

The Lion Man

One of the oldest mobile manmade artifacts was found in Germany in the valley of the Lone, close to the city of Ulm. It had been discovered by Otto Völzing (1910-2001) and Robert Wetzel (1898-1962) in 1939. However, during World War II it had been forgotten and the importance of the figure was only recognized in the late 1960s.

The sculpture known as “The Lion Man” was created out of a single mammoth ivory tusk and dates back to the last ice age, about 35.000 years ago. Early humans formed this delicate manufactured figure with stone tools. The precise and fine structure is still astonishing nowadays.

At that early time in mankind people used to be nomads who inhabited caves. They wandered through the icy landscapes while following the animals they hunted. Not only reindeers, wild horses and mammoth lived at that time. There were also cave lions that had their home territory in the middle of Europe. The so-called panthera leo spelaea was first described in 1810 by the German physician and natural researcher Georg August Goldfuß (1782-1848). Especially in Bavaria, North-Rhine-Westphalia and Baden-Wurttemberg bones and teeth of European cave lions could be found. For young mankind these animals must have been very impressive and frightening at the same time. A cave lion was more than three meters in size and therefore even bigger than the African lions of our time.

Since statues like “The Lion Man” did not serve a special function like tools, jewelry or other supplementary items, these figures are the first examples of human art that fulfilled a spiritual, religious or just intellectual purpose. Early humans used to represent all kinds of animals in their art. Even though cave lions as well as cave bears did not belong to these people’s prey, they felt great respect towards the strong and forceful creatures. It is therefore most likely that “The Lion Man”, found in the Hohlenstein-Stadel-Cave in the Swabian Jura, was inspired by the mythological role such dangerous animals played for human beings at that time.

Besides, the figure is especially spectacular for its anthropomorphic character. It is the upright walk of the sculpture as well as the proportion of its legs or feet and also the embodiment of ankles which imply a human association. The rest of the statue’s shape is clearly animal-like. The human aspects within the figure are a further indication for the existence of an intellectual, religious and spiritual background within the groups of early humans. They did not only try to imitate and represent nature, they also interpreted it.

It cannot be said if “The Lion Man” shows a masculine or feminine character, since the decisive details survived time only in fragments. Besides, cave lions of the last ice age did not have the distinctive differentiation marks as today's African lions do. Some believe the sculpture to be a genderless deity and others speak of a fertility sculpture.

Another interesting question is: “Who were these early people that manufactured such fine artifacts?” Even though modern homo sapiens had already evolved about 160.000 years ago on the African continent, its different cultures reached Europe only 120.000 years later. Therefore European cultures of the young Paleolithic Era are of a juvenile age, with regard to the evolution of mankind in and around France or Germany. However, these humans have already developed exquisite social structures and typical humanoid habits.

“The Lion Man” and other ivory figures, found in the Swabian Alps, had been detected together with jewelry and tools that are characteristic for the oldest culture of the younger Paleolithic Age, the so-called Aurignacians. These people are named after the type site Aurignac in France, where first marks of their existence could be discovered. This specific culture shows a fascinating development in human life. Not only art was created by them, they also manufactured jewelry for esthetic reasons and to distinguish from others of their group. Besides, even music was an essential part of the Aurignacians. This is proven since flutes made of ivory and bones could be found recently.