The History and Prehistory of Space: Introduction

In what sense can we say that space changes with time and, thus, can be considered to have a history and a prehistory? This sounds at first paradoxical since, for the modern mind, space appears to be an invariant of human experience, precisely what does not change with time but within which changes occur. We assume that the experience of 3-dimensional space is a universal category of the human mind. This is undoubtedly true in as much as all life takes place in a physical environment. However, it is likely that this abstract concept of space is a cognitive elaboration that emerged in the Western human consciousness with the advent of Euclidean geometry. This is a space reduced to three dimensions, without gravity and without complexity, that we project upon our environment like a net or a grid in order to "objectively" measure distances and evaluate surfaces when we endeavor to describe and interpret the archaeological record.

Another source of our modern representation of space depends on the achievements of geography. It is easier to conceive this aspect of space from the point of view of history because we can compare the maps that were produced over a long period of time for various practical purposes such as navigation, exploration, and administration. Although maps cannot be confused with actual territories, signal progress was made during the last few centuries to reach a close approximation in the projection on two dimensions of earth morphology. Today's satellite photography allows for high definition of details but what is gained in details is lost in terms of the global representation of general patterns and relations that are preserved in our semantic memory with various biases. We now imagine our planet as a set of five continents colorfully displayed on a sphere. Thinking of the world today calls up images that are markedly different from what these representations were thousands years ago or more. The archaeological record provides evidence of how space was experienced, conceived, and represented up to a certain temporal threshold but not beyond. When archaeologists locate and describe an artefact in space, they necessarily rely on the contemporary epistemological toolkits of geometry, geology, and geography as these points of view on our proximal and distal environment stand now.

No data by itself can be correctly interpreted, that is, cognitively represented with some degree of plausibility, in the absence of information about its context. Most often this information is of a spatial nature. Even social information has a proxemic dimension. There is a constant danger of extrapolating our own modern experience of space when we reconstruct the spatial context of the archaeological record. This issue is still more pressing when we try to describe and understand hominin and human mobility. Early migrants were bound to have a radically different relation to space since it can be assumed that their experience was not mediated by the knowledge of any form of geo-political maps, compelling them to rely on other cognitive affordances of their immediate experience. Can we infer, imagine, or simulate with any kind of plausibility the prehistoric experience, conceptualization, and representation of space in order to better understand the archaeological record? This is the question that our session will attempt to tentatively answer from a range of time scales and from a variety of archaeological points of view. This is a question that has haunted archaeology at least since the landmark publication of the collective volume edited by Colin Renfrew and Ezra Zubrow, *The Ancient Mind: Elements of Cognitive Archaeology*, twenty-five years ago.