Fetishism and visual culture in Later Neolithic Southeast Italy

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Abstract

The term fetish has been used since the sixteenth century to refer to indigenous 'power objects', perceived to embody positive supernatural energy. This concept is explored here with reference to the visual culture of the Later Neolithic in Southeast Italy (5800–4100 BC). During this period, many aspects of the material world were ascribed a greater visual significance, being modelled into more varied art-forms and highlighted by more innovative and elaborate decoration, ritual performances and special deposits. A culturally specific range of powerful bodily and abstract symbols unified and animated these material forms, to the extent that we can talk of a fetishistic way of seeing and visual culture. These may have been used strategically to highlight and strengthen social connections, distinctions and boundaries. Ultimately, these social dynamics related to tensions surrounding the final transition to a fully agricultural way of life in Neolithic Southeast Italy.

Fetishism and visual culture[1]

The term 'fetish' derives from the Portuguese *feitiço*, meaning 'charm' or

'sorcery'. It has been used since the sixteenth century to refer to indigenous

'power objects'. These range from charms and amulets to realistic human

and animal sculptures, perceived to embody positive supernatural energy,

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[1] This paper was originally presented at the 'Seeing the Past' conference at Stanford University, USA in 2005, and ― although not significantly modified ― remains as relevant today as it was then, particularly given the current theoretical interest in relational archaeologies, with their emphasis on the entangelements of past people and things (e.g. Watts 2013).

which could be harnessed to protect people, and to bring them good luck, health, prosperity or social well-being. In the late nineteenth century the term was incorporated into Western scientific discourse. The anthropologist Edward Tylor (1871) regarded a fetish as an object in which a spirit is embodied, to which it attached, or through which it conveys magical influence. He also used the term 'fetishism' to refer to the worship, shading into idolatry, of such an object, and the term 'animism' to refer to the belief that all things have their own souls or spirits. Karl Marx (1970) used the term 'fetishism' to refer to the process of mystification that exists in Capitalism through which the products of labour, as soon as they are produced as commodities, become divorced from their own physical nature, their use-value and the social relations of their production, and are valued instead for what they cost and how they look. Sigmund Freud (1977) also used this term in seeking to account for the fact that certain men could only achieve sexual gratification via a specific material 'fetish object', which, he argued, acted as a substitute for the man's childhood belief in his mother's absent penis, and served to arouse and cancel his deep seated fear of castration. Visual culture studies have extended the relevance of the term fetishism, drawing upon these earlier meanings to argue that fetishistic viewing plays an important part in everyday visual consumption (e.g. Mirzoeff 1999). In what is referred to as the 'fetishism of the gaze', for example, the visual senses are alienated in the process in which we casually accept that figurative representations or animations are 'realistic', while being fully aware of their conventionality.

Although various aspects of these conceptions of 'fetishism' have not stood up to recent critical scrutiny, the term in general remains highly relevant to discussions of the perception of art-objects (as do related terms such as 'animism' and 'idolatry'). Anthropologists and archaeologists interested in the 'objectification' of persons and the 'personhood' of objects have continued to explore the ways in which cultural artefacts are employed and transformed, particularly when perceived to be embodied with human-like social agency and even sacred power (e.g. Fowler 2004; Gell 1998; Miller 1994; Rowlands 1998; Tambiah 1984). The visual properties of art-works, for example, may not only be evaluated aesthetically in terms of their beauty, but also as efficacious manifestations of supernatural power, which can sometimes have a dazzling 'anaesthetic' effect on their viewers. According to Alfred Gell (1992), decorated canoe prow-boards from the Trobriand Islands near Papua New Guinea achieve this effect in two ways. First, their technical virtuosity can impress, even stun, the beholder. Second, the abstract decorative designs (such as bold symmetrical patterns, tonal contrasts, unstable designs, and bright colours), can disturb the normal optical and cognitive functioning of the viewer: leading the eye off in opposite directions, for example. These visual disturbances are sometimes interpreted as evidence of a magical power emanating from the object, and as evidence of the magical prowess of the craftsperson and owner. Such magic is seen to be at work in social contexts when dazzled spectators behave unexpectedly: with unexpected generosity, for example. Below, I explore these ideas about fetishism further with reference to the 'visual culture' (defined here as both the visual forms and

the visual processes through which people construct themselves) of the Later Neolithic in Southeast Italy.

