

## THE ROCK PAINTINGS OF THE MAHADEO HILLS, INDIA

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The Mahadeo Hills rock paintings occupy an important place in the history of Indian rock painting research. Attracted by the almost European climate and the enchanting landscape of the Pachmarhi plateau, the British established there in the last quarter of the nineteenth century a cantonment and sanatorium for the recreation of army and government officers and their families.

Rock paintings were probably noticed around the cantonment in the nineteenth century, and it is no surprise that it was an English officer, Lt. Col. D. H. Gordon (commander of the Small Arms School in Pachmarhi from 1932 to 1935), who undertook there the first systematic study of Indian rock paintings. During the 1930s more than fifty rock shelters with paintings were found in the Mahadeo Hills, most of them discovered by Mrs. and Lt. Col. D. H. Gordon. Gordon published his findings in several scientific magazines and research journals, and his ideas and hypotheses were taken as sound authority. The discovery and exploration of the huge galleries of rock paintings in the Vindhya region, as well as the rediscovery and re-evaluation of the rock paintings which were the subject of Gordon's own study, enable us to review critically Gordon's judgement as to the antiquity of Indian rock paintings.

Recently, while searching for the shelters which Gordon had discovered in the '30s, several important new sites were also found. It is now possible to contest Gordon's statement that "none of the Indian rock paintings or engravings is of considerable antiquity" (D. H. Gordon, 1958, p. 98). While Gordon thought of the beginning of rock art in terms of centuries, indications now exist that the earliest of rock art in the sub-continent may go back more than 20,000 years. In any case, these new findings cannot diminish the value of D. H. Gordon's work, whose achievement was to study Indian rock paintings in a systematic and analytical way.

### *The Location of the Mahadeo Rock Paintings*

Most of the known painting sites are close to the cantonment area of Pachmarhi in the Sohagpur Taluk of the Hoshangabad District, Madhya Pradesh (central India).

The Mahadeo Hills are the highest part of the Satpura range. The main hills in these deeply scarred mountains are composed of large-grained sedimentary sandstone, resting on a bed of volcanic basalt. Water, wind and chemical weathering has cut deep gorges, while physical stress has caused the break-up of huge rock walls. Extensive rocky wastes have been created; these are colonized by dense thorny vegetation, which in turn leads to the growth of forests. Many of the mountains are shaped like giant castles which have crumbled to ruins.

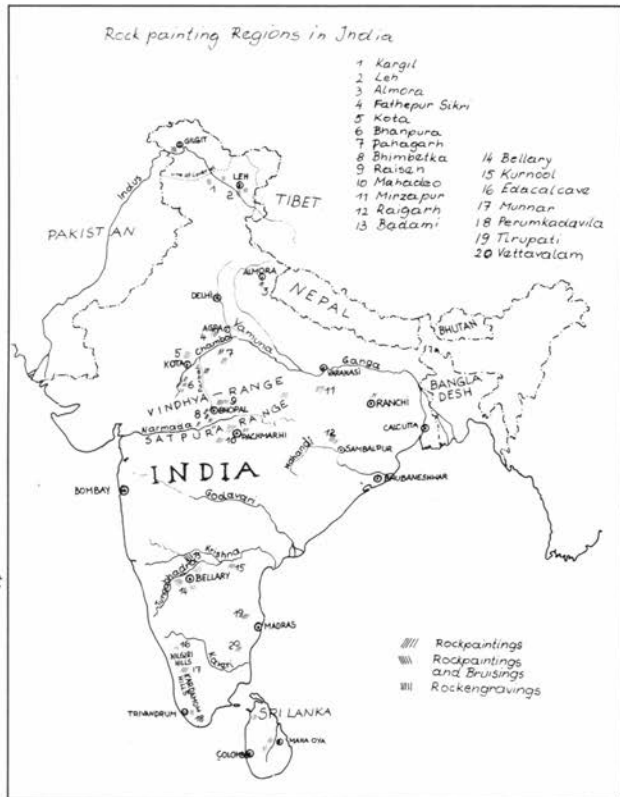
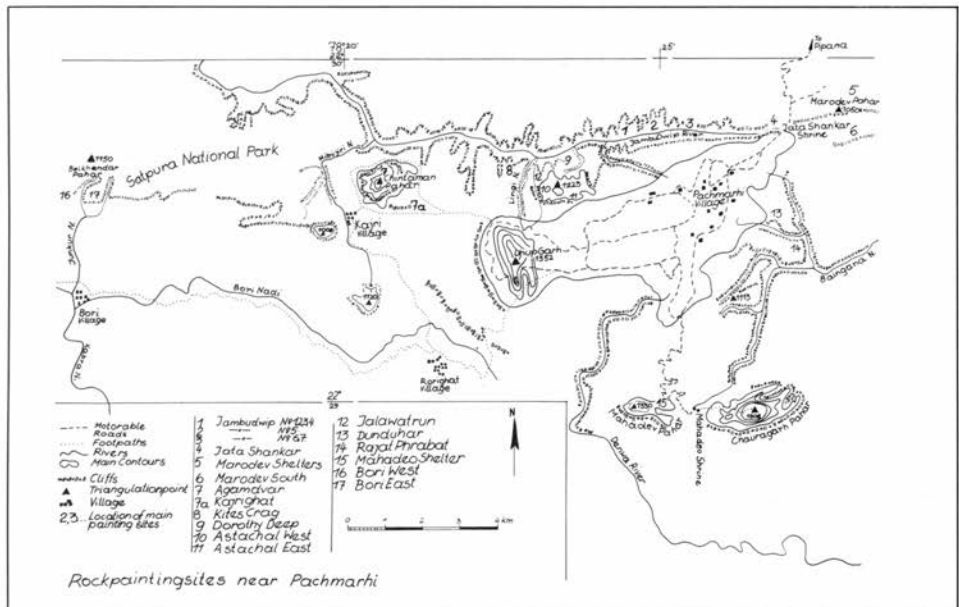


