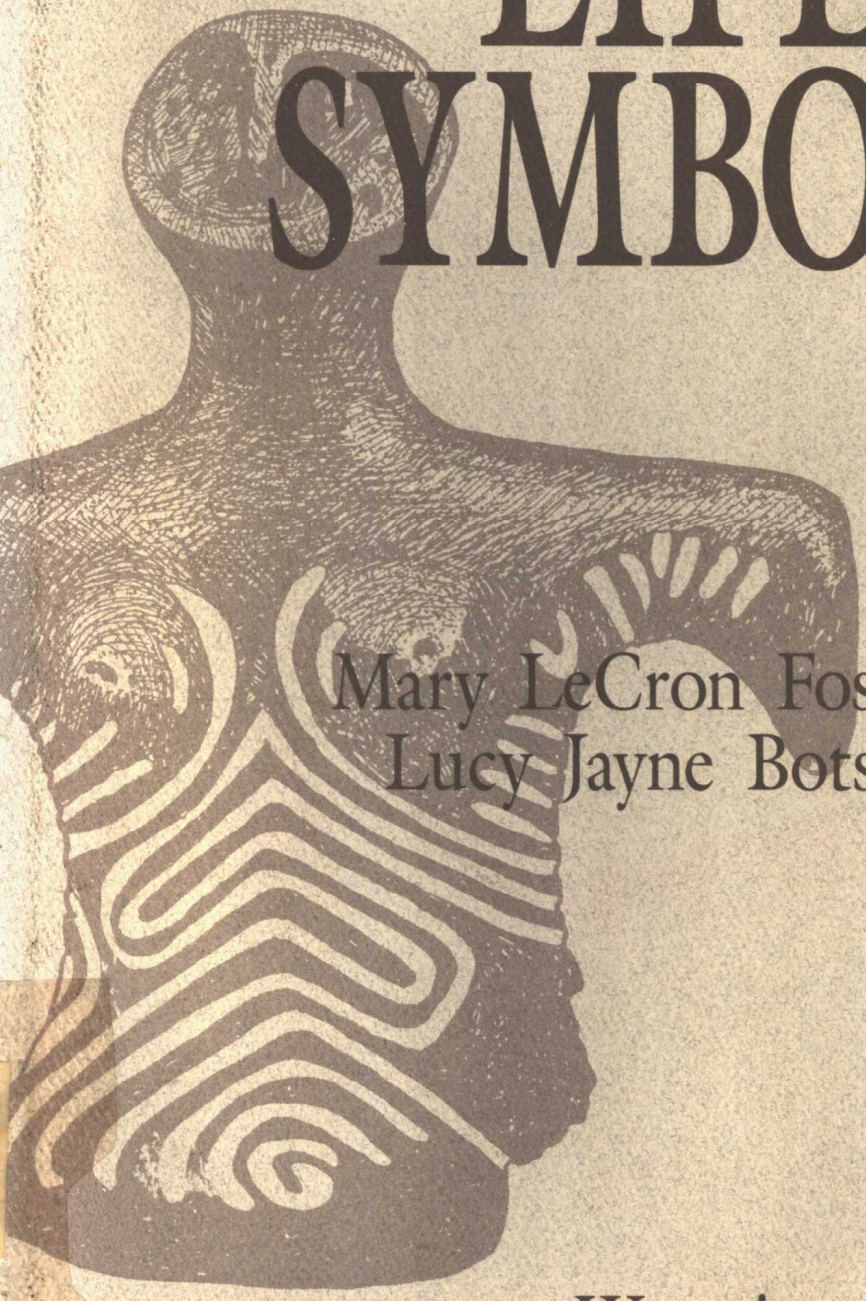
THE LIFE OF SYMBOLS



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Preface

Every society employs a wide variety of symbolic means to represent, preserve, reinforce, and validate the values and shared beliefs of its members. These representations are manifested physically and are both denotative and connotative. Connotative resonances are often profound, connecting symbols in a vast chain of linked meanings that are evoked in a myriad of contexts.

Some symbols are transitory, capturing meaning through a fleeting physical motion, e.g., a gesture, a facial expression, a dance step, an utterance. Others endure as a more permanent reminder of a concept or intent. Objects that occur naturally in the environment, as well as those that are deliberately manufactured, have meanings related to their use, e.g., white flowers are traditionally arranged in bridal bouquets, grass is grown and kept mowed to form a lawn before a house, explosives are used for weapons or for festive fireworks. Each of the contexts in which a given symbol occurs forms a part of its total meaning.

