



The Venus of Laussel

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The Human Revolution

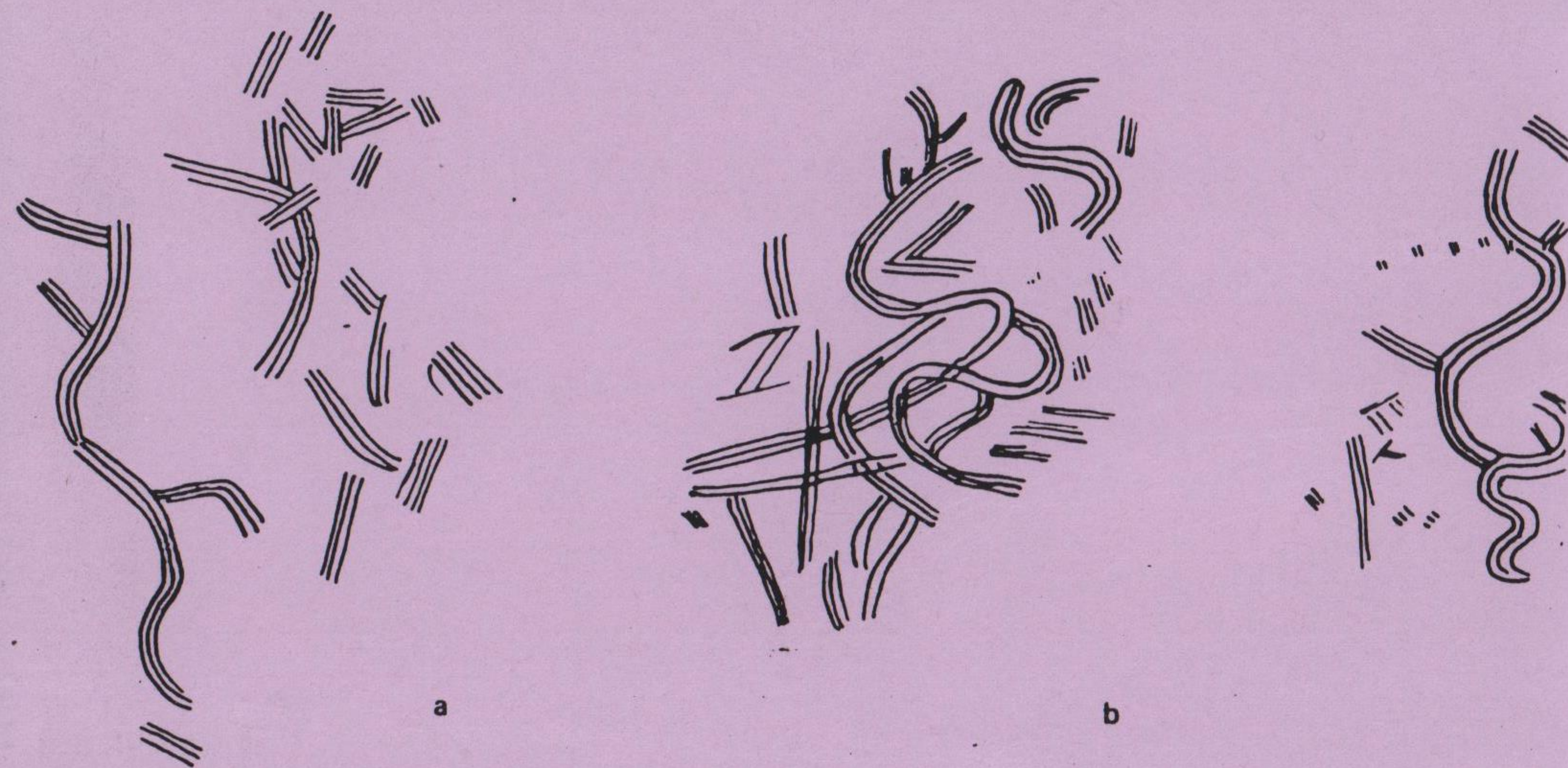


Fig 1a

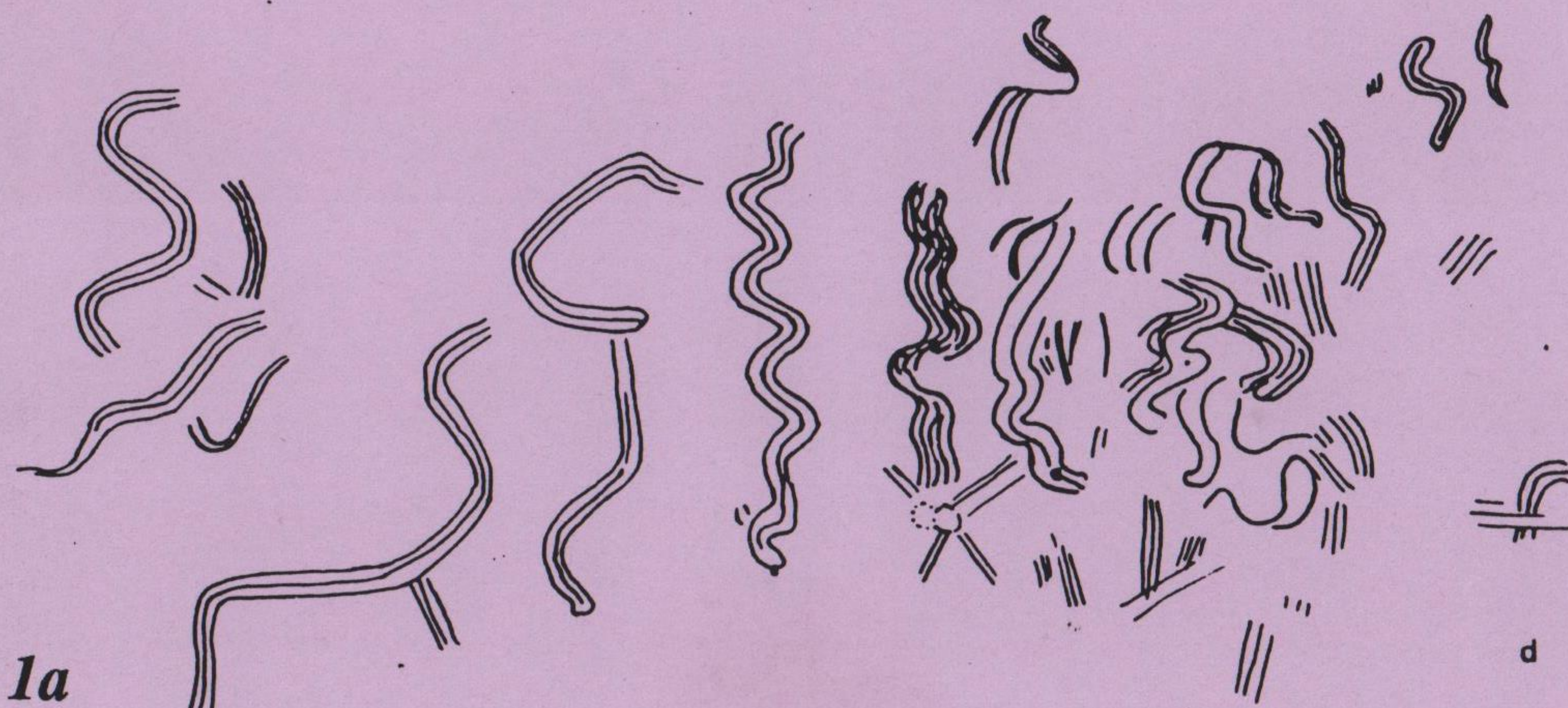


Fig 1b

The Human Revolution: Insurrection against the leisured sex!

Imagine a time when women lived together, worked together, sang and danced together, and our lives, work rhythms, songs and dance rhythms were all governed by the cycle of the Moon.

Imagine a time when our skins were dark, newly-arrived in Europe from Africa. Imagine a time when women had the power and solidarity to make men leave their warm hearthsides, go out into the howling wastes of Ice Age Eurasia to hunt giant and ferocious mammoths, and then transport their kills proudly back to the women's camp.

This is not a New Age feminist fantasy. This happened somewhere between 60,000 and 40,000 years ago, according to the latest scientific account of human cultural origins given by anthropologist Chris Knight in his recent book *Blood Relations*. The 'Human Revolution', as archaeologists call it, sparked an explosion of symbolic culture that was carried from Africa into Europe and all the way to Australia by 40,000 years ago, and later all over the planet.

