

Obituary

ALEXANDER MARSHACK
1918–2004

Alexander Marshack was America's foremost specialist in Ice Age art, despite being entirely self-taught in that subject. Born in New York City in 1918, he received a Bachelors degree in Journalism from City College there in 1943, and subsequently worked as a producer–writer in radio and television, and also as a photo-journalist, for example reporting for LIFE magazine in March 1960 on 'The Art of Russia that Nobody Sees'. In 1958 his book on the Geophysical Year, The World in Space, was a great success.

It was while he was doing research for a second book on the US space programme in 1963 that Marshack became intrigued by incised marks on a bone from the Mesolithic site of Ishango (Congo), dating to about 6500 BC, which he came to think might represent some kind of lunar notation. He then extended this idea into other marked pieces from the Ice Age of Europe (c. 30 000–10 000 BC), and published his first paper on the subject in the journal *Science* in 1964. His work attracted the attention and support not only of Professor François Bordes in Bordeaux, who published Marshack's first book on the topic, *Notation dans les gravures du Paléolithique Supérieur* (1970), but also of Professor Hallam Movius of Harvard, then America's leading specialist in the European Ice Age. As a result, Harvard's Peabody Museum was to support Marshack's research for the rest of his life. He was able to travel very widely, examining at first hand the Ice Age art objects from numerous European countries and, through his microscope, using new techniques to establish the ways in which images had been incised and, in some cases, reworked.

Bringing his photographic skills, as well as an enormously enquiring mind, to the world's oldest art, Marshack revolutionised its study. His book *The Roots of Civilization* (1972) was a milestone in the subject, featuring breathtaking close-up photographs of early engravings in bone, antler and stone. It caused scholars virtually to re-discover these often well-known art objects, while his controversial theories about notation and lunar observations aroused intense debate, while also raising important questions about the mental capacities of early humans. In the mid-1970s he was able to extend his research to the Soviet



Union, thus providing Western scholars with their first good documentation of the amazing Russian finds from the Ice Age. Much of his interpretative work focused on the variety of symbol systems, such as meandering 'macaroni' lines and net-like motifs, as well as what he believed to be depictions of seasonality in the animal images.

Marshack also studied the cave paintings of the period in France and Spain, and was a pioneer in using infra-red and ultra-violet light and fluorescence in the caves to see beneath calcite and investigate the pigments more closely: some of the spectacular results of this work were presented in a now-classic article in the January 1975 issue of *National Geographic*. His photographic work, together with these new lighting techniques, had a tremendous influence on others, including his great friend, the late Jean Vertut, France's pre-eminent photographer of cave art.

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In 1978, he served as guest curator for the important Ice Age Art exhibition at the American Museum of Natural History; this exhibition later toured the USA, was seen by 4-5 million people and was largely responsible for introducing the subject of Ice Age art to the American public.

In more recent years, he had continued to study and analyse early art objects, for example from Russia, the Near East and Turkey, still employing macro-photographs and the binocular microscope. He also devoted a great deal of research to other cultures, such as the calendar sticks of North American Indians. His work continued to arouse debate, especially where his interpretations were concerned, since younger scholars were questioning some of his results, and checking them with more advanced methods, such as the scanning electron microscope, and with a more scientific approach employing experimental tests.

Nevertheless, many of Marshack's interpretations were confirmed by the new analyses, and in any case, his work formed a crucial bridge between the traditional, intuitive ways of studying early art, and the more rigorous, scientific approach adopted by many today. Indeed, his dominant position in his chosen field, and his continuing research into

the cognitive abilities of early humans, led to his being the natural choice to deliver the very first McDonald Lecture at Cambridge University's McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research in 1989; in it he presented a masterly analysis of the Tai plaquette, which may be the most complex calendrical notation known from the Ice Age.

Always a prolific writer, Marshack continued working with enthusiasm and energy throughout the 1990s, now often undertaking analyses of finds from Turkey and the Near East. In particular, he was responsible for important studies of a Mousterian (i.e. Neanderthal) engraving of nested arcs on a flint cortex from Quneitra in Israel; and on the immensely important 'proto-figurine' from Berekhat Ram, also from Israel, which is probably more than 300 000 years old. It was Marshack who was first able to prove that this tiny piece of stone had indeed been modified by *Homo erectus*. His prodigious capacity for work lasted until a stroke in 2003, followed by a serious fall, destroyed his health.

He is survived by his devoted wife, Elaine, who usually accompanied him on his long research trips abroad; an earlier marriage was annulled.

PAUL G. BAHN