

## **SOCIETIES WITHOUT ANCESTORS? WHY ARE SO FEW GRAVES FOUND IN THE EUROPEAN UPPER PALAEOLITHIC AND MESOLITHIC?**

It is no secret that there is a significant deficit of Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic burials compared to the Neolithic and Metal Ages. A recent count established for the Epipalaeolithic and Mesolithic in France, which together cover a period of about 5,000 years, shows about 150 individuals spread over 46 sites (Boulestin 2018), which represents about 0.03 deaths per year or 3 deaths per century, whereas in less than three centuries the Early Neolithic in Alsace produced more than 400 graves. The discrepancy between the number of dead and the number of found individuals naturally exists for all cultures or civilisations studied by archaeologists, and its causes have been recalled many times. Alongside the dead who are preserved but have yet to be discovered, there are those who have been destroyed by erosion or building works and those whose absence of traces results from the way their bodies were treated after their death. Everyone is familiar with the examples of celestial funerals in the Himalayas, Zoroastrian towers of silence, or bodies left exposed on platforms by certain Amerindian societies. To these »universal« causes, we usually add, for the periods before the appearance of agriculture, the low population densities (fewer people, fewer deaths), and the nomadic way of life which was that of almost all Palaeolithic and Mesolithic hunter-gatherer communities (the dead buried – when this mode of funerary treatment is selected – at the place of their death, and therefore scattered along the annual route, a dispersion which makes it more difficult to locate them). The demographic argument (low densities) must, however, be put into perspective by taking into account the duration of the period: the hunters of the Epipalaeolithic and Mesolithic periods were certainly less numerous, but the fact remains that they most certainly produced, in 5,000 years and over the whole of France, many more deaths than the village communities of the Early Neolithic of Alsace alone did in three centuries. If we then consider the »type of treatment of the body« factor (i. e. the »cultural choice« factor) to be predominant, we must conclude that practices that left no remains or only residual remains (isolated bones) were by far the most common during the Upper Palaeolithic-Mesolithic sequence and that, correlatively, one of the great Neolithic innovations would be the proliferation of funerary systems that produced permanent remains.

In listing the causes of scarcity, however, another potential factor is overlooked, namely the willingness of the actors themselves to make the remains of the dead disappear with the explicit aim of getting rid of materials that are considered potentially harmful. Not, this time, because it is their way of dealing with the otherwise respected and honoured deceased in the same way as with those whose bodies are treated with in order to ensure long-term conservation (in this case, different funerary gestures, some destructive, others conservative, are performed in the context of the same ontological substratum). Indeed, we know that the destructive practices mentioned in the previous paragraph are not incompatible with a deep attachment to the dead and with the existence of funerals intended to honour them and facilitate their passage to the afterlife. No, what we are talking about here is an assumed desire to remove and forget the dead, who are looked on, at least for the most part, as potentially harmful entities for the living. The explicit aim is here to cut the link between the living and the dead and erase the memory of the latter, either by destroying their

remains or by relegating them far from the places of residence of the living. The decisive divide is therefore not that between »conservative« and »destructive« treatments, but the boundary between two ontologically opposed ways of dealing with the question of cohabitation between the living and the dead. These two forms of dealing with the dead are those found in current pre-state and animistic societies. Together they constitute an antagonistic binomial that contrasts with other modalities of dealing with the dead, for example, those that characterise the great »universal« religions, which will not be discussed here.

As we shall see from a diversion into ethnology, the fear-based removal of the dead is much more frequent than is generally imagined by prehistorians. The dead are seen as potentially harmful ghosts likely to come and torment the living. These strategies for avoiding the dead are contrasted with the practices of societies in which one of the central purposes of funerals is to produce ancestors, in other words, to extract them from living kinship and integrate them into a supernatural kinship by transforming them into spirits. Instead of hunting the deceased, they are kept in the community by helping them to join the supernatural fraction of the descent group (clan or lineage). Instead of hiding anything that might remind one of their earthly existence, their bodies are usually placed in a tomb that is visible to all, and their spirits are given a place in the house. In this way, they will be able to participate actively in the life of the descent group, by interceding with the gods or, if necessary, by reminding the living of the need to respect customary practices. We can see that this definition of the deceased as an ancestor is the antithesis of the relationship that societies that reject the dead have with their dead. For the sake of simplicity, we will describe the bearers of the former modality of management of the dead as »ancestor societies«, and those of the opposite modality as »ghost societies«. It goes without saying that the notion of ancestors on which we rely is that of ethnologists, which differs from the definition in common language, where »ancestor« is often used as a simple synonym for »ascendant« or »forebear«. Ethnological examples will allow us to refine the respective characterisations of these two categories later on. Before doing so, however, we need to go back to the prehistoric past to briefly review the funerary documentation available for the European Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic periods.

## **PALAEOLITHIC AND MESOLITHIC FUNERARY CORPUS**

This section is intended to give an overview of the situation in our two reference periods and therefore has no claim to exhaustiveness. In general, we note that graves are, compared to the later periods, rare, or even completely absent at certain times, and this, in certain cases, even in regions where abundant material remains show the existence of a substantial settlement. For the Upper Palaeolithic, the only recent synthesis that encompasses the entire European documentation is that of J. Riel-Salvatore and C. Gravel-Miguel (2013). The synthesis published shortly afterwards by M. D’Errico and M. Vanhaeren (2015) provides chronological details and a more in-depth analysis of the place and significance of ornaments in grave goods. D. Henry-Gambier has published a European-wide synthesis devoted to Gravettian funerary material and, more recently, another covering the whole of the Upper Palaeolithic but focused on the remains unearthed on French territory (Henry-Gambier 2008; 2018). For the Mesolithic, we will mainly rely on the continental-scale synthesis by J. M. Grünberg (2000) and on B. Boulestin’s article on Epipalaeolithic and Mesolithic funerary remains discovered on the French territory (Boulestin 2018).

In the Upper Palaeolithic, »visible« funerary activity had two main peaks: the first between 35,000 and 27,000 BP, linked to the Gravettian and contemporary eastern cultures such as Pavlovian and Sungirian, the second between 15,000 and 12,000 BP (Late Magdalenian and the second part of the Epigravettian), i. e. straddling the end of the Upper Palaeolithic and the Epipalaeolithic. D’Errico and Vanhaeren add a third in-

intermediate episode that they attribute to the Early-Middle Magdalenian and place around 19,000 BC (D'Er-rico/Vanhaeren 2015, 49). The Gravettian episode produced tombs scattered all over Europe, from Russia to the British Isles, but which are actually limited to half a dozen well-located concentrations, lost in a vast continent which is essentially empty of burials in the present state of research. The remains of the second peak are more clustered, in an area including Italy, France and Germany. No burials are known for the Aurig-nacian and in the long interval (8,000 years) between the two peaks. As Riel-Salvatore and Gravel-Miguel (2013) point out based on the case of Spain, which has a rich tradition of Palaeolithic research and yet has delivered no burials for the 30 millennia of the Upper Palaeolithic, these gaps cannot be attributed solely to gaps in research. After a rigorous sorting, the same authors retain a total of 85 graves, corresponding to 117 individuals, for the whole period, a figure to be compared to the 150 individuals of the 5,000-year-long Epipalaeolithic-Mesolithic period in France (Boulestin 2018) and to Grünberg's 1,608 Mesolithic individuals, the latter from sites that span about 6,000 years (Grünberg 2000). Despite the controversial case of the Pavlovian of eastern Central Europe, no burial site is known for the Palaeolithic that can be interpreted with certainty as a cemetery<sup>1</sup>. The regularities observed in the funerary gestures, as well as the relatively frequent presence of grave goods (mainly ornaments) and ochre, show, however, that we are dealing with one or more well-structured funerary cultures, with each region having experienced a dynamic that led to a certain codification of practices.