The Later Neolithic of Southeast Italy

The Later Neolithic dates to between around 5800 and 4100 BC in the Apulia region of Southeast Italy. For the purposes of this article, I have divided this period into three phases, with reference to radiocarbon dates and changing ceramic styles. I describe as 'Early Neolithic' the period dated to between around 5800 and 5700 BC, associated with pottery such as Guadone style 'evolved' impressed and incised and Lagnano painted ware; 'Middle Neolithic' the period between about 5700 and 5400 BC, associated with pottery such as Lagnano and Masseria La Quercia impressed and painted ware; and 'Late Neolithic' the period between about 5400 and 4100 BC, associated with pottery such as La Quercia, Passo di Corvo, Scaloria and Serra d'Alto painted ware. Over this period, and in contrast to the Earliest Neolithic (c. 6100-5800 BC), a large body of archaeological data enables us to piece together a relatively comprehensive picture of socio-economic practices and patterns in Apulia (e.g. Cremonesi 1979; Geniola 1979; 1987; Palma di Cesnola & Vigliardi 1984; Tinè & Simone 1984; Whitehouse 1968).

The agricultural lifestyle and its material culture, introduced and adopted during the Earliest Neolithic, became fully established during the Later Neolithic. This is clearly reflected at the literally hundreds of Later Neolithic agricultural settlements identified across the region (e.g. Cipolloni Sampò 1987; Corrado & Ingravallo 1988; Jones ed. 1987). On the Tavoliere plain in

North Apulia, where extensive aerial- and field-survey has taken place, it is clear that ecotonal situations on interfluvial rises were favoured as site locations (Cassano & Manfredini eds 1983; Sargent 2001). Cereals, pulses and legumes continued to be cultivated around them, either on the light *crusta* soils of the interfluves, and/or in the well-watered valley bottoms (e.g. Costantini 1984; Fiorentino 2002). Another almost invariable feature of the Tavoliere sites is their enclosure by circular ditches (first seen during the Earliest Neolithic), and the presence within them of smaller C-shaped 'compound' ditches (e.g. Bradford & Williams Hunt 1946; Jones ed. 1987). In practice, two of their key functions are likely to have been stock control and territorial demarcation. The animals in question are indicated by the bones of domesticated sheep, goat, cattle, pig and dogs, supplemented by generally small numbers of wild animals, molluscs and fish (e.g. Bökönyi 1983; Deith 1988; Wilkens 2002). On a structural level, these ditches can also be regarded as spatial, social and symbolic boundaries relating to co-resident groups. The enclosure ditches were probably constructed, and then functioned on, a communal scale, while the C-ditches may have been associated with domestic, family, units. A basic distinction can also be made between smaller and larger ditched sites, with reference to their size and plans. However, it should be noted that many of these sites were repeatedly occupied, abandoned and transformed over long periods of time, resulting in complex archaeological sequences, marked in particular by the digging, re-construction and gradual in-filling of their ditches (Skeates 2000). The largest of them appear to have been formed through a process of further population growth combined with settlement nucleation, involving the abandonment of

earlier and smaller adjacent settlements (Brown 1991; Whitehouse 1981, 163). Within the enclosures, a variety of features have been recorded. The C-ditches have a diameter of between 12 and 46 metres. Deep ploughing has destroyed most stratigraphic features associated with them, save for their deep ditch fills. However, at the few sites where better-preserved deposits have been excavated over relatively extensive areas, a range of settlement-related features have been identified, particularly within and around the entrances of the C-ditches. Rectangular wattle-and-daub huts, measuring between four and 4.5 metres long, and three to four metres wide, with compacted earth floors, and sometimes dry-stone wall foundations and raised hearths of plaster, have been identified at some sites. Associated features include rows of post-holes, extensive cobbled pavements (used as multi-purpose work areas), small channels (possibly for drainage), and hollows, pits and cavities (some apparently used as silos, wells and cisterns, others for special deposits including human burials). Similar features, but only a few enclosure ditches, have also been found at extensively excavated sites in Central and South Apulia. Tools used at these residential sites were mainly manufactured locally, in a 'domestic mode of production', using readily available supplies of materials such as stone, bone and clay (not to mention less archaeologically visible organic materials).

