

Symbols and the Transition from Hunting to Farming in the South Korea

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In the Korea peninsula there are now twenty known rock-art sites: they have only engravings obtained by pecking or scraping. Following observation on the art of engravings of the South Korean, we can find certain indices that enable us to obtain information on their intentions. It is now possible to suggest grouping sites in relation to context as we have just done. However, it is unfortunately impossible to apply a precise meaning to such groupings. The lack of a chronological study in detail obviates any exact distinguishing of the sites.

They can firstly be grouped into three categories, according to their main themes:

- sites that have principally naturalistic representations;
- sites that have principally arms;
- sites that have principally abstract representations.

The sites that have naturalistic representations probably relate to an early, pre-agricultural way of life. Others seem later – agricultural – as, for example, the site linked to megaliths. Dating of the Korean petroglyph sites, with their packed image on open-air rock surfaces is exceptionally hard. Those have not yet been dated directly, because the art engravings that were used do not contain the organic materials at present required for radiocarbon or other similar dating methods. They can also be dated by a very few direct stratigraphic contexts and by linking their images to objects of known prehistoric date, although many of the figures art ‘abstract’ and cannot be dated that way. One can be dated indirectly, a plethora of

whale and seal bones and harpoons from a nearby shell midden, that suggests the people who lived there 7,000 to 3,500 years ago. Others are found on megalithic formations, particularly dolmens and menhirs. A close correlation has been shown to exist between the distribution of archeological and symbolic sites in this case. These sites of engravings probably belong to the Bronze Age (between 1,000 and 300BC). Direct and indirect dating that sets the engraving traditions in southern Korea into their archeological context provide a frame for studying the change in art over time.

In the IVth and the IIIrd millennia agriculture was still unknown in the archeological context. Humans lived mainly by hunting and fishing as shown by the remains from this period, mainly shell middens. The people of this era hunted marine and land mammals. They thus had a mode of life reminiscent of the Northern Pacific populations known from ethno-historical sources. Over the IIIrd and IInd millennia agriculture started in the south of Korea. A particular type of pottery appeared with a pattern-less earthenware called “Mumun”. Rice farming appeared approximately 2,500BC. It is also in this era that the first megaliths were raised, dated between 1000 and 300BC: dolmens, covered trenches, mounds sometimes formed of pebbles.

According to this analysis, we can suggest certain conclusions on the level of cultural development reached, living conditions, religious observance, etc. We can distinguish at least two different stages; one of the fishing-hunting and the other of agriculture. The majority of the representations of animals by the populations of hunt-

ers-fishers are rather close to reality, while the farming populations had an abstracted art symbolic system. In the populations of fishers-hunters, the realism can have a high value symbolic system. On the other hand, the agricultural societies are limited to some geometrical figurations and arms: circles, vulvas, daggers, etc. The suggestion concerning chronology may be further substantiated through their relationship to context. Rock-art has had a function in society and will therefore relate in some form to social structure. In conclusion, one

global response to the result of environmental and technological change has been a creative explosion for inspiration on cultures the world over; not only in technology, but also in the arts. In other words, the hunter-fishers' rock-art tradition came to an end and the symbolic expression of a new economy and ideology took its place. A symbol functioned as an important agent in legitimizing and mediating status and inequality in a period of stressful social transition.