In terms of spatial and geographical distribution, the Mesolithic reproduces the main features of the Palae-olithic: numerous gaps, both chronological and spatial, the existence of regions entirely devoid of burials, and others for which the funerary corpus covers only part of the period. However, the cluster of points is much denser, with a number of individuals multiplied by 12 to 13 for a period 5 to 6 times shorter, which represents, in other words, about 60 times more individuals for the same length of time. We can therefore speak without exaggeration of an explosion in the number of found dead, even if it should be put into per-spective since the figure of 1,608 dead in the Grünberg European corpus does not exceed the number of burials found for Alsace alone ( $1/1,230^{\circ}$  of the surface area of the European continent) for the period, roughly equivalent in duration to the Mesolithic, which goes from the Early Neolithic to the Second Iron Age. The other great novelty of the Epipalaeolithic-Mesolithic period is the appearance of genuine cemeteries with characteristics similar to those of Neolithic cemeteries. A quick count reveals at least 16 of them, spread over five regional clusters: the Dnieper Valley, the Danube Iron Gates (between Romania and Serbia), the Baltic-Karelia block (Russia), southern Scandinavia and southern Brittany. To this list, we can add the fairly extensive grave corpus discovered in the shell mounds of southern Portugal. Even if the tombs here prob-ably do not belong to real cemeteries, they nevertheless testify to a spectacular rise in the use of burial from the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> millennium BC onwards, and to the emergence of a regional burial culture. However, the distribution of cemeteries remains very patchy, which is less and less the case for isolated burials, especially in regions where, as in the northern half of France, powerful rescue archaeology has enabled a much more complete coverage of the territory than in the past, and where a small series of isolated tombs has finally been discovered.

The emergence of the cemetery was classically associated with the end of the Mesolithic. However, this idea must be revised since cemeteries have been identified that are significantly older at both ends of the distribution area, with, on the one hand, the site of La Vergne (dép. Charente-Maritime/F) dated to the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> millennium BC (Courtaud/Duday 2011) and, on the other hand, the cemeteries of the Dnieper Valley, of which the oldest, Vasil'evka III (Kirovohrad obl./UA), is used as early as the 10<sup>th</sup> millennium BC (Lillie 2003). Three of the major concentrations, however, remain of recent date, namely southern Brittany, southern Scandinavia (6<sup>th</sup> millennium BC in both cases) and the Portuguese shell middens grave complexes (from the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> millennium BC; Peyroteo Stjerna 2016). The number of graves is globally more im-

portant in the eastern half with, for a single cemetery, up to 384 graves in Vlasac (Iron Gates; Bor okr./SRB; Radovanović 1996) and nearly 200 in the Baltic-Karelia block, compared to a maximum of 56 in southern Scandinavia (Skateholm II, Skåne län/S) and 10 (at Téviec and Hoëdic, dép. Morbihan/F, respectively) in western France.

In summary, the Palaeolithic has produced a corpus that is not very extensive and is divided into two main periods separated by a hiatus of several thousand years. In each of the two periods, the burials, which testify to the existence of real funerary cultures, are concentrated in a small series of »islands« lost in the immensity of the continent. The gaps, both chronological and geographical, are of course partly due to the state of research but certainly not entirely. The Mesolithic has produced, for a period 5 to 6 times shorter, a much larger corpus, but overall we remain under the same general pattern, with numerous gaps, both chronological and geographical. However, the chrono-cultural blocks that have yielded sets of tombs are more numerous and more frequent, and the appearance of real cemeteries undeniably constitutes an important novelty. We shall see later if the opposition indicated above between ancestor societies and ghost societies can be of some use in explaining the contrast between, to put it briefly, episodes with graves and episodes without graves. In the meantime, a few ethnographic examples will help us to complete our definitions of these two categories of societies.

## **THE DANGEROUS DEAD: SOME ETHNOGRAPHIC EXAMPLES**

### **Forgetting and Chasing the Dead**

The attitude towards death and the way of treating the dead are based on cosmogonic foundations. They depend on the representation that a given population has of the world of the dead, the status of its inhabitants and their relationship with the sensible world. It is therefore not surprising that research in this field has undergone a significant renewal in the wake of the work of an informal school sometimes referred to as the »new shamanism«, which includes the perspectivism of E. Viveiros de Castro (2014), the animist ontology of P. Descola (2005) and the comparative approaches of K. Århem, co-editor with G. Sprenger of a remarkable collection of texts on animism in Southeast Asia whose scope goes far beyond the limits of this geographical area (Århem/Sprenger 2016).

About the Achuar, a society of hunter-gatherers-horticulturists in the Amazon, Descola indicates that »the very idea of ancestor seems incongruous: the recent dead must disappear as soon as possible from the memory of the living. [...] Genealogies rarely go back beyond the generation of the grandparents and the descent groups, in the rare cases where they exist, control neither the access to the means of subsistence nor their devolution. [...] In this way, the dead are excluded from human communities and have no power over them« (Descola 2005, 454), and suggests, moreover, that this way of considering the relationship between the living and the dead could constitute »a characteristic of the animistic regime in general«. For Århem, there is, in the majority of Amazonian societies, no spiritual continuity between the living and their deceased relatives, hence the complete absence, in their cosmological panorama, of ancestor worship and, what is more, of the very notion of ancestor (Århem 2016a). One of the purposes of funeral ceremonies is therefore to promote the separation between the living and the dead and to contribute to the erasure of the memory of the deceased among the living. Among the Tukanoan of the north-western Amazon, for example, it is forbidden under penalty of curse to mention the names of the dead and any trace of a relative's burial place must be erased to avoid bringing his or her memory to the living.

The societies concerned by these remarks correspond to the »small farmers« of A. Testart (»les petits agriculteurs«), who differ from other societies practising agriculture by an egalitarian social organization similar to that of the nomadic hunter-gatherers (Testart 1982) and who share with the latter the same animist ontology, in other words, the same ideological substratum. They are composed of hunter-gatherer-horticulturalist communities practising slash-and-burn agriculture, whose products they see as one of the benefits of the forest, along with game and wild plants. The comparison with nomadic hunter-gatherers is made in the same way by Descola, for whom the regime of animist ontology, which he defined on the basis of the study of one of these societies (the Achuar), could well be that shared by all hunter-gatherers, or at least all nomadic hunter-gatherers (Descola 2005). This proposal of generalization is not contradicted, on the contrary, by the studies devoted to the nomadic hunter-gatherer societies of the forests of Southeast Asia. According to Århem, the dead are quickly forgotten there: »as the body disintegrates, so does the person (soul). Between the living and the dead there is no social or metaphysical connection; the rupture is total« (Århem 2016b, 17). The role of kinship in social organization is secondary here, and the freedom of movement of nuclear families, whose founders have no obligation to reside either in the same house or in the same group as their parents, results in a fluid and relatively unstable composition of communities. Low population densities, the lack of individual or family appropriation of useful spaces, the fact that descent groups do not control access to the means of subsistence, and the absence of genealogical memory are also characteristics shared with Amazonian societies.

If we had more space, we could multiply examples of this type of behaviour in relation to death and ascendants in non-sedentary hunter-gatherer or forest horticulturalist societies. We will therefore limit ourselves, in conclusion, to indicating that it is not limited to societies that are commonly attached to the category of hunter-gatherers or to related societies such as the »small farmers« of the Amazon. Its main characteristics can be found in many of the big men societies of New Guinea. Among the Dani of the Baliem Valley, for example, the main function of funerals is to appease the ghost of the deceased, to keep it away from the homes of the living and to repair the social fabric torn by death. The body envelope of the deceased is destroyed by cremation, at the end of which the participants mime the pursuit of the ghost, which is chased out of the village or hamlet (Heider 1997, 129). The notion of »ghost« is regularly used by ethnologists who study societies characterised by the »expulsion« of the dead. Funerals in Dani societies are accompanied by a collective meal and ritual slaughter of pigs, but the latter are not offered to the deceased, as is often the case with the animals slaughtered at funerals in ancestor societies, where it is considered that the deceased will need a herd to defend his rank in the afterlife.