Cave sites were a complementary component of the Later Neolithic socio-economic system. These sites tend to be located on the margins of the agricultural landscape, around the edges of the Gargano uplands, along rocky coastlines, on the sides of carstic valleys, and in the Murge. However, they

were never far removed, spatially and socially, from contemporary open sites and the mainstream of agricultural life (Skeates 1995; 1997). Deep occupation deposits often accumulated around their entrances, which suggests that many of them served a convenient residential function, the seasonality of which still needs to be assessed scientifically. Cereals and domesticated animals were certainly consumed at them, if not actually produced in the immediately vicinity, but local resources were also exploited, including a greater range and number of wild fauna compared to open sites. At the same time, it is clear that many of their interiors were also perceived and used as special, 'liminal', places for the performance of rituals (Whitehouse 1990; 1992b). This dimension is particularly evident at the largest cave sites, with extensive underground complexes of chambers and corridors, such as Grotta Scaloria and the Grotta di Porto Badisco, whose deep interiors were elaborated by pits, special deposits (including human remains), cave paintings, dry-stone walling and rock-cut features.

The Later Neolithic also saw the continued intensification of social relations amongst members of agricultural communities. This is characterised by the development of slightly wider and more intensive exchange and alliance networks, and of more elaborate and frequent ritual activities, compared to the Final Upper Palaeolithic and Earliest Neolithic (Ammerman 1985; Chapman 1988; Malone 1985; Skeates 1993b). According to characterisation studies, limited quantities of obsidian blades (mainly from Lipari in South-West Italy), small polished serpentinite and jadeite axes (from South-West and North-West Italy), and more locally produced painted fineware vessels, decorated in

inter-regionally recognisable styles, circulated within extensive maritime and overland exchange systems (e.g. Hallam *et al.* 1976; Leighton & Dixon 1992; Skeates 1992; Tykot 1996). Fine flint blades and 'Campignian' axes also continued to be extracted and exported from the Defensola A flint mine in the Gargano uplands (Galiberti *et al.* 2001). Some of these useful artefacts appear to have taken on added values, and to have consequently been mobilised on social and ceremonial occasions. Archaeologically, this is reflected in their 'sacrifice' and accumulation within ritual deposits, particularly in caves. Such deposits are often characterised by the presence of human remains, hearths and large quantities of animal bones and pottery sherds, which seem to reflect the performance of mortuary rites accompanied by feasting. These rites may increasingly have involved the demonstration of links to ancestors. The social relations embedded in these activities were probably based, above all, on a recognition of the benefits of mutual dependency and of social cohesion to groups that had adopted a fully agricultural lifestyle. However, some clearer signs of social differentiation also began to appear in this period, both between communities and within them. In the densely settled Northern half of the Tavoliere, for example, a picture of growing inter-community differentiation is indicated: by the formation of some very large residential communities through settlement nucleation, the multiplication and symbolic elaboration of boundary ditches, and the production of locally distinctive fineware styles. At the same time, hints of gender and age differences appear in the archaeological record. These take the form of some new female figurines, the gender-patterned paintings of the Grotta di Porto Badisco, and evidence of intentional tooth removal in women

in Neolithic Southeast Italy (e.g. Holmes & Whitehouse 1998; Robb 1997b). New forms of institutionalised social control and power may also have developed at this time, based upon a principle of anteriority in social relations (Skeates 2000). In this, the prosperity of the living may have been conceptualised as being controlled by supernatural beings, linked directly through the ancestors to the elders, who exploited their role as ritual mediators to exert control over younger generations. It was in this dynamic social context that greater demands appear to have been placed upon the production and consumption of visual material. This arguably led to the development and exploitation of a fetishistic way of seeing and to an integrated and embedded visual culture in Later Neolithic Apulia.