We are an astonishingly young species. The work of geneticists has revealed that every human being on the planet traces descent from a woman — they call her 'Eve' — who lived in Africa around 150,000 years ago. Even more remarkably, the same geneticists have recently discovered that Eve's descendants in East Africa have remained together in matrifocal communities — mothers living with daughters, sisters close to sisters — for tens of thousands of years, in some places right up to the present day.

The first recognisable symbolic culture of humanity appears as recently as 45,000 years ago. The evidence consists of ritual burials, paintings and engravings on rock, ornaments such as carved bead bracelets and necklaces, and musical instruments — tiny bone flutes. These fully fledged and highly polished works of art were created during the coldest period of the last Ice Age. Archaeologists are in close agreement that the humans who produced that culture spoke a language every bit as complex as the languages spoken today.

What triggered this symbolic explosion? Knight's radical new theory about human origins has caused detonations among the staid, sober and cautious fieldworkers in archaeology and anthropology. According to his account in *Blood Relations*, a cross-species women's insurrection led to the creation of that earliest culture.

The cartoon image of the caveman, club in hand, dragging his woman around by the hair is responsible for many popular misconceptions. There are several things wrong with it as a picture of where culture came from. The "Man the Hunter" story assumes human society was as male-dominated then as it is now, and presupposes a level of violence — male violence — as an inevitable fact of the human condition. The underlying premise is that men did all the important things in establishing culture — women just did what they were told.

Stone Age insurrection

But the record of the Upper Palaeolithic — the end of the Old Stone Age, the period of the earliest symbolic culture — reveals something completely different. The art is dominated by images of animals. But these are not associated with Man the Mighty Hunter. They are accompanied by representations of women, their menstrual flows, and calendars which mark off the lunar phases.

Knight argues that the solidarity needed to achieve a truly human level of shared understanding — language, symbolism, morality and kinship — could not have come about in a situation where men were competing aggressively among themselves for the sexual favours of females. It certainly could not have come about in a society that condoned rape. The 'rule' of Might is Right did not lead, and never could have led, to culture. The question we have to ask is, who *needed* to invent culture? Who stood to *gain* from it? The answer is, women and their children.

The humans who expanded out of Africa 45,000 years ago had to overcome immense problems as they faced the ice-bound wastes of Eurasia. These problems were acute for women in particular, because they and their children would have needed meat to survive. We cannot take it for granted that males would have provided sufficient for them to live on. Up to that time, humans had lived in relatively rich environments where females would have done most of their foraging for themselves.

The expansion out of Africa produced not only the first flowering of symbolic culture but also major advances in hunting technology. Yet, says Knight, it was not the invention of technology in itself that enabled humans to leave Africa. It was the solution to social and political problems — problems which in earlier periods had obstructed the potential of that technology. The key problem lay in the relations of power between the sexes. Quite simply, males had all the advantages in terms of possessing weapons and greater physical strength. In the new conditions of the Ice Age, women had to alter the balance of power if they were not to face oppression and starvation.

"Contrary to the popular prejudice that 'no revolution can change human nature', everything distinctively human about our nature — our ability to share understandings through language, to see ourselves as others see us, to construct rules and agree to abide by them — these features are the product of that immense sexual, social and political revolution that forged our humanity."

Women, says Knight, were the first revolutionaries. Their insurrection took shape as dance, song, laughter, ritual, art. They established the first communal homebases as their powerbases. Here, 'home' is nothing like the private, nuclear-family concept of today. Ritual action meant periodic mobilisation of whole neighbourhoods — 'dancing in the streets' — to assert women's dictatorship against the leisured sex.

Our closest relatives

As a social anthropologist, Knight brings to the study of cultural origins knowledge of present-day hunter-gatherer peoples, their economies, their myths, rituals and taboos.

"Among hunter-gatherers there's a feeling — and sometimes a strong taboo — against eating one's own kill out in the bush. The meat is brought home to where the women, children and other non-hunters can eat it. It seems perfectly clear that it is in the interests of hunter-gatherer women that men don't just eat their own kills — so clear that we needn't assume that earliest women were the mere passive beneficiaries of male generosity in this respect. Women played an active role in establishing this arrangement."

Knight contrasts the sharing lifestyle of hunter-gatherers with the situation among primates, especially our closest living relatives, chimpanzees. Monkeys and apes of all species exist in highly competitive, and complex, social systems. Individuals are constantly competing for rank within a dominance hierarchy, with males trying to get access to the greatest number of females.