Fig. 39  
Distribution map of rock art areas in India.

Fig. 40  
Topographical location of rock art sites in the Pachmarhi area.

Fig. 41  
View across the Mahadeo Hills.



It may have been these natural forms which led the tribal population, as well as the local Hindus, to regard these mountains with awe. Even the name "Mahadeo", a synonym for Shiva, reflects this sanctity. Hidden in deep gorges, in caves and on top of hills are a number of important sanctuaries,



which are visited annually by thousands of pilgrims during Shivratri, Nagpanchami and Dusserah.

According to local folklore, a long time ago the Mahado Shrine was on an island surrounded by an extensive lake, guarded by a huge serpent which prevented the pilgrims from paying homage to Mahadeo. This enraged Shiva, and by a stroke of his Trisul the snake was turned into stone. Its huge body now forms an impenetrable wilderness at the foot of Chauragarh Pahar. A second stroke from Mahadeo's weapon caused the lake to drain and so enabled pilgrims to reach his shrine dryfooted.

On the Pachmarhi plateau exist a number of historic monuments, the most famous of which are five rock-cut caves excavated during the Gupta period. Folklore takes these caves as the homesteads of the Pandavas during their exile in the jungles of central India. The name of Pachmarhi is derived from Panch Madhi – “ the five huts”. A copperplate inscription of the same period grants land to the Brahmins of the Mahadeo shrine.

Findings of stone tools clearly show that the higher reaches of the Mahadeo Hills were occupied or visited from the Upper Palaeolithic period onwards. Tools of earlier periods are absent from the higher elevations of the hills. This is a clear indication that only microlith-using men ventured to the higher parts of the hills, whereas Lower Palaeolithic men used the lowlands of the river valleys only.

Microlith-using men left not only stone tools, but left paintings as well, in the recesses of cliffs and in rock shelters. Only a small number of the innumerable shelters have paintings, and it is likely that only a small proportion of the paintings that originally existed have survived.

Even so, a number of well-preserved paintings of the Mesolithic period are known to exist, the best in the shelters of Astachal, Dorothy Deep, Rajat Phrabat, Agamdwar and Bori. Many of these shelters measure almost half a

mile in length. Many of the Mesolithic paintings are covered by a thick layer of sinter which obscures the paintings and makes them visible to trained eyes only.

Paintings of the Historic period are more numerous. It is for these paintings that Pachmarhi is famous, and casual visitors to the "prehistoric paintings" are generally guided to these. By far the largest number of painted shelters are far away in the pathless jungle, and can only be reached after cross-country treks and neck-breaking climbs. Some of them are visited by honey collectors once or twice a year; others are used by moonshiners who distill tax-free Mohua-spirit.