Symbols are not static but change through use. New purposes modify the contexts—hence meanings of both already existing symbols and of new symbols are continually created and recreated to modify and supplement the symbolic repertory. It is both the inception and the change of symbol systems that concerns us in this volume. Some forms of symbolization have a history as long as that of *Homo sapiens*. Others even seem to have begun with *Homo erectus*. Tracing the life of symbols begins with archaeology and extends into the ethnographic present.

By the Upper Paleolithic (ca. 35,000–10,000 B.P.) the symbolizing process was well under way. Although technology was still primitive by present-day standards, the elaboration of graphic symbols through parietal and mobiliary art indicates that other cultural forms were already well established and that language in some form must have already existed.

Examination of the archaeological record of earlier hominid activity in the Pleistocene provides some clues as to the beginnings of symbolization, as does the pre-symbolizing behavior of other primates. Some evidence can also be derived from the early symbolizing activity of infants if we take into consideration the fact that they are operating with symbolic material present in their surroundings and that through their interactions

with adults they are internalizing models of the normative symbolism of their culture. By examination of the archaeological record, and comparison of behaviors that it reflects with those that we know from the historic past and present, we can discover certain symbolic continuities that arose in prehistory and have persisted to the present-day.

To trace the life of symbols in this volume we have divided the interpretive material of our authors into four parts. Part 1, *Beginnings*, starts with a hypothesis that language originated as a result of social interaction between mother and infant. To reach this conclusion both phylogenetic and ontogenetic evidence were brought to bear as well as evidence of pre-symbolic interaction from great ape behavior. The section brings together consideration of the role of analogy in symbol formation, with special reference to bodily process as crucial to the origin of counting and speech, and a discussion of the semiotics of the earliest prehistoric evidence suggesting development of an aesthetic sense.

Part 2, *Persistence and Congruity*, focuses on symbols and symbolic structures that can be traced over millenia and across geographical distance. It addresses the question of the use of evidence from the present to elucidate the past. Questions of genetic relationships between similar systems, structural universals, and neurobiological factors involved in systemic change are explored. Striking similarities of structure can often be found cross-culturally. Assessment must be made between genetic relationships and the possibility of structural universals that operate holistically in such a way that resemblances can be found despite quite separate histories. Chapters in this section deal also with this problem.

Part 3, *Figuration*, addresses the beginnings of figurative art in the Upper Paleolithic cave paintings in two chapters that take different approaches to the problem of interpretation—the first uses archaeological evidence of hunting practices and data from historic ethnography to elucidate parietal animal scenes. The second is primarily concerned with artistic progress in depiction of animal action. The final chapter shows connections between Paleolithic artistic symbolism and that of the subsequent Neolithic Bronze Ages, demonstrating the explosion of symbolic depiction that is both constructed and reconstructed over time by means of increased exploitation of analogies between the human and the natural worlds.

Part 4, *Abstraction*, is primarily concerned with structure, distribution, and interpretation of etched or painted abstract signs that are found from the Middle Paleolithic until the Bronze Age, first on stone or bone, and, after the invention of pottery, also on objects of baked clay.

A variety of interpretive strategies is used in these investigations—many with novel results. Whatever the favored type of interpretation, all

examine structural similarities, differences, and interrelationships in order to discover meaning.

The chapters together as a whole round out the thesis of the book: that symbolism is the product of a dynamic of change and conservation that can be profitably explored in many ways, using insights from a variety of disciplines, both within and without the traditional bounds of anthropology. The editors' decision to put together a book on the origin and development of symbols was inspired by the failure of much of the analysis of Paleolithic culture to come to grips with the fact that the beginnings of human culture must have entailed a very real cognizant rubicon in the transition from a survival to a transcendent mode in which symbols came to be the common currency of social interaction. We felt it essential that the question of symbolic beginnings and change be addressed, not in terms of human survival but in terms of cognitive process. This volume is the result.