What's more, male primates do nothing to help provision their children. They leave Mother to do it all — carry her offspring through pregnancy, give birth, breast-feed her infant, continue to feed and fend for the juvenile until it is quite independent of her — a task of several year's duration for a female chimp, who is all the while ensuring the business of her own survival.

Somewhere along the line, our female ancestors completely altered this picture. To provide for themselves and their children in an increasingly inhospitable climate, women had to harness male labour power, directing the male capacity for violence to a productive and cooperative end — in the hunt. Shortly after the start of the last Ice Age, women had secured a radically new contribution from males — cooperative, collective big-game hunting.

In those days, the animals hunted — giant mammoth, bison and reindeer — were very big indeed. Hunting them needed close teamwork and long-distance travel in harsh environments. Sexual rivalries between males were simply not compatible with this kind of hunting. How did women eliminate the problem of male sexual competitiveness?

Sex strike

So long as our ancestors were animals — super-intelligent apes — sex was the organising principle of society. When we became the first and only animals with symbolic culture, society began to organise sex. To be precise, women organised sex.

The way women did this, Knight argues, was simple, ingenious and so profound in its implications that it reverberated around the world. Its echoes can be heard in myth and fairytale to this day.

Women motivated men to hunt big game for them by making sex dependent on it. Signalling 'No' to men as a collective, they refused sex to any man who did not join the hunt and help bring the kill back to camp. It was in the sex-strike and on women's 'picket-line' that the necessary solidarity for human culture was born.

The Red Flag of this prehistoric strike action was women's menstrual blood — hence the subtitle of Knight's work, *Menstruation and the Origins of Culture*. It is a fact that menstrual taboos and first menstruation rites are among the oldest and most universal observances of traditional cultures throughout the world. And on every continent, a ban on sex during menstruation is associated with success in the hunt.

Synchronised cycles and rock art

Menstrual synchrony — the tendency of women who are physically and emotionally close to synchronise their menstrual bleeding — is part of the everymonth experience of women all over the world, and has been amply documented in medical literature.

Knight sees menstrual synchrony as the key concept for unlocking the symbolism of the oldest human art — art that may have been produced by women as part of the ritual surrounding their menstrual sex-strikes. Among the most common images found in Old Stone Age art is the female vulva, depicted as a split, grooved oval, rather like a hoofprint. These images — which were originally painted with red ochre, the colour of blood — were frequently linked with game animals, often wounded animals.

The oldest abstract art consists of what are termed 'meanders' — stripey, rhythmically curving patterns (*Fig 1a*). Leading American archaeologist Alexander Marshack believes these represent some 'magical' periodic flow of water or blood. Again, they are linked strongly with images of game animals.

Very striking are later images of the whole female torso, with deeply grooved outlines of women's backs, buttocks and thighs engraved in limestone blocks. Grouped together, these women appear to be dancing. Sometimes their vaginas are explicitly linked by lines drawn between them (*see cover*). The 'powerpoints' in these engravings were repeatedly scored, and may have been retraced by women month after month. In other places, the same concept was expressed simply by two deeply gouged holes, again with lines recurrently scored between them. These dancing women were the ravers of the Ice Age!

The female image developed into a kind of shorthand form — a 'P'-shape symbol, formed as a loop for the buttocks, with a line representing the cleft of the thighs. Whole rows of these 'P' symbols were superimposed on paintings of game animals, such as a horse with a wound in its hindquarters (*Fig. 1b*).

The lunar link

A later example in Upper Palaeolithic art, but with stylistic links to the earlier tradition, is the famous 'Venus of Laussel' (*back cover*). A woman seated with her left hand laid on

her belly, she holds up in her right hand a crescent-shaped horn, which is marked with 13 notches. The horn is regarded in many cultures as a symbol of the new moon. Thirteen is the number of dark or full moons in one year.

A further fact: the average length of women's menstrual cycles — 29.5 days — is exactly the same as the average length of the lunar cycle, the time from one dark moon to the next. If women evolved with the potential to synchronise menstrual cycles — and we clearly did — then the external 'clock' used by our bodies to synchronise was undoubtedly the Moon.

Over the past two decades, Marshack has documented the oldest calendrical tradition in the world. Dating back 40,000 years, this takes the form of a system of lunar notation, marking off the phases of the Moon. The lunar cycle is of considerable significance in hunting economies. The amount of light in the sky changes with the phase of the Moon. As the Moon waxes towards full, it rises at sunset, giving hunters maximal light in the evening — very important for tracking game over long distances.

