several skulls of ibex, does not prove the hypothesis of a cult. In this case the remnants of ibexes and the skull of the child have no connection at all.<sup>91</sup> Since it could be shown that even the skull deposit of Monte Circeo was not the result of human activities, but that the damages of the skull were due to the work of hungry hyenas, the last argument in favour of a skull cult is disproved.<sup>92</sup>

### Cannibalism

Cannibalism has already been mentioned in connection with the deposition of human skulls. André Leroi-Gourhan expresses himself as follows: “Die Existenz eines religiösen Kannibalismus im Paläolithikum mag wahrscheinlich sein, doch läßt sich dies bei der gegenwärtigen Materiallage absolut nicht beweisen. Und dennoch spricht kein Autor von der paläolithischen Religion, ohne für oder gegen die Kannibalismusthese Stellung zu beziehen, wobei in größerem Umfang auf ethnographische Beispiele zurückgegriffen wird.”<sup>93</sup> But particularly those ethnographic analogies give strong arguments against the hypothesis of prehistoric cannibalism. The anthropologist

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid. 85.

<sup>88</sup> Leroi-Gourhan 1981: 53.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. 54-56.

<sup>90</sup> May 1986: 17.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. 33-34.

<sup>92</sup> Henke and Rothe 1994: 527.

<sup>93</sup> Leroi-Gourhan 1981: 56.



Gabriele Weiss and the archaeologist Heidi Peter-Röcher discuss the topic of cannibalism carefully.<sup>94</sup> They state that the ethnographic material itself is frequently not convincing, because it is based mainly on sensational reports of past adventurers. There are no assertions by eye-witnesses, but stories of man eaters were always reported by writers who only stated that they had heard about those customs. The custom of cannibalism itself was always stated to have been given up just several years before the arrival of the traveller.<sup>95</sup> Frequently the assumption that a certain people was guilty of cannibalism was used propagandistically in order to be able to lead a war against this people or to force them into slavery.<sup>96</sup> On the other hand it was a well known rumour in Africa even up to the beginning of this century that Europeans fed on the flesh of African children.<sup>97</sup> It is argued by Heidi Peter-Röcher that there is no evidence of cannibalism among recent peoples at all.<sup>98</sup> This means that it is nonsense to search for the reason and the origin of that custom in prehistoric times. It cannot be decided to what extent Sigmund Freud, with his hypothesis of the origin of human society, must be blamed for evoking the idea of early man-eaters. In his *Totem und Tabu* he made several statements about the origin of human society, claiming that at the beginning of prehistory a group of humans was ruled by a despotic patriarch, until he was killed and eaten by his sons.<sup>99</sup> The subtitle of his book, "Einige Übereinstimmungen im Seelenleben der Wilden und der Neurotiker,"<sup>100</sup> reflects, however, the

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<sup>94</sup> Weiss 1987: 142-159, and Peter-Röcher 1989.

<sup>95</sup> Volhard 1939: 369.

<sup>96</sup> Gabriele Weiss (1987: 152) mentions the example of a decree of Queen Isabella in 1503, who gave permission to enslave the Caribbean Indians because they were said to be man-eaters.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid. 150.

<sup>98</sup> Peter-Röcher 1998. On the contrary the American anthropologist Christy Turner is convinced that the Anasazi, an Indian people who lived in the southern parts of the United States during historical times, did human hunting. See Turner 1999.

<sup>99</sup> See Weiss 1987: 44-45.

<sup>100</sup> Weiss 1987: 44.

opinion of many of his contemporaries and colleagues, and contributes to the picture of the mentality of Neanderthal man until today.<sup>101</sup>