Bodily and abstract art

In this period, visual material appears in an expanded range of forms and contexts. Indeed, to such an extent, that it could be claimed that the visual properties of almost all elements of material culture were now ascribed some special significance. Obvious examples of 'portable' art include: body ornaments of seashell, bone and stone; pottery decorated in a variety of geographically and chronologically varied styles; red ochre pigment; ceramic stamps (or *pintaderas*), female figurines and decorated spindle whorls; and a naturally decorated tortoise shell. In addition, it can be argued that stone axes, flint blades, human remains, even crops and animals, also took on an added visual significance at this time. Examples of all of these objects have been found in 'living' contexts, in residential sites, and were therefore probably all closely associated with quotidian activities. However, relatively

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large numbers of them ultimately found their way into 'liminal' contexts. In Later Neolithic Apulia, such contexts are characterised by mortuary and other ritual deposits, adding to a range of features that might be described as examples of 'installation' art. At 'open' settlement sites, these include enclosure- and C-ditches and associated cavities, as well as a standing stone; while at caves often striking natural forms were elaborated by dry-stone walls, rock-cut features, cavities and paintings. These visual forms can also be placed along a stylistic scale, ranging from schematic 'bodily', anthropomorphic and zoomorphic, forms, to abstract geometric and curvilinear forms.

It is evident that visual culture in Later Neolithic Apulia retained many of the key elements previously established by the first agricultural communities of the Earliest Neolithic. However, their forms and meanings also became elaborated over time and space. Body ornaments became slightly more varied and elaborate, particularly in North Apulia. Ceramics were refined technologically, modelled into new forms, decorated in new styles, and displayed in new ways. Circular ditches were modified and multiplied at open settlement sites, also especially in the North. Liminal spaces, at residential sites and in increasingly sacred cave interiors, were elaborated by ritual performances and special constructions, including patterned mortuary deposits. In addition, an increasingly sophisticated visual symbolism of bodily and abstract motifs animated and integrated the visual culture of this period. These transformations, and their social significance, will be considered further

below, starting with the 'portable' visual forms, before turning to the 'installation art' of the open and cave sites.

Portable visual material

Plate 1*:* Decorated base of rocker-impressed ware vessel from Casa San Paolo (Museo Nazionale Archeologico, Altamura).

Ceramic vessels, and especially finewares, were arguably one of the most dynamic categories of visual material in Later Neolithic Apulia (**Plates 1-4**). They were skilfully crafted by local potters, who exchanged stylistic information intensively, at the same time as innovating freely, to produce colourful, distinctive, beautiful and valuable artefacts that embedded social display and exchange in their practical functions. Demand for them remained high, as combined 'functional' and 'symbolic' containers, related primarily to the production and consumption of food and drink. Potters consequently continued to make them in a mainly domestic mode of production, using a variety of predominantly local recipes and raw materials, although a few fine vessels were probably exchanged over long distances (Muntoni 1999; Skeates 1992). Potters also continued to transform the style of their products. They did so by selectively blending local knowledge with novel technological and social information derived from networks of regular interaction in the South-Central Mediterranean region (Chapman 1988a; Evans 1987; Malone 1985). In particular, trans-Adriatic connections with possibly ancestral groups in the Eastern Adriatic, maintained throughout the Later Neolithic, comprised

a rich source of stylistic inspiration (e.g. Batović 1975; Benać 1975; Bray 1966). Geometric impressed and incised motifs may also have originated in the patterns formed by woven materials. Some of the painted motifs, on the other hand, including the distinctive 'fringe' motif of the Scaloria Bassa style, may be squeomorphs of textile patterns. Vessel fabrics were refined and their forms expanded. But, it was again their surfaces that received particular creative attention. These were further elaborated, especially with polishing, carefully applied coloured decoration, and more complex abstract and bodily symbols. Even the bases of some vessels were richly decorated. Such decoration varied from vessel to vessel, and between communities, whilst conforming to broadly independent but partially overlapping regional styles. These transformations suggest that a key intention of the most skilled potters was to enhance the aesthetic value of their finewares, primarily for local consumption but also as valued objects of exchange. The result was the appearance of a succession of increasingly sophisticated, beautiful, distinguished and prized finewares.

