

Red ochre and early humans

Already 200.000 to 100.000 years ago Neanderthal people in Europe as well as early modern humans in Africa painted their body with red ochre mixed with fat. They did it long before modern man developed significant artistic skills and interest in sophisticated rituals.



The Venus of Willendorf, a stone age symbol of fertility and birth, estimated to be 24.000 to 22.000 years old, was covered with red ochre. It may have been because red ochre supported health by its sterilizing activity and because it kept away flies. (Natural History Museum, Vienna; photography by H. Tributsch)

Ochre, iron oxide, under sunlight on the moist skin, generates aggressive chemicals. They transform body smell into odourless carbon dioxide and sterilize the skin from bacteria. A scentless skin became a big advantage because primitive hunters had to approach their shy game at close distance. In addition the ochre treatment helped to control infections and disease from exposure to wild animals and their remains.

How did early humans acquire this ground-breaking ochre bathing strategy for survival? They simply did regularly observe a vulture, the bearded vulture, acting that way. He did it while regularly sharing their prey of killed animals. After feeding on a carcass, the vulture attempts to bath in red ochre mud and subsequently dries the feathers and cares for them in sunlight. It is an innate, genetically fixed activity. By learning the advantage of ochre bathing from this natural model early humans did also acquire a kind of creative tool. When cleaning their mud covered hands on

cave walls they may have had their first artistic experiences in recognizing patterns of red hands. In addition, animal skins on their ochre tainted body gradually became durable, tanned hides. And in dramatic situations, like those of birth and death, it may have been obvious to involve the smell preventing and health supporting activity of red ochre. This way red ochre became part of significant rituals and accompanied countless tribes through the ages until modern times.

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