Mary LeCron Foster
Lucy Jayne Botscharow

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Introduction

Mary LeCron Foster

It has become increasingly apparent to many, if not most, cultural anthropologists that culture is a symbol system. That is, culture is a construct of all of the interpretations regarding the nature of the world shared by a social group. These interpretations are represented in concrete ways that are manipulated for individual or group reasons by the group members. These concrete representations are the symbols by which that culture is activated and is communicated to members of the society. Without such a set of shared symbols no human society could function.

Anthropology is the study of culture, and as such it is the study of otherness. The anthropologist lives the symbols of his or her own culture, and by studying others he or she learns to recognize, and, at least to some extent, to manipulate, the symbols of that culture in place of his or her own. The anthropologist involved with more than one other culture soon learns that some people are more "other" than others. The contrasts between the behavior of people belonging to such a culture and that of the anthropologist are great. That culture then seems to the anthropologist—and to those who read anthropological writings—exotic. If the anthropologist is from a Western culture—and most are—and writes from that perspective, then degrees of cultural difference may be seen as a series of concentric rings of otherness, with Western culture at the center of the rings.

Of all anthropologists, archaeologists studying culture from a very great time depth study at the same time the outermost rings of otherness. The greater the time depth, the greater the distance from the center of the circle, and the greater the contrast. Ultimately the threshold or juncture is reached at which differences seem to outweigh similarities and where the validity of comparisons, not only with historic Western peoples, but with modern humans seems dubious. This is the juncture between anatomically modern *Homo sapiens* and morphologically different

types of hominids. There is controversy concerning the status of hominids which lie beyond this threshold, and the humanity of early hominids is still in question. On the other hand, there is general agreement that hominids which are anatomically similar to modern humans are psychologically similar as well, and that they are potentially accessible to us through the application of analogies with historic peoples.

There can be no doubt that the anatomically modern people of the Upper Paleolithic (c. 35,000 to 10,000 B.P.) were symbol-using, culture-bearing beings. As societies of hunter-gatherers these peoples can be compared analogically with present-day, or historically reported, hunter-gatherers, although this is not without its dangers. One paper in this volume which makes such comparisons (T. Kehoe) is cautious in this regard and the method results in some innovative hypotheses. Another (Velo and A. Kehoe), discussing a controversial topic in the archaeology of early symbolism, stresses the dangers of over-comparison, indicating where comparison can probably be safely used and where it may go astray.

With regard to human types preceding the Upper Paleolithic, there is no general agreement as to their mastery of symbols. Were earlier hominids psychologically similar to modern man or were there significant differences between them? At what point did early man become fully human? These questions are important, since they relate both to the theoretical perspective of the investigator and to the methodology that he or she uses. If the group under question is seen as being fundamentally similar to modern *Homo sapiens,* then analogies with modern man can be utilized as a way of shedding light upon these early beings. If there are fundamental differences, then analogies from the human sciences are not in order, and analogies from the natural sciences are more appropriate. As the great apes are genetically the closest creatures to humans, comparison with these animals is often made, and since phylogeny and ontogeny are assumed to be in some way similar, comparisons to the behavior of human infants at various stages of development are often made in order to make sense of the transition. Borchert and Zihlman provide insights into symbolic origins by careful comparison of data from psychological studies of human infants and studies of primate behavior. Botscharow fruitfully compares the semiotic tropologies of culture with early foreshadowing of symbolism and extracts from material culture evidence of significant cognitive shifts in the productive strategies of *Homo erectus.*

The understanding of otherness is always difficult, and ethnocentrism is always a danger. Culture provides us with the lenses through which we perceive the world and without which we cannot see. Yet these lenses evitably distort our vision of other cultures, and the greater the cultural

differences, the greater the possibility of distortion. The study of prehistoric society is perhaps most susceptible to such pitfalls, since, in addition to cultural distance, there is so much that must be inferred and so little that can be inferred with certainty.

Consciousness of these pitfalls inevitably leads to caution regarding conclusions about archaeologial materials. The archaeological literature has been exceedingly cautious in the past quarter of a century. Such caution is in part a reaction to the excesses of earlier archaeologists and in part to the nature of archaeological data. Archaeologists justly point to the fantasies of some early archeological writings as examples of the pitfalls lying in wait for the archaeologist who tries to infer conceptual thought from archaeological data. As a result, the belief has developed that conclusions regarding praxis are much less susceptible to error than conclusions regarding symbolism. The reaction away from speculation in favor of positivist empiricism was a necessary step if the field of archaeology was to progress, and this rigorous approach has served the field well for some time.