The facts on which the theory of prehistoric cannibalism are based are usually poor. Frequently it was sufficient to assume cannibalism existed, if a skeleton was found incomplete or not in anatomical order.<sup>102</sup> It is still considered a strong proof for cannibalism when split human bones occur, as were excavated at Krapina. The defenders of the cannibalism thesis argue that the remnants of human bones look absolutely similar to the scattered animal bones at the same excavation site. Therefore they come to the conclusion that Neanderthal man treated fellow humans in the same way as he treated game. This argument is still stressed by the anthropologists Tim White and Alban Defleur: Scattered bones of human beings and deer in the cave of Moula-Guercy show the same scratches.<sup>103</sup> This argument presupposes, however, that the humans as well as the animals were killed by Neanderthal man. Both the humans and the animals could, however, have been the victims of carnivores, for example hyena or cave lion, or the scratches on human and animal bones may be due to taphonomic processes.<sup>104</sup> This thesis would explain the remains of Krapina as well as the findings of Moula-Guercy. In any case, the identical treatment of human and animal bones and the missing of any traces of a ritual do not promote the hypothesis of a religious custom. In this case Krapina and Moula-Guercy would prove that Neanderthal man hunted other humans for meat. This seems, however, to be unlikely, because the hunters of the Mousterian lived in a habitat full of game, which was for sure easier to kill than humans.

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<sup>101</sup> Campbell 1987: 339.

<sup>102</sup> Maringer 1956: 81f. In the excavation report of the site Weimar-Ehringsdorf cannibalism is not mentioned at all. See Feustel 1989: 391-393.

<sup>103</sup> Defleur et al. 1999: 128-131.

<sup>104</sup> It is still more than difficult to decide whether scratches on bones are due to human activities, to carnivores or to taphonomic processes. The topic is still debated among scientists. For an overview, see Henke and Rothe 1994: 19-25.

The archaeologist Heidi Peter-Röcher scrutinised the theories of alleged cannibalism in early history. In this connection she discussed the finds of Krapina in detail. In her conclusion, she points out that the human fossils of Krapina do not stem from a group of humans killed during a single event, but stem from frequent usage of the cave over a period of 40 000 years. One of the main arguments in favour of the hypothesis of cannibalism was the bad condition of the bones. Since, however, the excavators operated with dynamite, the condition of the bones hardly allows any conclusions about the cause of death.<sup>105</sup> Scratches on the bones, supposed to be traces of stone tools, have not been examined with the help of a scanning electron microscope. Without such an examination the cause of the scratches cannot be detected at all. In the long run there is not a single point of reference which could prove the theory of ritual cannibalism in the Palaeolithic period.

#### Funerals and cult of the dead

An intended funeral is considered a clear indication of conceptions of a life after death.<sup>106</sup> Although the archaeologist Fabienne May remains sceptical — archaeology can probably prove the facts, but hardly find the intellectual background — funerals can at least serve as indications of possible religious conceptions, if not as proof.<sup>107</sup> Therefore reports of alleged funerals always cause attention, even if cautious archaeologists warn about overinterpreting badly documented

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<sup>105</sup> Peter-Röcher 1998: 41.

<sup>106</sup> Heiler 1979: 516, and Wißmann 1980: 730. Wißmann explains: “In der Religionsgeschichte begegnet eine Vielzahl von zumindest teilweise religiös motivierten Verhaltens- und Vorstellungsformen, die — hier dem Begriff Bestattung zugeordnet — den Umgang der Lebenden mit dem Leichnam des Verstorbenen kennzeichnen und die darin implizit enthaltenen Vorstellungen oder explizit geäußerten Anschauungen, die dessen Existenzform im Tod oder jenseits des Todes, das Verhältnis des Toten zu den Lebenden oder dem Leben selbst betreffen.”

<sup>107</sup> May 1986: 3.

excavations.<sup>108</sup> Ioan Couliano and Mircea Eliade are convinced that Neanderthal man buried his dead.<sup>109</sup> Eliade not only takes the funerals for granted, but believes that the position of several skeletons indicate that Neanderthal man feared the return of the dead or hoped for rebirth.<sup>110</sup> Both conceptions are well known in the history of religion. Many funeral ceremonies among primitive cultures show that the kin of the dead tried to prevent the return of the deceased. In doing so, the corpse was bound or struck. Wholes were cut into the shoulders or the belly and the sinews were destroyed. These precautionary actions were supposed to prevent the dead body from rising and returning.<sup>111</sup> Åke Ström and Haralds Biezais mention an example of the belief in rebirth from historical times. They interpret funerals of the Germanic people as follows: The corpse was buried in a manner resembling the position of a child in its mother's uterus, so that the dead could be reborn after a certain period.<sup>112</sup> Johannes Maringer is convinced of the existence of funerals since the Mousterian, too. As proof he describes the excavations at Kiik-Koba, the Mountain of Carmel and Teshik-Tash. He also mentions places in Western Europe such as Le Moustier, La Chapelle-aux-Saints and La Ferrassie.<sup>113</sup> The excavation reports seem to prove that the hunter of the Mousterian already believed in life after death. The young man of Le Moustier was buried, as Johannes Maringer believes, in a sleep posture. "It is difficult to say whether he understood this sleep as temporary and expected to wake