### **Making Ancestors**

In the scale of socio-political complexity in Southeast Asia, the degree that follows that of the nomadic hunter-gatherers is occupied by agricultural societies often called »rank societies«. These are politically egalitarian societies, but their social life is deeply imbued with symbolic hierarchies. Their subsistence is based on agriculture from which they draw the essential of their supply. They own domestic animals, but these are raised entirely for ritual purposes (Jeunesse/Denaire 2017). The ownership of agricultural land is held by descent groups (clans and lineages), whose rivalries for renown and access to resources constitute the main structuring factor in social organization. Genealogical memory is a central concern. It allows one to go back to the founding ancestor, who cleared the land and was the first to farm it, and, in the event of a dispute, to legitimize the ownership of plots. These societies practice a so-called hierarchical or transcen-

dental animism (Århem 2016b) whose main characteristics are the centrality of sacrifice, the importance of divinatory and other mantic practices, spirit possession, ancestor worship, conspicuous funerary rituals, the great attention paid to a wide range of nature spirits, and, if we look back to the not-so-distant past (the first half of the last century in the most isolated regions), headhunting (Århem 2016a). Instead of sending away the dead, they are helped to integrate the afterworld, where the social organization of the world of the living is reproduced. These societies all have very elaborate funerary cultures, manifested, among other things, by the considerable social and ritual importance of funeral celebrations and, in some cases, by the use of spectacular, sometimes megalithic, funerary architecture. The practice of the collective tomb is frequent without being systematic, with very fine examples on the Indonesian islands of Sumba and Sulawesi (Jeunesse/Denaire 2018).

Their transfer to the world of the dead does not prevent the ancestors from influencing the existence of the living, with whom they are linked by a relationship of social and metaphysical continuity. On the Indonesian island of Sumba, for example, they are supposed to live in the upper part of the clan or lineage origin house (Jeunesse 2016). »In many ways, the ancestors are the principal interlocutors in the life of South-East Asian villagers, addressed and invoked to assist and guide the living in every aspect of life« (Århem 2016a, 290). While they can be harsh in defending the observance of customary rules, their attitude is never arbitrarily malicious and aggressive as can be the case with ghosts in societies without ancestors. One of the functions of funeral rites, often long and complex, is precisely to ensure that the deceased does not become a potentially evil ghost but a protective and benevolent ancestor. During the ceremony, one observes successively the »fabrication« of the ancestor, then his reintegration into the descent group as a supernatural entity. The descent group has a horizontal dimension (all the living descendants of the founding ancestor) and a vertical dimension (all the ancestralised ascendants, up to the founder). This verticality, which is also manifested in the considerable symbolic importance of the origin house, the ritual and political centre of the group, is not only an image but a lived reality. The ancestors are, among other things, co-owners of the property of the descent group, which cannot be used without their consent.

This configuration, whose deep differences with the attitude of the societies are obvious, is not the prerogative of animist societies whose subsistence is based on agriculture. It is found, for example, in all its facets, in the sedentary hunter-gatherer societies of the Northwest Coast of North America, which also share with the traditional agrarian societies of Southeast Asia many aspects of their social organization. The Tlingit, for example (Val'terovich 2005; Thornton Emmons 1991), live in villages that are sometimes centuries old, with large cedar or spruce plank houses, are divided into two categories of free men (nobles and commoners), and practice slavery. Some individuals enjoy great prestige; their influence on the rest of the community is great, but they have no institutionalised political power. Society is composed of juxtaposed kinship groups (clans) united by ritual complementarity and a forming part of a hierarchy of prestige. The remains of the dead are buried in cemeteries set up away from the village and composed of kinds of wooden funerary huts flanked by carved poles. At their death, the spirits of free humans settle in an afterlife where the hierarchical relationships of the world of the living are reproduced. They will then maintain a constant dialogue with their living descendants, the modalities of which are similar to those we have mentioned in relation to the rank societies of Southeast Asia. Funerals give rise to spectacular celebrations, funeral potlatches. Descent groups control access to resources. They possess, among other privileges, hereditary and inalienable access rights to fishing or hunting zones, the justification of which, in the event of a dispute, involves the mobilization of genealogical memory, which also plays a central role here.

## Synthesis

In recent pre-state animist societies, there are at least two main ways of organizing the relationship between the living and the dead. The body-soul dualism is present everywhere. What is mainly at issue is the fate of the soul(s): the deceased is transformed into a malevolent and difficult-to-control ghost on the one hand (egalitarian or horizontal animism), or into a benevolent and protective ancestor on the other (hierarchical or transcendental animism of the Southeast Asian type). The problem of the fate of bodily remains is, in fact, secondary. In both cases, they can either be destroyed and dispersed or preserved in their entirety. In the ghost-death system, the removal of the souls does not necessarily imply the destruction of the bodies, the basic principle being to make the latter invisible, to conceal the traces of them in order to erase the deceased from the memory of the living. If one projects oneself in an archaeological context, there will thus be no reason to be surprised to find an individual in anatomical connection deposited in a grave in a society in which the dead were transformed into ghosts. What, on the other hand, is unthinkable in such a context, is the existence of real cemeteries, of visible funerary architecture and of a frequent and codified practice of depositing funerary furniture.

The opposition between, to simplify, ghosts and ancestors does not overlap either, as we have seen, with the classic opposition between hunter-gatherers and farmers: it is, after all, the study of a society (Descola's Achuar) in which agriculture is one of the pillars of the subsistence system that has produced the most complete characterization of the ghost system and its ontological background, and it is in a hunter-gatherer society (the Tlingit) that we have found one of the purest examples of the ancestor system. There is therefore no a priori reason to ban the existence, in Prehistory, of Neolithic ghost societies and Upper Palaeolithic or Mesolithic ancestor societies. The practice of animal husbandry is not discriminating either: because of the case of the dog (already domesticated in the Late Palaeolithic), but also, moreover, of the existence of ghost societies raising reindeers (Siberia) or horses (Siberia and North America). But these are nomadic societies whose main supply continues to come from the harvesting of spontaneous resources, horses, reindeers (and dogs) being used for tracking and game or to transport goods in order to facilitate the movements of communities. These societies would merit a close look at their funerary practices, which is obviously beyond the scope of this article. We will simply note that at least some of them practise a form of hierarchical animism (Stépanoff 2019) which, while clearly distinguishable from the hierarchical animism of the agricultural societies of Southeast Asia (notably by the central role played by the shaman), also presents notable differences with the egalitarian animism of Amazonia. It would therefore be interesting, because of this intermediate position, to see how precisely they are situated in relation to the dualism ghosts-ancestors.

In this attempt to classify societies with or without ancestors, the most relevant divide seems to be that of sedentary life: hunter-gatherers who produce ancestors are village hunter-gatherers and ghost societies that practise animal husbandry show a nomadic lifestyle. There remains the question of agriculture, illustrated by the case of Amazonian »small farmers«. It is advisable there to take into account another parameter, which is that of the degree of mobility. It is true that Amazonian »small farmers« live in villages all year round, but these villages are regularly moved each time the cultivation plots are moved. The abandoned plots are then entirely recovered by the forest, which has the effect of preventing the formation of a true *village terroir*, which is only possible within the framework of a stable and perennial association between a village on the one hand, and a methodically exploited area on the other. The main difference is, therefore, in the degree of sedentary life and the forms of exploitation and control of resources but also in the system of ownership: in ancestor societies, the useful spaces belong to the descent groups; in ghost societies, the exploited territories belong to the spirits of nature, can only be used under certain conditions, and cannot be the object of any lasting formal appropriation by humans. Ancestor makers are thus also landlords.