In any human science, there is a persistent tension between praxis and symbol, action and meaning, behavior and thought. While it is true that the dialectical relationship between these oppositions should be included in any study of human phenomena, in practice this is extraordinarily difficult. As a result, practitioners of the human sciences tend to concentrate on one or the other. For the past twenty-five years positivism has been dominant in the human sciences, and most particularly in archeology. That this has been so is not surprising. Archaeologists labor under difficult circumstances, inasmuch as they are necessarily limited to the material traces of defunct cultures. It is difficult enough to cull systematic praxis from such remains, and many archaeologists have often maintained that to go any further is merely sloppy speculation.

Unfortunately, positivism's definition of what constitutes knowledge is too narrow. If we now know a good deal more about praxis, we know little more about the symbolism of past cultures than we knew when fantasy was discarded. Every scientific paradigm creates unsolved problems. No paradigm can account for all phenomena. Ultimately, all the possible kinds of solution which a paradigm can yield are identified, and the kinds of solution it cannot give become increasingly clear. New paradigms then arise.

The advance of symbolism as an appropriate anthropological focus requires exploration of a new archaeological paradigm. Symbolism in contemporary and historical ethnological perspective is increasingly well understood, and, as a result, there is a growing realization that symbolism *is* praxis. Human behavior is seen to be marked by the constitution and manipulation of symbols, with the result that a symbol inevitably represents

a certain kind of behavior and an associated way of thinking. Symbols are seen to be the physical manifestations of thought processes. They cannot be read in isolation, but if their interconnections are established, and cross-cultural comparison of these is made, great progress in decipherment can be effected.

Application of cross-cultural analogies between anatomically modern humans separated in either time or space is sometimes also hazardous, but safeguards can be taken. The principal safeguard is the fact of symbolic networks—the association between symbols in a symbolic construct. Szynkiewicz gives evidence of such networks in extracting social regularities from the material data of a variety of methods of corpse disposal.

The random, historically unrelated occurrence of any specific construct of symbols is highly unlikely, especially if the linkages are multiple and if they can be shown to occur in a similar way in a variety of cultures separated by space and time. However, in an examination of methods of corpse disposal, Szynkiewicz demonstrates that *general types* of social organization and belief systems can affect social process in predictably similar ways even when no contact between groups seems likely. In contrast, Hall shows that semantically more specific symbolic linkages must reflect remote contact, even when groups exhibiting these linkages are widely separated temporally and geographically.

Strong similarities across cultures, not just between single symbols, but between multiple symbolic constructs, can indicate one of two things: either a psychic unity of humankind or descent from a common prototype. If the symbolic linkages proposed by Szynkiewicz are found to hold cross-culturally, it is evidence of a kind of psychic unity. However it is extremely unlikely that symbolic networks such as that discussed by Hall are of this kind. Psychic unity provides a matrix for the symbolic process to take place but does not dictate the content of specific symbols nor of symbolic constructs. However, since biological evidence demonstrates that all of humankind has common ancestry, we may also assume a common matrix of cultural forms which has changed over time and differently from place to place but may still be partially discerned and common origin predicted. What is needed are detailed accounts of the structural manifestations of particular systems. Winn's data on Neolithic abstract signs point the way to the kind of analysis of prehistoric graphic continuity that Foster is suggesting.

The papers in this book that deal with change also make the point, either directly or indirectly, that cultural evolution is incremental rather than abrupt. Borchert and Zihlman are concerned to point out that behavior *precedes* anatomical change and that anatomical, including genetic, change results from shifts in behavior rather than from random genetic

mutation. Changes follow a logical progression and depend heavily upon environmental, including social, conditions. Pontius provides evidence of the influence that culture change and learning of new techniques can have on human perception and, ultimately, its biological substrate.

Symbolism as a complex network of interconnected meanings and related actions that govern behavior provides both constraints on change and a guiding matrix allowing for change. The life of symbols shows both stability and transformation. Changes in symbol systems over time are constrained by symbolic interconnections; for no symbol exists in isolation and no symbol has a single referent. We know from modern ethnological studies that symbols are multi-valent and interconnected by means of complex metaphoric and metonymic networks. The totality of such a network constitutes a culture. Over time the meaning of a given symbol changes. Change is usually very subtle, and is characterized often by an almost unnoticed shift in meaning. Gimbutas points out both continuities and shifts in focus over time in the symbolism of Upper Paleolithic and Neolithic eras, and both change and stability with the advent of the Bronze Age.