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<sup>108</sup> A comment of André Leroi-Gourhan: "So ist das Problem der Paläoanthropinen-Gräber nur sehr unvollkommen erhellt; die Verantwortung trifft voll und ganz die Ausgräber, die nicht dem Wunsch zu widerstehen vermochten, 'das Fossil ihres Lebens' zu finden" (Leroi-Gourhan 1981: 67).

<sup>109</sup> Couliano specifies as follows: "Die unter dem Namen Neandertaler bekannte Menschenrasse. . . glaubte zweifellos an eine Art von Überleben Ihrer Toten, die, auf der rechten Seite liegend und den Kopf nach Osten gewandt, begraben wurden" (Couliano 1991: 28).

<sup>110</sup> Eliade 1978: 20-22.

<sup>111</sup> Wißmann 1980: 733.

<sup>112</sup> Ström and Biezais 1975: 65.

<sup>113</sup> Maringer 1956: 71-76.

up in another world,” Maringer explains.<sup>114</sup> The foetal position of the human skeletons found at La Ferrassie and Carmel is strong proof for the hypothesis that Neanderthal man bound his dead because he feared their return.<sup>115</sup> Traces of fire in those caves, which served as temporary shelter, he interprets as remnants of funeral customs. “Vielleicht hielt der Urmensch die Aschenschicht für eine Decke, die kein Toten zu durchdringen vermöge, die ihn also an sein Grab banne. Der Abwehrkraft des Feuers steht wiederum seine wohltuende, wärmende Wirkung gegenüber. Möglicherweise sollte das Feuer den erkalteten Leichnam erwärmen, ein Zug der Totenfürsorge.”<sup>116</sup> In Johannes Maringer’s opinion, the excavation reports do not prove the existence of funeral gifts. But the bones of ungulates, which were frequently found in close proximity of the tombs are, Maringer thinks, the traces of meals to honour the deceased.<sup>117</sup> All documents of the excavations which Johannes Maringer used to prove his opinion of funeral rites in the Palaeolithic period were recently examined by Fabienne May.<sup>118</sup> She comes to the following conclusions: Not all so called funerals deserve that name. Neither at Le Regourdou, nor La Qina, or Le Roc de Marsal did a single funeral take place. Many non-European excavations do not support the idea of Mousterian burials, for example places like Carmel or Teshik-Tash. At other places, e.g. La Chapelle-aux-Saints or outside Europe, in Shanidar, the circumstances at the excavation sites allow us to assume that intentional funerals took place. Nearly all graves contain only a single corpse, with the exception of La Ferrassie, where two children were buried together, and Qafzeh, where the skeletons of an adult and a child were found together. The grave of Shanidar could probably be a collective burial site as well. 14 corpses out of 34 alleged funerals were found in cavities or graves, all without additional installations. Fabienne May states that natural

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid. 76.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid. 77.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid. 77.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid. 77-78.

<sup>118</sup> May 1986: 11-35.

recesses could be selected consciously in order to accommodate the corpse, but that this hypothesis can not be verified.<sup>119</sup> All graves were found in the direct neighbourhood of settlements — that is the main reason they were detected at all. The remains of fire were found at some burial sites, but Fabienne May points out that those fires were lit by later generations in the caves and settlements, and have no connection with funeral rites by mourners or kin.<sup>120</sup> In the middle Palaeolithic, the dead were occasionally covered by slabs of stone. This can be proven in six cases.<sup>121</sup>