The case of New Guinea makes it possible to introduce an additional nuance. The Dani of the Baliem area, who are, in all likelihood, on the side of the ghost societies, are, however, »real« sedentary people who occupy densely (about 160 inhabitants per square km) a fertile plain. If it were to be confirmed that they really belong to the category of ghost societies, which we believe, but which will have to be firmly attested by further research, then it would have to be admitted that the criterion of property is not sufficient to explain the distinction between the two options that govern the relationship between the living and the dead. The answer is perhaps to be found in the relations of production. In fact, in big men societies, prestige is only very secondarily linked to the possession of land, which plays practically no role in the construction of social hierarchies. Its ownership, or even simply its control, is significantly never mentioned in the works devoted to the characterization of big men systems. The fame of the latter has only an indirect and very secondary relationship with land, the property of kinship groups. What matters most is their individual ability to amass ephemeral wealth that can be invested in competitive feasts, in other words, mainly food and, above all, pigs. The fact that the Dani and other big men societies are likely to be a variant of the ghost system may be related to this distanced relationship to land ownership, which is very different from that prevailing in, for example, the ancestor societies of Southeast Asia. As we have seen, the latter are also societies with a strong and deep genealogical memory, in which social organization is based mainly on relations between descent groups, and not, as in societies with big men, on the random and open game of rivalry between a few remarkable men. The other constant that the literature on big men societies reveals to us is the relative modesty of the funeral celebrations organised for dead big men and the little regard that is paid to the remains of the deceased. Some remarkable individuals, notably because of their warlike prowess, may nevertheless be the object of special treatment that may go as far as the permanent preservation of their remains, but they are then considered as heroes belonging to the community as a whole, not as ancestors celebrated as representatives of a particular descent group.

It is, therefore, perhaps, in this combination of a solid territorial anchorage and an organization in which social relations are determined primarily by rivalry between descent groups (and not individuals) over the control of resources, that the socio-economic substratum of ancestor societies must be sought. In the traditional societies of the island of Sumba (Jeunesse 2016), and, in general, in the pre-state and animist societies of Southeast Asia, the local hierarchies between clans and lineages are based primarily on the anteriority of presence on the exploited lands. In a given space, it is the oldest lineage, the one that cleared the first plots of land, that invariably occupies the top of the social ladder. The importance of historical anchorage goes of course hand in hand with hereditary transmission. Ancestral societies are societies of owners, but also, consequently, societies of heirs, in which inter-individual competition plays a secondary role in the interplay of social relations (Jeunesse 2019), in contrast to the behaviour that prevails in big men societies, where hierarchical links are based on individual merit. The central role of territorial anchorage, whether the areas concerned are cultivated, grazed or exploited by predation, is thus a fundamental condition of the ancestor system, which we can affirm without hesitation, while recalling of course that our corpus of reference is limited here to animist and pre-state societies, that it is incompatible with all the forms of nomadism listed. This is an unavoidable condition, certainly, but not sufficient, as the case of the Dani shows. The control of useful territories is not enough, property must also be central in the processes of construction and legitimation of social hierarchies.

Let us now consider the impact of our two ways of managing the relationship between the living and the dead on material culture. In ghost societies, the necessity to distance and forget the dead and the subordinate role of kinship groups explain the absence of cemeteries and ostentatious funerary architecture. However, this does not exclude the existence of what archaeologists call tombs, i. e. structures specially designed to house one or more bodies. Burying a body in a grave can, in fact, be one of the means of concealing the



remains of its owner, provided, of course, that there are no over-ground signs of its presence. As for grave goods, there is nothing to prevent the body of a ghost-in-the-making from being buried with some personal property. But the absence of a community of ancestors symmetrical to that of the living is incompatible with the depositing of symbols related to the social status of the deceased, which, like his souvenir in the memory of the living, vanishes into smoke quite quickly after his death.

The existence of overground signalisation, the use of signs (funerary building or grave goods) related to social status and the fact that the majority of the population is treated in this way characterise the functioning of ancestor societies, and it is the presence of these traits that establishes the existence of what we have called a funerary culture above. As far as grave goods are concerned, in societies whose practices have been recorded by travellers or ethnologists, deposit in the grave is, unfortunately for archaeologists, not obligatory. The distribution of precious goods belonging to the descent group (Testart 2010), or even their simple display at funerals (Jeunesse 2019), can serve the same function as goods accompanying the dead in the grave. Cultures with ancestors also almost always try to keep the remains of the dead close to where the living live, whether under the house, in front of the house, or in cemeteries located near the village. But there is no guarantee that the material evidence of these practices will be durably preserved. Archaeologists may very well find themselves faced with societies with ancestors where none of the traits we have just mentioned have left the slightest trace. This is the case, to give just two examples, of the Tlingit of the Northwest Coast of North America and of at least part of the Dayak of Borneo, whose bone remains are preserved in wooden subaerial structures that have no chance of surviving the decline of the society that built them. An archaeological culture without funerary remains is therefore not necessarily a material reflection of a ghost society. On the other hand, the recurrent presence of burials and of a funerary variability referring to the organization of the society of the living, in other words, a true funerary culture, will almost certainly mean that we are in the presence of a society with ancestors.

### **PALAEOLITHIC AND MESOLITHIC EXCEPTIONS: SOCIETIES WITH ANCESTORS?**

It is now time to ask whether the distinction between ghost and ancestor societies can be of any use in understanding, on the one hand, the scarcity of burials for the Upper Palaeolithic-Mesolithic sequence and, on the other hand, in explaining the significance of the episodes of considerable densification of funerary remains that we have tried to characterise briefly above. As we have already emphasised, the enormous deficit in preserved dead cannot be explained solely by taphonomic factors and the existence of potentially »destructive« funerary gestures independent of the ontological context. It is therefore legitimate to ask whether it might not be due, at least partly, to the fact that the majority of human groups in the European Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic were ghost societies. Ethnology shows us the existence, in the world of pre-state animist societies, of a strong correlation between this type of society and the practice of nomadism (including mobilities of the cyclical slash-and-burn agriculture type) on the one hand, and a strong link between the removing and oblivion of the dead and animist ontology (egalitarian animism) on the other. According to a widely shared hypothesis, the animist ontology could globally reflect the way in which nomadic hunter-gatherers and certain itinerant farmers conceive the relationship between humans and the supernatural, and thus constitute a sort of »prehistoric« substratum from which the other ontologies would have developed. Why, then, should the same not apply to the relationship between the living and the dead? The practice of considering the dead as undesirable ghosts that have to be chased would then form a sort of common substratum, a norm shared by all societies at the beginning of the Upper Palaeolithic and competed only later with, at first timidly and then more and more frequently, the competing norm of the »making« of ancestors.

The episodes with a funerary corpus are characterised by the appearance of burials, a relative frequency of furnishings, a more or less pronounced variability in grave goods richness and, although only from the Early Mesolithic onwards, the gathering of the dead in cemeteries. For the Upper Palaeolithic, the contrast between vast empty areas and the few concentrations of graves has already been highlighted above. The latter consist of small corpora that often contain a few exceptionally rich graves. The ghost-death hypothesis provides a plausible explanation for the »absent« graves that cannot be satisfactorily explained by »traditional« factors, although for obvious reasons it is very difficult, if not impossible, to provide scientific proof. For this reason, we will concentrate on the existing tombs, for which the two central questions are: should the known regional corpus be interpreted as evidence of the existence, at certain times and in small areas, of ancestor societies? Or do they bear witness to original practices that escape the ghost-ancestor alternative? The question of the possible existence of cemeteries (within or outside the settlement) has already been raised above. For the known groups of tombs (Dolni Věstonice, okr. Břeclav/CZ, and the Arene Candide), we lack sufficient chronological precision to determine whether they are the product of continuous use, without gaps, by a given social group, or simply the result of repeated use of a highly frequented place without any desire to create a kind of »village of the dead«. If tombs with no or poor furnishings can correspond to the remains of ghost-dead, this is obviously not the case for individuals buried with rich furnishings. It is therefore to them that we must devote our main attention. Before going into detail, let us try to go a little further in characterising the Upper Palaeolithic funerary corpus, with the help of the very useful statistics published by Riel-Salvatore and Gravel-Miguel (2013, 329).