Plate 2: Graffiti incised anthromorphic motif, beaneath a hatched band, on a cup from the Grotta Sant'Angelo (Museo delle Civiltà Preclassiche della Murgia Meridionale, Ostuni).

These highly visible fineware vessels may now have played a more active role in enhancing the social significance of the daily and ritual food-related activities within which they were embedded (Chapman 1988a; Pluciennik 1997; Skeates 1998). They were used, displayed, exchanged and broken in living contexts, where they were frequently repaired, and in ritual

performances, leading to their special deposition in mortuary deposits and sacred caves. In all of these contexts, pottery vessels could have helped people to establish and maintain social connections between the living, the ancestors and the supernatural, particularly when given as gifts. Their decoration could also have borne additional meanings and values. The ornamentation of vessels in widely shared regional styles, for example, may have highlighted the continued importance of food sharing, mutual dependency and social connections, particularly at a time when larger and more sedentary agricultural communities were being formed. At the same time, local differences in specific decorative elements may have emphasised different group identities. On the densely settled Tavoliere, for example, the Guadone, Lagnano and La Quercia ceramic styles of the Early and Middle Neolithic may have originated as contemporary local wares, produced by divergent communities in the North-West, North-East and Central parts of the plain respectively (Whitehouse 1986, 41-2). The elaboration of parts of serving vessels with specific, and sometimes exotic, symbols may also have highlighted symbolic boundaries and ritualised restrictions surrounding the use of those vessels. The rims and handles of serving vessels are the first parts of those vessels that people would have touched with their lips and hands. It therefore seems significant that these vessel parts comprised a particular focus for decorative elaboration. Rims were frequently highlighted with special decorative symbols, including incised notches, scratched bands, red slip, painted lines and anthropomorphic faces. Handles were also elaborated, particularly on cups, by the application of anthropomorphic motifs to lugs and zoomorphic appendages to handles. Such decorative features

may, then, have reinforced social constraints over the handling of these vessels and their contents, particularly in the performative context of rituals. The symbols may also have been ascribed an added spiritual power, through their use of bodily imagery and of motifs, hinting at exotic, even ancestral, Balkan connections. They could also have been used magically, to protect the contents of their vessels from harm. Pots may even have come to be perceived as bodies, as they are in many traditional societies (e.g. Barley 1994), being 'clothed' in decorative motifs derived from bodily forms and textiles, and ascribed a human-like agency.

Plate 3: Painted anthropomorphic face (with incised eyes, relief nose and impressed nostrils) on rim-sherd from Monte Aquilone (Museo delle Origini, Roma).

Ceramic figurines, decorative stamps and decorated spindle whorls represent distinct categories of visual material, but they also exhibit many similarities to decorated pottery vessels (Holmes & Whitehouse 1998). As a consequence, it is possible that they were also used and valued in similar ways to decorated pottery vessels, being skilfully crafted, displayed, handled, broken and deposited, sometimes ritually. More specifically, they too could have highlighted certain social connections and distinctions. The precise uses of both the figurines and the stamps are uncertain, although their 'palm-sized' scale, and the handles on the stamps, suggests that they would have been hand-held and closely viewed objects. The flat base of the Canne figurine also suggests that this example was designed to stand. Although a pottery sherd from Ripalta carries a positive stamp impression, it is a rare example