In connection with assumed funeral sites as for example Krapina or Kebara, the question arises whether Neanderthal man may have subjected his dead ones to a special treatment, i.e. whether they took off the flesh from the corpses and only buried the bones. There is first evidence for this custom in the Neolithic period.<sup>122</sup> In the case of the excavation site at Krapina the cause for this assumption is the bad condition of the bones. This, however, is more likely due to the activities of predatory animals. Later in the upper Palaeolithic, the other single reason to assume such funeral rites was the presence of ochre at the bones. Consequently the excavators came to the conclusion that the bones themselves must have been coloured. On the other hand an inquiry into the facts demonstrated that the bones quickly take on the ochre colouring if it is present in the direct environment, which was often the case in camp sites of Neanderthal man.<sup>123</sup> Traces of cremation are not found in the middle Palaeolithic. All skeletons whose position could be reconstructed with the help of the excavation reports were buried lying on their back or their side with bent, but not extremely bent, legs. This means that the

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<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.* 149.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.* 150.

<sup>121</sup> These are two burial sites at La Ferrassie, and the ones at Régourdou, Monte Circeo (which can no longer count as funeral), La Chapelle-aux-Saints and Qafzeh (*ibid.* 152).

<sup>122</sup> Peter-Röcher 1998: 41.

<sup>123</sup> May 1986: 162.

corpses were not bound before the burial. There was no evidence of funeral gifts. Fabienne May comes to the following conclusions: There is scarcely any evidence for intentional funerals in the Mousterian. Frequently the excavators preferred to interpret their archaeological findings instead of describing them carefully. Nevertheless it seems certain that Neanderthal man buried very few of his dead by putting them into a natural cavity or covering them with slabs. Ochre was not yet used in connection with funerals during the middle Palaeolithic period. Fireplaces in proximity of the grave bear no connection to the latter. Many caves were inhabited later, so that the traces of daily activities are frequently found on and near the graves. That means that knives and other items found there cannot be interpreted as funeral gifts.<sup>124</sup>

The only fact which remains of Johannes Maringer's extensive considerations is the mere existence of only few funerals during the Mousterian. It seems natural that Neanderthal man must have known feelings such as mourning, rage, despair and incredulity at the final loss of a beloved person. Obviously those feelings induced Neanderthal man from time to time to handle the corpse of the deceased in an affectionate way. This does not mean that he had to believe in a life after death or that he was capable of religious feelings. Especially the lack of any funeral rites proves the absence of a certain common belief. On the other hand those rare funerals can be a first hint of an initial feeling or hope that there might be a certain form of existence even after death.

### Conclusion

For the whole lower and middle Palaeolithic there is no evidence of any religious practice. All such notions are either products of a certain mental climate at the time of the discovery of the fossils, or of ideologies. The results of palaeanthropological research show that neither *Homo habilis* nor *Homo erectus* were capable of developing a complicated symbol system. In the middle Palaeolithic, the time of *Homo ne-*

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid. 211-212.

*anderthalensis*, things were different. This early representative of the genus *Homo* had already developed advanced intellectual abilities. But neither in connection with his hunting customs nor at his settlements could any traces of cult practice be found. First signs of a beginning of religious belief in a form of existence after death are given by the rare burials. But there are no funeral rituals or funeral gifts. All assumptions that Neanderthal man already believed in an afterlife, are mere speculation. Theories of rituals during the middle Palaeolithic, of cannibalism or bear worship, belong to the realm of legend.

The question of the origin of religion is still unsolved. The origin and the development of religious feeling can be read from archaeological finds of burials. It is only in the middle Palaeolithic period that a first hesitation to abandon a beloved is provable. Proper funerals and possible funeral gifts can be made out during the upper Palaeolithic. Only the European Mesolithic and the early Neolithic of Asia Minor know regular funeral customs and rituals, a certain spectrum of funeral gifts and secondary burials.<sup>125</sup> An increasing care for the dead during the last 100 000 years is nevertheless easily to detect. It can be supposed that the developing funeral customs were closely connected to the belief in an afterlife. Obviously religion, which means the belief in a supreme being, in supernatural power, in an afterlife, the feeling of the "Holy" in the sense of Rudolf Otto, was not a part of human nature from the very beginning, as Mircea Eliade assumes, but had to develop over a period of thousands of years.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> See Wunn 1999b: 130ff.

<sup>126</sup> Otto 1963.



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