As we have already seen, these two authors have retained 85 tombs, which are divided between the two main chronological blocks, that of the Gravettian and contemporary eastern cultures and that of the Magdalenian-Epigravettian complex, which we shall call, for simplicity, groups 1 and 2. Two characteristics distinguish this corpus from those of the Neolithic and Metal Age cultures with single graves cemeteries: a high proportion of multiple graves<sup>2</sup> (15 out of 85, i. e. nearly one in five)<sup>3</sup>; even higher proportions of immature graves (45 % in group 1, 32 % in group 2). Other striking features have been highlighted by the specialists. To begin with, there are several individuals with pathologies that can be linked to disabilities: one of the children from Sungir (Vladimir obl./RUS; group 1), has bowed leg bones as a result of a congenital disease; one of the individuals in the triple grave at Dolni Věstonice (group 1) has asymmetrical legs; a dwarf teenager was found in the double grave at Romito 2, Calabria (prov. Cosenza/I; group 2) (Formicola 2007; Formicola/Buzhilova 2004). In the latest study on this subject, E. Trinkaus lists, for the Upper Palaeolithic, at least eight individuals showing »developmental anomalies« clearly visible to their contemporaries and taking into account three additional ambiguous cases leads him to the rather astonishing percentage of 10.4 % (Trinkhaus 2018, 11943). To these inventories, Ch. Stépanoff (2019, 83-84) adds the Mesolithic »shaman« of Bad Dürrenberg (Saalekreis/D), who was affected by a malformation of the atlas vertebrae leading to probable neurological disorders (Porr/Alt 2006)<sup>4</sup>, and hypothesizes, based on observations made on recent shamanisms in northern Eurasia, that these individuals with disabilities would be likely to have, because of their infirmities, privileged links with the supernatural world. Another »anomaly« comes from the double tomb of the Grotte des Enfants near Grimaldi, Liguria (prov. Imperia/I; group 2), a rich tomb that yielded several hundred perforated shells. It contained the remains of two children (12-24 months and 24-36 months), the younger of whom was probably killed by an arrow whose flint head was found stuck in a vertebra (Henri-Gambier 2001).

Other characteristics of the Upper Palaeolithic corpus include the high frequency of the use of red ochre (51 out of 85, 60 %). As far as items of furniture are concerned, the dominant category is ornaments, represented in almost half of the tombs (41 out of 85, 48 %). It is composed, in decreasing order of frequency, of small perforated shells, perforated animal teeth (mainly deer canines in southern and western Europe,

whereas fox teeth dominate in the more eastern sites), entirely shaped beads of hard animal material (generally ivory) (for example at Sungir and in the grave of the Abri Pataud, *dép.* Dordogne/F; Henri-Gambier 2002). The very frequent combination of ochre and adornment is a common feature between the two groups and contributes to the impression of relative homogeneity that emerges from the Upper Palaeolithic funerary corpus<sup>5</sup>. The spectacular character of certain assemblages made up of several hundred small beads (shells and/or teeth) is put into perspective by Riel-Salvatore and Gravel-Miguel (2013, 330), who consider that the »beads« could be elements sewn onto clothing that was worn by the deceased while they were alive, and therefore could not be interpreted as genuine funerary deposits. This view is shared, on the basis of studies showing that the shells or teeth of several burials showed significant traces of wear, by D'Errico and Vanhaeren (2015). While the furniture is often limited to ornament, there are also some more diverse assemblages: the adult grave from the Cavillon cave in Grimaldi (*prov.* Imperia/I; de Lumley 2016), the double grave (two adolescents) from the Barma Grande cave in Grimaldi (*prov.* Imperia/I; Giacobini 2006) and the grave of an adolescent from the Arene Candide cave (Henri-Gambier 2008, 176), all of which are Gravettian and located in northwestern Italy, contained large flint blades. In the third, there were four »batons percés« made of elkwood. Weapons are rare: ivory javelins at Sungir and Mal'ta (Irkutsk obl./RUS), flint arrow and/or spear heads at Mal'ta (Abramova 1995; Lbova 2021). This is also the case for tools, some of which, as in the case of the ivory pin from one of the two twins at Krems-Wachtberg (Krems a. d. Donau/A; Teschler-Nicola et al. 2020), are probably part of the clothing.

As this topic is not central to our project, we will not deal in detail with the question of the possible existence of social inequalities in the Upper Palaeolithic. Nevertheless, we must mention it, since the existence of funerary variability linked to the position of the deceased in social hierarchy is one of the major characteristics of the funerary behaviour of ancestor societies. We can even affirm that if the richly furnished tombs of the Upper Palaeolithic do indeed reflect a vertical social differentiation, we have no choice but to admit the existence of societies that »produced« ancestors from this period onwards. Opinions in this area are quite contrasted. The »egalitarian« option is illustrated, for example, by Riel-Salvatore and Gravel-Miguel (2013), who consider that the corpus of Upper Palaeolithic graves is too heterogeneous to define a coherent tradition and that, moreover, the »richness« of the most remarkable graves is largely relativized by the idea that the small elements of adornment were sewn onto clothing that the deceased had worn during their lifetime and therefore did not reflect an exceptional technical investment in relation to the death of the individuals concerned. The interpretation of the furniture from the Magdalenian tomb at Saint-Germain-de-la-Rivière (*dép.* Gironde/F) by Vanhaeren and D'Errico, on the other hand, leans towards the opposite hypothesis, which postulates the existence of funerary variability reflecting social inequalities. These authors insist in particular on the presence of 71 perforated deer canines and conclude that »the rarity and probable exotic origin of these teeth, the small number of paired canines, and the technological and morphological homogeneity of the collection suggest that the teeth were obtained through long-distance trade and represented prestige items« (Vanhaeren/D'Errico 2005, 129). In a more recent article (D'Errico/Vanhaeren 2015), they distinguish between the Gravettian, where the main cause of variability in funerary furnishings would be the expression of ethnic identity (geographical variability), and that of our group 2, where, following the example of the tomb of Saint-Germain-de-la-Rivière, the use of prestige items would reflect the existence of vertical social differentiation (social variability).

But let us return to our central concern, that of the possible existence of societies with ancestors. The funerary behaviour of recent ancestor societies implies the existence, in the funerary corpus, of a significant proportion of adult individuals, male and/or female, corresponding to the leaders of the descent groups (clans and lineages) and a necessarily secondary place for the immature. This is, to simplify, the model found in Neolithic cemeteries with individual graves, where rich children (including very young ones) graves are

regularly found, but where the sub-group of tombs rich in furniture is always largely dominated by adults. The sample we have for the Upper Palaeolithic clearly does not conform to this model. If we compare it to the population of a cemetery of the Linear Pottery culture, which is, in my opinion, composed of segmentary societies using the ancestor system (Jeunesse 2018), we observe, for the Palaeolithic, a flagrant deficit of adults and a disproportionate place of immatures, both globally and in the group of burials with rich furnishings. If we wish, as some supporters of the existence of an unequal social structure do, to make »rich« children into »heirs« testifying to a hereditary transmission of social status, then the available corpus lacks most of the adults of whom these children would be the descendants. It is certainly possible to resolve the question by asserting that the sample of tombs found is not representative of the tombs that existed in the Palaeolithic. This objection does not seem to me to be acceptable. The selection made by time and taphonomic factors should logically have favoured adults, whose bone remains are more easily preserved and who are also, due to their size, easier to locate archaeologically<sup>6</sup>. It is, therefore, reasonable to think that the observed deviations from what one would expect to find in the context of ancestor societies are not the result of chance, and even, possibly, that the actual proportion of immatures was even higher.