In the Knight scenario, women would have timed their sex-strikes around new moon. Men would have begun their ritual and other preparations for the hunt as the Moon began to wax. The hunt, lasting several days, would have culminated with the kill, ideally at full moon.

An image of power

Women's biology, then, spelt power. The Venus of Laussel was originally covered in red ochre. She is menstrual woman linked to her 'clock' — the new moon.

The profusion of Venus figurines and engraved female images are unlikely to have been part of some Paleolithic porn industry, simply because of where they have been found. They were stored in domestic, hearthside spaces which would surely have been controlled by women — spaces that women and children occupied while men were away in the hunt. "The Laussel Venus is not some Playboy sexy image", Knight stresses, "it is an image of power".

The crucial factor in human evolution which allowed us to use our biology to advantage was the ability to control sexual impulses. As we evolved, we became mistresses of our hormones, able to say 'yes' to sex at any time we chose, but most importantly, able to say 'no'. As a result, the pattern of the female human reproductive cycle is the complete inverse of the pattern of the female chimp.

A chimp shows a marked period of oestrus, with highly visible sexual swellings, and is unable to resist having sex at that time. As she approaches peak fertility, her entire body tells the tale, through visual and scent signals: 'Come on boys, now's the time!'

Women by contrast have completely concealed the time of ovulation from men. The only strong signal in our cycle is the heavy blood loss of menstruation. This shows that we did not evolve in a system of competitive sexual soliciting.

Individual female chimps may get 'presents' of meat from males — but only if they are in oestrus, only if they chase after the males, and only if they have sex there and then. The ability to say 'No' gave women power — to make men go away and hunt for them. It made possible self-control, self-consciousness, and morality — that is, judgement by a collective. Any woman who threatened to break the sex-strike at a critical time — when men were showing reluctance to hunt — would have to be brought into line by her sisters.

This means the sex-strike would have generated solidarity among the women, not competition. It depended on every woman joining in. As women said 'No', men would have been able to overcome their sexual rivalries. It was then in their common interest to team up and discover their own solidarity, cooperating in the hunt. Theoretically, each sex-strike had to involve the entire female human population. Only those women who succeeded in organising themselves would have obtained the meat supplies they and their children needed to survive in the harsh conditions of the Ice Age.

The symbolic domain: blood taboos

Strike action at the time of menstruation would have meant that women had their periods when they were feeling most powerful, most in tune with one another, in synchrony and solidarity — one body and one spirit. We know from evidence of rock art and from patterns of hunting rituals all over the world that women experience synchrony through clapping, singing and dancing to a shared rhythm.

In the Kalahari Desert still today women clap, dance and pantomime the mating behaviour of antelopes. Their dances are held to be vital for men's hunting luck — and they are most potent when performed in celebration of a girl's first menstrual flow (*Fig 2*).

The prehistoric women who first created human symbolism signalled 'No' through similar body language of dance. But this first dance was not simply coordinated rhythmic movement. It was fully symbolic. Because women's unanimity in their strike was so intense, because their dance was in effect a dancing *picket line*, these women began to do something extraordinary and peculiarly human. They began to dance *pretending* to be the horses, bison, reindeer, or other game they wanted their men to hunt. Their message to men was: 'You want to have sex with us now? You must be joking. We're not women at all. We're animals! What's more, we're *bleeding* animals'.

Men who got the hint would have gone on the hunt. Animals in real life don't menstruate; they bleed when they are wounded. The dancing women's bleeding became a pantomime of animals who had been speared in the hunt. The blood of menstruation and the blood of the hunt had been danced into one conceptual flow. To this day, the East African Hadza people say to a girl at her first menstruation: 'Congratulations, you've shot your first zebra!'

Through this dance of menstruation with women body-painted as wounded animals, the world's first collective fantasy was born. Women's dance transported them into another realm — one that had never existed in all previous evolution. The symbolic domain

comprises *collective deceptions* — dragons, monsters, tricksters and goblins — beings that can never be touched, tasted, seen or heard in the real world, but only danced and shared in the imagination.

Women's dance worked a magic spell, for practical economic purpose. When men killed an animal, its flesh bled. Symbolically, because the animal had been 'danced' by women, it 'menstruated' as they did. The signal men received was 'No!' 'Blood!' 'Taboo!'. To exactly the same extent that no man could touch and have sex with a woman while she menstruated, no man could touch and eat the animal he killed while it remained raw and bloody out in the wild.