amongst an enormous quantity of Neolithic pottery found in Apulia. This suggests that the stamps may also have been used to mark organic materials. For example, they could have been used as decorative stamps to apply pigments to people's bodies or clothing (e.g. Cornaggia Castiglioni 1956). If this was so, then they had the potential to decorate more than one person with the same motif, which in turn could have emphasised connections between different people. Alternatively, they might have been used to stamp special bread, which might have been ritually shared (Chapman 2001). The figurines, on the other hand, comprise a condensed selection of human physical attributes (Bailey 1996). As such, they could have been perceived to contain human-like agency, and could therefore have been used as ritual intermediaries, serving to channel power between the human and spirit worlds. At the same time, the gendered form of these anthropomorphic figurines might have symbolically expressed and enhanced the increasingly distinctive aesthetic and cultural status of women's bodies. The latter also appear to have been culturally marked by intentional tooth removal, according to John Robb's palaeo-osteological study of an admittedly small sample of 30 skeletons from Neolithic Italy, most from Apulia (Robb 1997). He claims that between a quarter and a half of adult women, but no men, had their front teeth intentionally extracted during life.

Plate 4: Serra d'Alto style cup, with abstract painted decoration and zoomorphic handle terminal, from the Grotta Sant'Angelo (Museo delle Origini, Roma).

People's bodies, both living and dead, were also highlighted by a slightly expanded range of perforated ornaments during the Later Neolithic (**Plate 5**). Their extended range may in part reflect the expanded long-distance social connections maintained by Neolithic groups in Apulia. Their use, however, may have remained essentially similar to that of the Upper Palaeolithic, if slightly more overt: referring both to long-distance social contacts and to personal social distinctions. They may, for example, have referred to gender distinctions, to judge from their representation on female figurines.

Plate 5: Naturally decorated shell ring from Masseria Mallerba (Museo Nazionale Archeologico, Altamura).

Installation art

Examples of all of these portable visual forms were also installed within larger works, the most monumental of which are the circular enclosure- and C-ditches. These highly visible structures retained their original role as socio-economic boundaries and landmarks, delimiting residential sites and domestic spaces within them, as well as points of access to and from them. In practice, they could have continued to help defend and control access to the economic and social resources of residential communities and their component kin-based domestic units. However, their visual elaboration and multiplication, particularly in North Apulia during the Later Neolithic, suggests that they may now have been ascribed a greater symbolic and ritual significance as liminal boundaries (Skeates 2000). The large number and scale of the enclosure ditches, their re-inscribed concentric circular forms, and the occasional

addition of mortuary deposits to their fills, are particularly striking. So, too, is the frequent symbolic elaboration of the C-ditches by mortuary deposits, which were placed in their fills, in cavities cut into their inner sides, and in cavities dug outside huts within their enclosed areas. These boundary features and their deposits could have contributed to the demarcation and framing of social space, both physically and symbolically, by highlighting its structure. In the case of the enclosure ditches, the social strategy of emergent community leaders may have been to carve out and strengthen the territories, identities and power of their agricultural communities. In particular, a symbolic strategy of communal ditch digging may have been employed to persuade smaller kin-groups to nucleate and remain in larger residential communities. This strategy may have succeeded, to a certain extent, at major sites such as Passo di Corvo, where the scale of the settlement and its enclosure ditches is striking. However, such communities evidently remained susceptible to fissioning, as is reflected in the continued spread of numerous ditched settlements across the landscape, and the abandonment of established sites. At the same time, within the heart of these developing communities, elders may also have used C-ditch digging and mortuary rites strategically. Here, their intention may have been to maintain the separate identities of their families, and to delineate themselves from their neighbours, with particular symbolic reference to the ditches containing the physical remains of their ancestors, as well as the 'familiar' spaces that they enclosed.

Mortuary deposits were frequently established at open sites and in natural caves. Unfortunately, limited contextual details of these have been published.