The high proportion of individuals with visible physical deficits is difficult to interpret. Indeed, we have no idea of the overall health status of Upper Palaeolithic populations, and therefore of the proportion of »cripples« that we should expect to find for this period. We can therefore draw nothing more than a superficial impression of strangeness, the same one that arises in the face of the astonishing case of the very young child of the Grotte des Enfants killed by an arrow shot. And this is all the more true since these features are added, even if they are only slightly representative, to the anomalies of the demographic composition mentioned in the previous paragraph. One possibility, suggested by Stépanoff's remarks mentioned above, is that individuals with physical anomalies were selected because, as in many recent societies, their »abnormality« is a sign of a privileged link with the supernatural. If we follow this line of argument, we can hypothesise that this criterion of proximity to the supernatural is also valid for the other remarkable Upper Palaeolithic tombs (the physical anomaly would then be one of the signs of a proximity to the supernatural). We thus join an old research tradition, recalled above in connection with the Mesolithic tomb of Bad Dürrenberg, which consists in interpreting as shaman burials the prehistoric tombs containing unusual, heterogeneous furniture, with objects that can be seen as instruments of the shamanic ritual. To give just one example, we will mention the double grave (two children, 1-2 and 3-4 years old) discovered in Mal'ta (Russia), belonging to our group 1, and whose furniture included a series of tools made of siliceous rock, fragments of an ivory »tiara«, a necklace of 120 bone beads, a decorated bone plate and a sculpted bird figurine (Lbova 2021). The idea of a link with shamanism rests mainly on the latter, which represents a bird in flight, which may evoke the journeys into the spirit world of shamans transformed into animals. These specific examples cannot, of course, be considered as proof of the existence of a »ritual« factor in the selection of the deceased (or some of them) in the Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic. They are however sufficient to make us want to know a little more about the world of shamanism and to understand why Stépanoff, one of its most erudite and rigorous specialists, suggested a connection with certain prehistoric tombs.

In his recent book (Stépanoff 2019), he distinguishes, for northern Eurasia, two categories of shamanism, which he describes as heterarchical (or egalitarian) and hierarchical and which he presents as two choices that are not conditioned by modes of subsistence since both exist in hunter-gatherer and in reindeer herders societies. Groups with hierarchical shamanism admit to »an unequal distribution of skills« and see in the shaman »an individual whom they recognise as more powerful than themselves« (Stépanoff 2019, 130) and endowed with a »distinct hereditary essence«. There is indeed a »rigid inequality of competence«, but this is only expressed in the relationship with the supernatural, »between people who are open or closed in their relations to the invisible« (Stépanoff 2019, 141). Unlike societies with heterarchical shamanism,

in which people only marginally delegate their power to communicate with the supernatural, shamans here are individuals considered superior, holding a speciality that can be transmitted through heredity and are unavoidable in rituals involving a dialogue with the supernatural. This hierarchical formula, which, as we saw above, shows notable differences with what specialists call hierarchical shamanism for Southeast Asia<sup>7</sup>, is compatible, according to Stépanoff, with otherwise egalitarian forms of socio-political organization. Among its characteristics is an immoderate taste for ostentation, which is reflected in the use of richly decorated costumes, a feature that does not exist in heterarchical shamanism (Stépanoff 2019, 300). These are made collectively by several families and offered to the shaman at the time of his »enthronement«. The comparison with the »richest« Upper Palaeolithic tombs is self-evident: we find exuberant costumes, some of which, as at Sungir, were most probably made by a group larger than the nuclear family. The transmission through heredity of the ability to negotiate effectively with the supernatural also provides a good explanation for the existence of children's tombs, including very young ones, richly furnished.

To the two theories applied to Palaeolithic funerary material mentioned above, i. e., on the one hand, the rejection of any form of inequality due to the absence of a true tradition and, on the other, the existence of vertical social differentiation, we can therefore add a third possibility: societies that are indeed unequal, but where the only accepted form of inequality is that which separates the rare individuals with an exceptional capacity for openness to the supernatural from the others. This dichotomy would be echoed in a funerary dualism, with the mass of the population treated according to the model of the ghost-death system on the one hand, and the shamans on the other, objects of special attention due to their innate ritual superiority. Hierarchical shamanism as described by Stépanoff undoubtedly represents a form of inequality, especially as it is based on the existence of a privileged group with a »distinct hereditary essence«. If such a system existed in the Upper Palaeolithic, we should conclude that the first form of institutionalised inequality emerged in the prehistoric hunter-gatherers' world. The fact that other humans delegate part of their ability to dialogue with the supernatural to the shaman and that the function of shaman is accessible only through heredity makes it both a speciality (perhaps the first not based on gender?) and a kind of »vocation«<sup>8</sup>. The richly furnished tombs do not mean, however, that small ornaments (shells, teeth and ivory beads) were invented to distinguish the hierarchical shaman. Present in abundance from the Aurignacian as well as in other »without burials« regions or periods of the Palaeolithic, they obviously also had one or more other functions, for example, as emphasised by D'Errico and Vanhaeren, the expression of ethnic identity. They were thus clearly polysemous markers whose meaning could change according to the context. The context and, perhaps, also their provenance, as the same authors suggested in their interpretation of the meaning of the »imported« deer canines from the grave at Saint-Germain-de-la-Rivière. The latter illustrates well the ambiguity that accompanies this potential polysemy: their rarity makes them compatible both with the hypothesis of the hierarchical shamans, who, because of their ability to travel to supernatural worlds, are well placed to access »exotic«<sup>9</sup> objects, and with the idea of an early appearance, in the second half of the Upper Palaeolithic, of hierarchies of prestige based on achievement. The possibility, for this period, of a cohabitation between rich tombs of shamans and rich tombs of men of influence cannot, therefore, be excluded, even if the existence of the latter is hardly compatible with the deficit of rich adult graves mentioned above.

The hypothesis of the existence of prehistoric shaman tombs is not new. What is new is the possibility offered by the theory of the two kinds of shamanism as presented by Stépanoff for northern Eurasia, to go beyond the often superficial ad hoc comparisons applied to a few exceptional burials and to elaborate a more comprehensive model which, in combination with the ghost-ancestor dualism, allows to account for most of the distinctive features of the European Upper Palaeolithic burial corpus. Another major advantage of Stépanoff's work on recent shamanism is that it illustrates the existence of social systems in which the

existence of a small group of individuals with significant power but limited to the ritual sphere can be compatible with an otherwise perfectly egalitarian ethos. His model makes plausible the existence, between societies that reject all their dead and those that transform them into ancestors, of an intermediate configuration in which the archaeologically invisible ghost-dead, who form the vast majority of the deceased, would have cohabited with a small group of ritual specialists to whom was reserved a funerary treatment close, at least in appearance, to that which would later be reserved for the heads of descent groups in ancestor societies. From a heuristic point of view, this model offers us the possibility of leaving behind the rigid alternative between egalitarian Palaeolithic societies (with a funerary variability that the defenders of this option cannot do other than qualify as anecdotal) and inegalitarian Palaeolithic societies displaying a vertical social differentiation of the same type as that sometimes attributed to certain Neolithic societies. Of course, this model also has its weaknesses: it does not provide a satisfactory explanation for the high proportion of multiple graves, nor does it explain the case of the child shot with an arrow in the Grotte des Enfants, and the very high proportion of immatures also remains a mystery. It is, on the other hand, fully compatible with the existence of »graves« devoid of furniture and the large number of isolated human remains known from the Upper Palaeolithic settlements. The former can be seen as the remains of ghost-dead that were buried underground, and therefore likely to be preserved for millennia, the latter as, at least partially, the residues of multiple disturbances that, in often densely and for very long periods of time used settlements, may have affected buried but unmarked remains of ghost-dead.