Creation of a new symbol is not random. New symbols partake of many of the network associations of the old. Thus, the life of symbols may be traced over time, and many symbols are extremely persistent, although their semantics and their interconnecting network must be readjusted in some degree in order to be compatible with changed circumstances. This volume represents an effort to establish some of these persistent strands and changes in the structure of the strands over time by means of structural comparison.

A *structural comparative* approach can usefully draw on the methodology established for language comparison in the nineteenth century and refined since. It has often been cited as a breakthrough in establishing linguistics as the first "true" science among the social sciences. Twentieth century structural linguistics and generative grammar (also reliant on structural relationships between words and parts of words) have strengthened the scientific nature of linguistic methodology. Foster draws on this linguistic methodology in tracing language origins and change. Psycholinguists have led the way into increased understanding of the structure of meaning and the acquisition of such structure. Borchert and Zihlman draw on these advances in pointing out ontogenetic/phylogenetic parallels.

Because the interconnection of symbols acts as a constraint on change, new symbols must be accommodated to the network possibilities of the old. Metaphoric and metonymic paths are preserved or readjusted to accommodate the new. Many symbolic constructs are fairly easily traced through time both because they have been preserved into the present and because records are available of their usage in the past—either

historical or archaeological. What is not preserved historically can often be retrieved in the archaeological record and interpreted because of its similarity to known historical or present-day symbolism. This is not to say that the meaning is identical, but only that a significant thread of meaning has persisted over time such that the symbolism is recognizable. Borchert and Zihlman argue against genetic mutations as the cause of biological change and in favor of social invention as the stimulus for genetic innovation. The logical progression of symbolic reorganization discussed in the other chapters in the book supports this position.

Since there is no consensus as to the dividing point between the cultural concentric circles of humanity and the wider spheres of the natural world, nor as to how to interpret this rubicon, scholars often arrive at quite different interpretations of the same material. Botscharow discusses the difficulties of using a purely referential approach in interpretation of archaeological materials, and instead argues for the relational (i.e. structural) approach of semiotics in an attempt to discover possible early tropes—the hallmarks of symbolism—that motivated the manufacture of certain Acheulean artifacts. By the same token, Szynkiewicz isolates persistent structures that have governed corpse disposal—one of the earliest known symbol systems—over time. Foster's two chapters are further illustrations of the potential use of structural comparison across space and time in an effort to understand symbolic origins and change in systems of spoken language and writing.

Two contrasting methods of interpretation inform a great deal of anthropological work on the discovery of meaning in culture. Although these differences in methodological approach are not totally applicable to all of the papers in this volume, they provide theoretical frameworks for much of the analysis. The two approaches have often been called "materialist" versus "idealist," or "positivist" versus "symbolic." The term "idealist" seems somewhat pejorative in divorcing the symbolic interpretation from the reality in which symbols are enacted, suggesting that the symbols themselves are "all in the mind." For us, the term "symbolic" cannot be divorced from the external reality implied by positivism, since the symbols themselves ***are*** that reality. Thus, we suggest that more accurate terms for theoretical focus might be ***survivalist*** versus ***transcendent.***

Survivalist interpretations relate the appearance of cultural manifestations ("symbols," in our definition of the world) to techniques of survival: strategies for the achievement of economic and genetic advantage. Sociobiological interpretations are prime examples of this approach. Such interpretations make little or no effort to probe behind economic or sexual strategies for other kinds of meaning or motivation. In this volume, Borchert and Zihlman, in fact, explicitly reject sociobiology as a useful

model and turn instead to a comparative structural analysis of the communicative strategies of children and lower primates in order to develop hypotheses about the origins of language and other symbolisms.