The origins, social significance and meanings of these mortuary rites are consequently difficult to interpret. Their consistency throughout Apulia during the Later Neolithic indicates the adoption and maintenance of a culturally-specific set of mortuary rites. The origins of these are unclear. It might be assumed that they were introduced from the East, during the Earliest Neolithic, as part of a package of cultural innovations. However, no mortuary deposits can, so far, be clearly assigned to that period in Apulia, and so it remains possible that these rites developed locally during the Later Neolithic, as part of the social intensification that generally characterises this period. Certainly, some of the Later Neolithic features, such as the artificial cavities and chambers dug into the sides of enclosure ditches, are regionally distinctive. The generally small scale of the mortuary deposits, and their frequent positioning adjacent to living areas, suggests that they were mainly produced during the course of kin-based (as opposed to communal) rituals. These would have involved the burial of selected individuals by members of their families. More specifically, the provisioning of the dead with personal equipment, ornaments and gifts of food may indicate a belief in an after-life. This, and the repeated placing of the dead in well-defined mortuary deposits, situated in liminal spaces outside but adjacent to living areas, may also indicate a concern with defining boundaries and contacts between the living and the dead (Pluciennik 1998). In particular, they may indicate a new concern with defining the place of, caring for, and maintaining good relations with ancestral family members. They may also reflect a growing concern with defining kin-based descent-groups and lineages.

In caves, in addition to mortuary deposits, the interior spaces of a few large cave complexes were visually elaborated by some more specialised ritual structures and deposits over the course of the Later Neolithic. In this way, Neolithic groups exploited and added to the existing natural, visually striking, morphologies of the caves, inheriting and developing further a traditional way of seeing and ritually experiencing caves previously established in the Upper Palaeolithic (Skeates 1991; Whitehouse 1992b). Such spaces still create an awe-inspiring sense of 'otherness', and may well have been regarded as 'liminal' places in the past, providing a point of contact between the lived-in and supernatural worlds. With the exception of the paintings placed relatively close to the entrance to the Grotta di Santa Croce, which may have alerted visitors to the ritual significance of the cave's interior, these special features were clearly not intended for open viewing, since they were situated in the most inaccessible (deepest, darkest and most restricted) parts of the underground cave complexes in Grotta Scaloria and the Grotta di Porto Badisco. Indeed, a degree of ritual secrecy, characterised by socially restricted and controlled access to key symbolism and knowledge, is likely to have surrounded their production and consumption (Whitehouse 1990; 1992b). More specifically, they may even have been associated with initiation rites, involving the induction of successive generations into different levels of secret, powerful, religious, ancestral knowledge. As part of this process, constraints may have been placed on women and children in terms of their access to the hidden interiors of these caves. This interpretation seems particularly appropriate to the Grotta di Porto Badisco, with its increasingly abstract symbolism the deeper one moves into the cave, and its group of

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painted juvenile handprints situated half way along the second corridor. Such features might be regarded, more generally, as characteristic elements of a distinctive 'cave-cult', which developed throughout the South-Central Mediterranean during the Neolithic (Whitehouse 1992b, 2-3). However, locally specific practices and meanings are also likely to have been expressed (Skeates 1995b). In Grotta Scaloria in North Apulia, for example, specific ritual concerns with death and 'abnormal' water derived from stalagtites appear to have been expressed. These might have related to specific agrarian concerns over the fertility, health and productivity of people, crops and stock on the adjacent densely settled Tavoliere plain. In the Grotta di Porto Badisco in South Apulia, on the other hand, a slightly different set of ritual concerns may have been expressed through the re-use of a Palaeolithic ritual cave, the recurrent representation of the male hunting of wild deer, the representation of animal-human hybrids, the repeated deposition of crops in the form of burnt offerings in the entrance to the cave, the confining of female symbols to the first decorated zone of the cave, and the group of juvenile handprints in the interior (Plate 6). These powerful images might have related to tensions within local indigenous groups with a hunter-gatherer ancestry surrounding their full transition to an agricultural way of life, including the gender- and age-based division of labour within this.