The episodes with a funerary corpus are characterised by the appearance or multiplication of burials, a relative frequency of furnishings, a more or less pronounced variability in the richness of funerary deposits and, only from the Early Mesolithic onwards, the grouping of the dead within cemeteries. In the Mesolithic, there is a marked contrast between regions with cemeteries, where the treatment of the dead is highly codified, and regions with doubly isolated tombs, because they are both alone and far from settlements. The latter are characterised by an at least apparent lack of coherence, with very heterogeneous behaviour both in terms of funerary gestures and of the choice of grave goods. This is the case, for example, of the area comprising the Paris Basin and its margins, where the diversity of practices is particularly striking (Ghesquière/Marchand 2010, 149).

The »shamanic« hypothesis is one of the possibilities for explaining the anomalous deficit of funerary remains that characterises the Upper Palaeolithic and the Mesolithic, along with the presence of exceptionally rich grave good sets. We have seen above that, in recent pre-state societies whose burial practices have been well described, remarkable graves were those of men of renown distinguished for their individual achievements (big men societies), those of eminent members, primarily by virtue of their heredity, of a clan or lineage, or those of hierarchical shamans. The first and the third cases are reflected in the existence of a small number of visible and remarkable burials, with the »ordinary« members of the community being treated according to the ghost-death system, while the second is reflected in the formation of real cemeteries and ancestor making. The big men society and the shamanistic models are therefore compatible with the existence of genuine tombs, potentially remarkable but always few in number and, at least as far as New Guinea is concerned, exclusively male. From the point of view of archaeological visibility, the »dead heroes« and the »shamanistic« formulae could therefore represent a third and fourth pattern, something like intermediate configurations between ghost societies and ancestor societies or, more precisely, variants of the former. Despite the presence of spectacular tombs in the two Palaeolithic peaks, the idea of the existence of ancestor societies from this period, although a legitimate hypothesis (notably because some of the most spectacular tombs contain women or immatures), remains insufficiently supported due to the absence – for the moment – of cemetery-type funerary complexes. It is, on the other hand, much more probable for the Mesolithic chrono-geographical blocs with cemeteries.

Testart had very early suggested the idea of an affinity between the village societies of the American Northwest Coast and the cultures with sedentary or semi-sedentary settlements of the Epipalaeolithic (Natufian) or the Mesolithic (shell mounds of Atlantic and Northern Europe), which would have shared the same prosperity based on the exploitation of particularly rich biotopes and the mastery of conservation and storage techniques (Testart 1982). This relationship with the most generous natural areas appears plausible when we examine the distribution of Mesolithic cemeteries, which are almost all found in privileged ecological contexts where aquatic (sea, lake or river) and terrestrial resources are combined. This configuration could therefore clearly have constituted an ecological substratum favourable to the emergence of societies with ancestors. But we have seen above that the binomial sedentarity + prosperity was not a sufficient explanation. The ideological ingredient of the relationship to land ownership combined with the level of social valuation of the latter is missing because it is not demonstrable by archaeological arguments. On the Indonesian island of Sumba, where our ethnoarchaeological research projects regularly take us, the funerals of clan or lineage chiefs are an opportunity to replay indefinitely those of the founding ancestor of the clan, the one who first asserted the group's rights over the agricultural land (arable land and pastures) it controls. In the same way, the house of origin, that of the founder, is rebuilt, generation after generation, according to the same plan and on exactly the same place, another way of freezing the state of things as it was instituted at the time when the privileged relationship between the group and its territory was born.

While there are convincing arguments for the idea that the ancestor society existed as early as the Mesolithic, there are also good reasons to believe that, in a symmetrical way, the ghost society may have survived the Neolithization process. The cases of current Amazonian and Neo-Guinean societies show that the practice of agriculture is not a discriminating criterion. The European Neolithic has produced cultures that are unquestionably on the side of ancestral societies. This is most probably the case of, for example, the cultures of the Danubian Neolithic (5500-3600 BC), whose social organization was probably quite close to that of the segmented and ranked societies of Southeast Asia (Jeunesse 2018). On the other hand, the question of the continuation of the ghost-death system arises for Neolithic cultures without a funerary corpus or with a poor funerary corpus. This is the case, for example, of the two major Late Neolithic lake-dwelling cultures of the Swiss Plateau, namely Cortaillod (Kt. Neuchâtel/CH) and Pfyn (Kt. Thurgau/CH), which, at least in the centre and north of the Plateau, on the shores of lakes Biel, Neuchâtel and Zürich, have yielded a large number of settlements but a ridiculously small number of structures that can be assimilated to burials. To explain this gap, it is customary to invoke a treatment which destroys the body or leaves it in a state that will condemn it to be destroyed by erosion, but which remains compatible with a Neolithic type of »funerary ideology«, i. e. a practice that is only superficially different from those that produce graves, with which it would share the same ontological substratum. Nevertheless, the »invisible dead« of these cultures could just as well be »ghost-dead«. To suggest this possibility is, at the same time, to outline the hypothesis of the existence, in the European Neolithic, of »small farmers« who remained faithful to the old Palaeolithic and Mesolithic ideological substratum. In the case of the Swiss Plateau, where the corpus of Mesolithic human remains is very scanty, this fidelity could perfectly well be part of a continuity with the pre-Neolithic practices. Without wishing to go into detail, we note that in addition to the absence of burials the life span of the Cortaillod and Pfyn settlements is surprisingly short, which has led specialists to hypothesise slash-and-burn agriculture. Other arguments are the modesty of the architecture, very far from the majesty of the large houses of the Danubian Neolithic, and, finally, a comparatively »poor« material culture, which points to communities that are essentially outside the major European networks for the distribution of precious goods (Jeunesse 2010). The absence of graves would therefore not reflect a practice of destroying bodies comparable to that of Himalayan celestial funerals (based on a theological justification), but a mere desire to remove and destroy (or conceal) the bodies in order to protect the living from possible aggression.

## CONCLUSIONS

Most specialists agree that the classic explanations (taphonomic and demographic factors; forms of treatment of bodies leading, all other things being equal, to the non-preservation of remains) are not sufficient to account for the small number of burials and human remains known for the Upper Palaeolithic-Mesolithic sequence. The hypothesis of a preponderance, at this time, of the ghost-death system, in other words, an assumed desire to remove and forget the dead considered, at least for most of them, as potentially harmful entities for the living, would make it possible to dispel this uncertainty. Ethnology shows us that, in fact, in recent pre-state and animist societies, there are two main ways of regulating relations between the living and the dead, which we propose to distinguish by opposing ancestor and ghost societies. The purpose of funeral ritual is, on the one hand, to maintain the dead in the community after transforming them into ancestors, and on the other hand, to remove them and encourage their forgetting. It is important to emphasise that the second of these modalities is not incompatible with the existence of bodies deposited in structures likely to ensure the long-term preservation of the skeleton (and their discovery by archaeologists). Depositing a body in an isolated grave, with no markings on the ground, is, after all, a way like any other of removing all visible traces of the deceased. Symmetrically, we also see that an archaeological culture that has practised the ancestor system may well not deliver any burials. This would be the case if, like the Dayak or the Tlingit, it buried the remains of its dead in subaerial wooden structures. It is therefore possible, in an archaeological context, to find ourselves paradoxically confronted with societies with human remains that used to practise the ghost-death system and, conversely, with ancestor societies that left no trace of their dead.