Now, it was men who had a problem to solve. How could they remove blood from the meat, so that it could be eaten? They needed to cook it on fire. But in those days, fire could not be transported by men on a hunting expedition. Who had the fire? Women, back at the homebase.

Strikers on a 20th century picket line have been heard to chant: "*We don't want bread. We want the bloody bakery!*" Prehistoric women who placed a menstrual taboo on each kill would have got not just titbits of meat on men's terms — but the whole bloody carcass, delivered to the doorstep!

Men were compelled to bring the meat back to camp and surrender it there to women. Stone Age women not only possessed the power to strike and impose taboos, but also to lift taboos. Once they received the kill from their men, women continued to work as a collective. Butchering and cooking a mammoth required an operation virtually as complex as hunting it.

The cooking process itself was magical. As fire removed the blood from the meat, symbolically it also removed the blood taboo from women's flesh. Only once the meat was entirely cooked, only after the feast when everyone had eaten their fill, were women and men free to enjoy each other under the light on the full moon — a true monthly honeymoon!

Myths and fairytales

One of the most fascinating of Knight's findings concerns myth: "To understand this origin of symbolic culture is to crack the code of world mythology. The structure of all the world's magical myths and fairytales echoes with stunning fidelity the symbolic dance which has just been described. The stories focus on an episode of enchantment — a blood-linked spell — and assume a division of time into two phases. One can be read as a phase of sex-strike as the Moon waxed, the other a phase of feasting and lovemaking as the Moon waned."

Think of *The Sleeping Beauty*. It is clearly a story about a girl's first menstruation. As soon as Beauty pricks her finger and bleeds, a spell is cast upon her and the whole kingdom. Everything comes to a stop. An enchanted forest, impenetrable, grows up around her castle. Each prince who tries to hack his way through the thorns — violently —

ends up impaled. The one who happens to turn up at the right moment, when Beauty is ready to emerge from her seclusion, arrives just as the thorns turn to flowers and the way parts. He finds his way through because he gets his timing right.

“At a deep level, all the world’s magical myths are about ‘this world’, about ‘the other world’ — and about the movement between the two. You can use a variety of magical vehicles to get to that other world. You can sit on a magic carpet, a broomstick, or get into a pumpkin. And then away you go! The paradox is that you move by squatting or lying down, not by strenuously walking or running. In the myths of Northern Australia, you travel to the sky simply by entering your menstrual hut, preferably with a sister, where you can both let loose floods of your own magical blood. The magic carpet, witchy broomstick or pumpkin has its power because it’s a variation on the menstrual theme.”

The ‘other world’ — the hidden world of seclusion — is characterised by ‘rawness’, ‘blood’, ‘wetness’, ‘darkness’; it’s a world of kinship, but also of hunger, and fear of being eaten alive by giants. Patriarchal cultures code it as a world of ugliness where once-beautiful princesses are bewitched by an evil spell and turned into animals or birds.

Only after the phase of blood has passed is it possible to emerge from this seclusion. The blood-spell is broken and the time is ripe to light the fires, cook the feast, and enjoy the pleasures of the flesh — meat and each other. Frogs turn back into princes, and we all live happily ever after — until the next dark moon!

Women’s ‘No’

The implications of Knight’s ideas are powerful and important for women. Fundamentally, his work shows not only that women derive power from their right to say ‘No’, but that Women’s No was the first word of human language. It was first spoken by women in solidarity, danced defiantly — on the picket-line. This picket-line could only have been mounted by people able to menstruate. *Blood Relations* demolishes the prejudice that we, the female half of humanity, are inevitably handicapped by our bodies. Women created culture not despite female biology, but thanks to it.

Camilla Power

Further reading:

Knight, C D *Blood Relations: Menstruation and the origins of culture*. Yale University Press, paperback edition 1995 (£10.95).

Knight, C D, C Power and I Watts *The Human Symbolic Revolution: A Darwinian account*. Cambridge Archaeological Journal, April 1995.

Lewis-Williams, D *Believing and Seeing. Symbolic meanings in Southern San rock paintings*. Academic 1981.

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Power, C *The Woman with the Zebra’s Penis*. University College London.

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Fig 2: Kalahari San ravers celebrate a girl’s first menstruation