Plate 6: Cave paintings in Grotta di Porto Badisco

Fetishistic visual culture

To judge from these various developments, then, an increasingly complex and integrated visual culture was established over the course of the Later Neolithic in Apulia. It is characterised by the aesthetic elaboration of the visual properties of a wide range of material forms, including their materials, colour, texture, lustre, shape, size and symmetry. It is also characterised by a rich visual symbolism of schematic bodily and abstract geometric and curvilinear motifs (Pluciennik 1994; 2002). These evolved through the sharing and local re-working of traditional and exotic stylistic knowledge. These motifs continued the trend towards abstraction already established in the linear-geometric art of the Final Upper Palaeolithic. The fact that the Neolithic motifs remain difficult to pin down may also provide a clue to the nature of their past meanings: as potentially ambiguous, changeable and multivalent, but also powerful, dangerous and frightening. These symbols were displayed across, and connected, a wide variety of material forms and spatial contexts: ranging from 'portable' to 'installation' artforms, and 'living' to 'liminal' contexts. They were unified around, and animated by, the core symbolism of the human body: living and dead, old and young, male and female. They also helped to construct social bodies. Female bodies, in particular, were objectified by culturally specific representations, markings, ornaments and gestures (Robb 1997; Whitehouse 1992a). The value of this symbolism was heightened by ritual performances in liminal spaces. In these contexts, new sets of symbolic objects and new symbolic meanings were established, which, recursively, helped to structure, focus and give meaning to the ritual actions performed in those spaces. A symbolic association between men, hunting and deer may occur, for example, not only in the painted scenes of the Grotta di Porto

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Badisco, but also in some of the burials of Grotta Scaloria and in the Manfredi

hypogeum (Robb 1997; Whitehouse 1990; Winn & Shimabuku 1980). Other

symbolic connections may have been established between the living, the

ancestors and the supernatural in rites of passage, including mortuary rites.

Such visual symbolism comprised a valuable social resource. It may have

been exploited, as an active ideological agent, by family elders and emergent

community leaders, to impose order on the physical and social world, by

signifying and highlighting its connections and boundaries. In particular, it

may have been used to frame and form people's identities, including their kin-

based and community affiliation, their age-based status and their gender

roles. As social life became more complex and stressful in Apulia, ultimately

due to the full adoption of an agricultural lifestyle, fetishistic visual expression

was deployed as a more overt form of communication.

Notes on Contributor

Robin Skeates is a Professor in the Department of Archaeology at Durham University. He is a specialist in the prehistoric archaeology of the Central Mediterranean region, and also an expert in museum and heritage studies. His publications explore a wide variety of themes within the overlapping inter-disciplinary fields of material, visual and sensual culture studies, and museum and heritage studies. He is author of various books, including: *An Archaeology of the Senses: Prehistoric Malta* (Oxford University Press) and *Visual Culture and Archaeology: Art and Social Life in Prehistoric South-East Italy* (Duckworth). He has also edited books on the archaeology of caves, public archaeology, radiocarbon dating, and the archaeology of ritual and religion. His current archaeological fieldwork focusses on the human uses of caves in Italy – both in Sardinia and in Lazio – where he has established strong research collaborations with scholars, universities, heritage agencies and local people.

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Captions for plates

Plate 1
Decorated base of rocker-impressed ware vessel from Casa San Paolo (Museo Nazionale Archeologico, Altamura). *Photo: R. Skeates*

Plate 2
Graffiti incised anthromorphic motif, beaneath a hatched band, on a cup from the Grotta Sant'Angelo (Museo delle Civiltà Preclassiche della Murgia Meridionale, Ostuni). *Photo: R. Skeates*

Plate 3
Painted anthropomorphic face (with incised eyes, relief nose and impressed nostrils) on rim-sherd from Monte Aquilone (Museo delle Origini, Roma). *Photo: R. Skeates*

Plate 4
Serra d'Alto style cup, with abstract painted decoration and zoomorphic handle terminal, from the Grotta Sant'Angelo (Museo delle Origini, Roma). *Photo: R. Skeates*

Plate 5
Naturally decorated shell ring from Masseria Mallerba (Museo Nazionale Archeologico, Altamura). *Photo: R. Skeates*

Plate 6
Cave paintings in Grotta Porto Badisco. *Photo: http://www.leccecronaca.it/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/badisco.jpg*