The available data suggest that the ghost-death system may have been the dominant practice in the Upper Palaeolithic, where it seems to have reigned unchallenged for long periods, and even, for some regions, for the entire duration of the sequence. We have seen that, due to the absence of cemeteries and the existence of some »anomalies« in the composition of the corpus, it is difficult, in the present state of documentation, to conclude that societies with ancestors emerged at this time. We also showed that the existence of remarkable tombs is in fact compatible with other practices, which can be seen as variants of the ghost-death system. Among these other systems, the »shamanistic« one is more convincing because it provides an explanation for the existence of »rich« female or immature graves. Its emergence would be the result of the appearance of a new form of inequality specific to hierarchical shamanism and based on the privileged access of certain individuals to the supernatural. The richest tombs would then be those of shamans buried with the costume they used in their great cosmic expeditions. This »hereditary« shamanism has the advantage of offering a simple explanation for the presence of a significant proportion of immature graves. This is more difficult to envisage in the context of the »death-hero« system as practised in big men societies, unless one imagines a variant in which the glory of the hero is passed on to his children.

The ghost system continues to dominate the funerary landscape during the Mesolithic, where it is however more often interrupted by episodes yielding tombs, accompanied in some cases by the development of cemeteries, the combination of these two features probably reflecting the emergence of ancestor societies. These would thus materialise a virtual possibility in the behaviour of *Homo sapiens sapiens*, but which is apparently only rarely triggered during the chronological period considered in this article and this only in certain areas. The complete absence of burials in the Aurignacian is an important argument in support of the idea that the »ghost-death« system may have reigned alone in the early Upper Palaeolithic. From the Gravettian onwards, it would then have coexisted with a model that produced burials, some of them remarkable, thus showing a notable change, but without allowing us to conclude without caution that fully constituted ancestral societies and genuine funerary cultures existed from that moment onwards.



As we have seen, this leap was probably taken during the Mesolithic period, where the ghost system clearly remained the majority practice. Judging by the materials available today, the appearance of cemeteries is curiously accompanied by the disappearance of very rich tombs, which constitute one of the main characteristics of the Upper Palaeolithic funerary landscape. This fact constitutes an additional reason to suggest the possibility of a correlation between these »non-standard« burials and forms of social organization with »men of influence« in the broadest sense of the concept. The individuals concerned can be seen as warriors and organisers, according to the model known New Guinea, or as shamans, in a context comparable to that of the hierarchical shamanic societies of northern Eurasia as recently defined by Stépanoff (2019). The ancestor system only becomes the dominant form from the Neolithic onwards, but most probably without the disappearance of the ghost system. The prerequisite of freeing oneself from the straitjacket of the great classical divisions (hunters-farmers, Palaeolithic/Mesolithic-Neolithic) appears to be an indispensable condition for a better understanding of the history of the ways of managing the relationship between the living and the dead, which has its own dynamics and whose study must be, at least initially, disconnected from that of the other aspects of the evolution of human societies.

## Notes

- 1) The Grotta delle Arene Candide (prov. Savona/I) is also sometimes presented as a cemetery. The remains of 15 individuals were indeed found there but spread over more than a millennium (Riel-Salvatore/Gravel-Miguel 2013, 335). The site was thus selected repeatedly as burial place but not regularly enough to be interpreted as the cemetery of a given community.
- 2) That means which contain two or more individuals buried simultaneously.
- 3) For group 1, D. Henri-Gambier distinguishes thirty single graves, four double deposits and three deposits with three or more individuals (Henri-Gambier 2008, 172-173). Multiple deposits thus represent 19% of the total number of graves.
- 4) The proposal to attribute this grave to a female shaman is due to Grünberg 2000, 204.
- 5) It remains important in the Mesolithic of western Europe, particularly in the early stage. Ochre continues to be commonly used in the Neolithic. In the Linear Pottery culture, its use constitutes a sort of neutral background noise, unrelated to the level of wealth of the grave goods, nor to the sex or age of the deceased (Jeunesse 1997).
- 6) Let us not forget, in this perspective, that a significant part of the Upper Palaeolithic tombs come from ancient excavations.
- 7) In particular, the central role and status of the shaman in northern Eurasia and the importance of ritual slaughter of domestic animals in Southeast Asia. The idea that there might be ritual specialists of a »distinct hereditary essence« is, moreover, not attested for Southeast Asia.
- 8) But the term applies here to lineages of shamans and not to individuals chosen by the spirits as is the case in heterarchical shamanism.
- 9) We know that in many traditional societies, the distant »unknown« is confused with the supernatural.

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### *Zusammenfassung / Summary / Résumé*

#### **Gesellschaften ohne Ahnen? Warum werden im europäischen Spätpaläolithikum und Mesolithikum so wenige Gräber gefunden?**

Die meisten Fachleute sind sich einig, dass die klassischen Erklärungen (taphonomische und demographische Faktoren; Formen der Leichenbehandlung, die unter sonst gleichen Bedingungen zur Nicht-Konservierung von Überresten führen) nicht ausreichen, um die geringe Anzahl von Bestattungen und menschlichen Überresten zu erklären, die für die spätpaläolithisch-mesolithische Sequenz bekannt sind. Die Erklärung dafür könnte darin liegen, dass zu dieser Zeit ein Bestattungssystem vorherrschte, das den vermeintlichen Wunsch widerspiegelte, die Toten zu entfernen und zu vergessen, weil sie zumindest größtenteils als potenziell schädliche Wesen für die Lebenden angesehen wurden. Dieses System ist das der »Gesellschaften ohne Vorfahren« oder »Geistergesellschaften«, das wir in diesem Artikel mit einem Umweg über die Ethnologie zu charakterisieren versuchen. Zumindest ab dem Mesolithikum koexistiert es mit einem zweiten System, dem der »Ahnengesellschaften«.

#### **Societies Without Ancestors? Why Are So Few Graves Found in the European Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic?**

Most specialists agree that the classical explanations (taphonomic and demographic factors; forms of treatment of the bodies leading to, all other things being equal, the non-preservation of remains) are not sufficient to explain the small number of burials and human remains known for the Upper Palaeolithic-Mesolithic sequence. The explanation could well lie in the preponderance, at that time, of a funerary system reflecting an assumed desire to remove and forget the dead, considered to be, at least for the most part, potentially harmful entities for the living. This system is that of »societies without ancestors«, or »ghost societies«, which we attempt to characterise in this article via a diversion through ethnology. From at least the Mesolithic onwards, it coexists with a second system, that of »ancestor societies«.

#### **Sociétés sans ancêtres? Pourquoi trouve-t-on aussi peu de tombes dans le Paléolithique supérieur et le Mésolithique européen?**

La plupart des spécialistes s'accordent pour reconnaître que les explications classiques (facteurs taphonomiques et démographiques; formes de traitement des corps conduisant à, toutes choses égales par ailleurs, la non-conservation des restes) ne suffisent pas à expliquer le petit nombre de sépultures et de restes humains connus pour la séquence Paléolithique supérieur-Mésolithique. L'explication pourrait bien résider dans la prépondérance, à cette époque, d'un système funéraire reflétant une volonté assumée d'éloigner et d'oublier des morts considérés, au moins pour la plupart, comme des entités potentiellement nuisibles pour les vivants. Ce système est celui des »sociétés sans ancêtres«, ou »sociétés à fantômes«, que nous essayons de caractériser dans cet article via un détour par l'ethnologie. A partir du Mésolithique au moins, il se trouve en concurrence avec un second système, celui des »sociétés à ancêtres«.

### *Schlüsselwörter / Keywords / Mots clés*

Mesolithikum / Paläolithikum / Bestattungssitten / Animismus / Ontologie  
Mesolithic / Palaeolithic / funerary practices / animism / ontology  
Mésolithique / Paléolithique / pratiques funéraires / animisme / ontologie

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