The term "structuralist" might also be appropriately applied to what I have called "transcendent" methodology, for, to be effective, transcendent methodology must rely heavily on structure; but structuralism has become so closely associated with the (often poorly understood) work of Lévi-Strauss that it has lost for many some of its original meaning. In the view of transcendent methodologists, while survivalist interpretations provide many valuable insights, they too often beg the question of the semantic resonance of symbolism—resonance that is the chief characteristic of culture. Thus, much survivalist methodology avoids any deep analysis of "culture," a concept that has long been the central focus of anthropology and is much in need of revitalization by transcendent, structuralist analysis.

In order to be convincing, transcendent methodology must base its search for deeper meanings on the analysis of such structural relationships as recur across time or space. Several of the papers in this volume are representative of a transcendent approach. Such an approach makes heavy use of analogic abstraction and often seems abstruse or bordering on fantasy to those who do not understand, or agree with, the methodological prerequisites for this kind of analysis. It is important to make clear the methodological premises on which it relies. The papers of Botscharow, Hall, Foster, and Gimbutas can all be characterized as transcendent, while those of T. Kehoe, and Velo and A. Kehoe are most clearly survivalist in nature.

Winn is meticulously structural, in the best sense of the term, but does not yet venture interpretation of the structures that he has painstakingly uncovered, although he suggests that this is a task for the future. Prudhommeau similarly dicovers previously undetected structure in Paleolithic materials and uses it to convincingly postulate a sophisticated approach to the depiction of motion in the work of late Upper Paleolithic artists. However, her interpretation is not precisely transcendent, because, like Winn, she does not attempt to discover symbolic meaning in the paintings beyond that of simple reference.

Several papers in this volume are biologically oriented but in very different ways. Pontius finds resemblances between graphic depictions across time and space, and correlations for these with both physical (neurological) and cultural-environmental conditioning. In hypothesizing phylogenetic cultural development from a combined analysis of ape behavior and the ontogenetic development of human infants within the context of social interaction, Borchert and Zihlman, too, incorporate biological data. Sheets-Johnstone also draws on the biology of mammalian

species in demonstrating how this differential affects perception, and influences interpretation of space and space-based symbolisms by early humans.

Whatever the favored method of interpretation of symbolic origins and development, all of the papers in this volume further symbolic research by suggesting both novel ways of dealing with the data and fresh methods of interpretation that open many new avenues of investigation. They analyze past and enduring symbols and hypothesize their meanings in terms of the environment in which they occur. They recognize that interpretation depends both upon semantic continuity and upon the associational network within which any given symbol is found. In this, all of the papers may be characterized as *structural* in the best sense of the term.

It is patently impossible for any meaning to be extracted from symbols active in the past unless some continuity with the present is assumed. Fortunately such continuity does, in fact, exist, and will yield to patient analysis. The varied approaches in this volume are testimonies to the degree to which the remote past can be interpreted through application of methodological ingenuity and structural principles. Each new approach provides a matrix for further theoretical advances in comparative symbolism.

PART ONE

Beginnings

Symbolic beginnings can be traced in various ways. This means that various kinds of data are relevant to the task. Archaeological data constitute the only concrete evidence of human evolution. While no evidence of complex symbolic systems is available prior to the Upper Paleolithic, in the late Acheulean we see evidence of the start of certain cultural practises that are familiar from historic periods. Such evidence is primarily spatial: e.g. construction of dwellings with areas of specialization for carrying out particular activities, with a hearth fire as the its central focus, greater specialization in tool assemblages, and incisions or other decorative motifs on stone or bone.

During the Mousterian certain practises began which became familiar and widespread. Burial of the dead indicates a cognizance of, or a desire for, some kind of transcendent continuity. Decoration of, or goods buried with, corpses especially emphasizes the early stirring of such feelings or thoughts, and clearly symbolizes something beyond the act itself. Each of the four papers in this section attacks the problem of beginnings from a different methodological standpoint.

Although it is not always thought to be symbolic, the first cultural manifestation revealed through the archaeological record, the manufacture of crude stone tools, also symbolizes something beyond the performance of the act itself—an act, or the hope of an act, which will logically follow: the hunt, and/or the killing and preparation of game to be shared among members of the social group. The archaeological record provides us with a very long history of tool use, exhibiting progressive change and improvement in the sophistication of stone tools. If our definition of symbol includes artifacts, as we believe it should, since the systems of culture are based on the relationships between objects the use of which, or the manufacture of which, is rule-governed, then these early tools are the first evidence we have of what might be considered to be symbols. As tools became more complex, new methods of man-