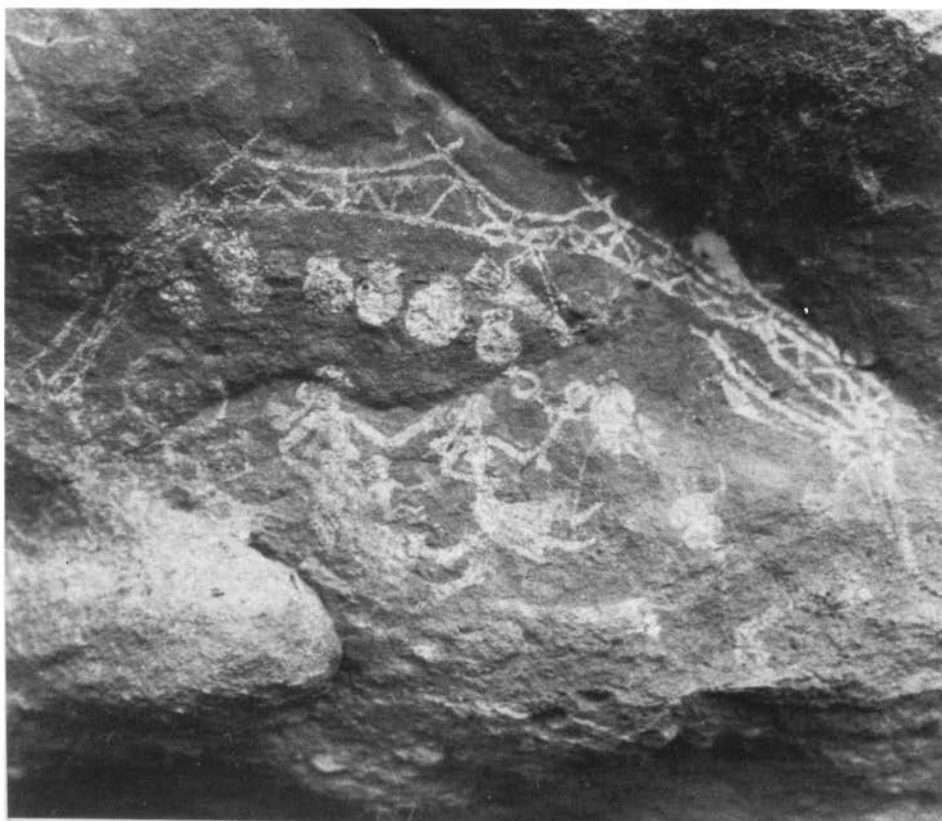
The paintings themselves seem to have no religious relevance to the people today. If asked about their authorship, the tribal people generally say they are the work of Devis, and once I was even told that the paintings were done by an English sahib who was always in search of shelters! (It must have been D. H. Gordon).

Most of the painting sites are well protected by the impenetrable topography of the area. But many important shelters were opened to tourists by constructing paths of access, and have been subsequently destroyed, a fate

*Fig. 42*  
*Mabadeo; historic paintings in white. A domestic scene inside a tent, with pots and a quiver hanging. Length of the tent like*

*structure: ca. 40 cm.*

*Fig. 43*  
*Agamdwar; historic; ca. 60 cm; painting in white with red outline Headhunter.*





which will continue to endanger many of the Indian rock paintings until the authorities find a way to protect them.

In 1981, the most rugged terrain of the Mahadeo Hills was designated the Satpura National Park, which forms a last refuge for a typical central Indian flora and fauna. A good number of important shelters are located within the boundaries of the National Park. These sites are in close proximity to sanctuaries which are visited yearly by thousands of pilgrims during Nagpachami. The Nagpachami pilgrimage has grown to a large "Mela" (1) within the last few years, and the paintings around Chintamani Pahar are highly endangered.



*Fig. 44  
Mabadeo Pabar; historic painting in white;  
size of feline: ca. 10 cm.*



*Fig. 45  
Mabadeo Pabar; detail of the two couples  
from the picture above.*

Indeed, a number of paintings have been destroyed in the last two years. The reconnaissance of the area is far from complete. Further findings of painted shelters are to be expected.

### *Mesolithic Rock Paintings*

Although Mesolithic paintings in the Mahadeo Hills are rare, a number of shelters have fairly well-preserved groups.

Thematically these paintings do not differ from the Mesolithic paintings in the Vindhya Hills. The difference is the general setting of the paintings. While the fine-grained Vindhya sandstone reacted chemically with the applied pigment, which makes the paintings visible even if the original pigment has weathered away, on the coarse-grained dark-pigmented Mahadeo Hill sandstone the paintings are visible only if the applied pigment remains as a layer on the rock surface. Only extremely well-protected paintings of the Mesolithic period have withstood the onslaught of weathering agents.

Due to the dark pigmentation of the Mahadeo sandstone, the main colours used in the paintings were white and yellow. Red, the dominant colour in the Vindhya Hills, was used in the Mahadeo Hills mostly as a colour to contrast with the white. The red colour derives from iron oxide, the white from calcareous clay, and the yellow from lateritic clay. Most paintings were done in two colours, white and red, some in several shades of yellow and red. The thematic as well as the technological information which we are able to gather from the paintings is scarce, a limitation due to the small number of Mesolithic groups overall as well as to the fragmentary state of preservation.

The only weapons we know of are spears and arrows. These are shown set with microliths in a harpoon-like fashion. The arrows show fledgings for flight stabilisation and a groove at the end to fit the sinew of the bow.

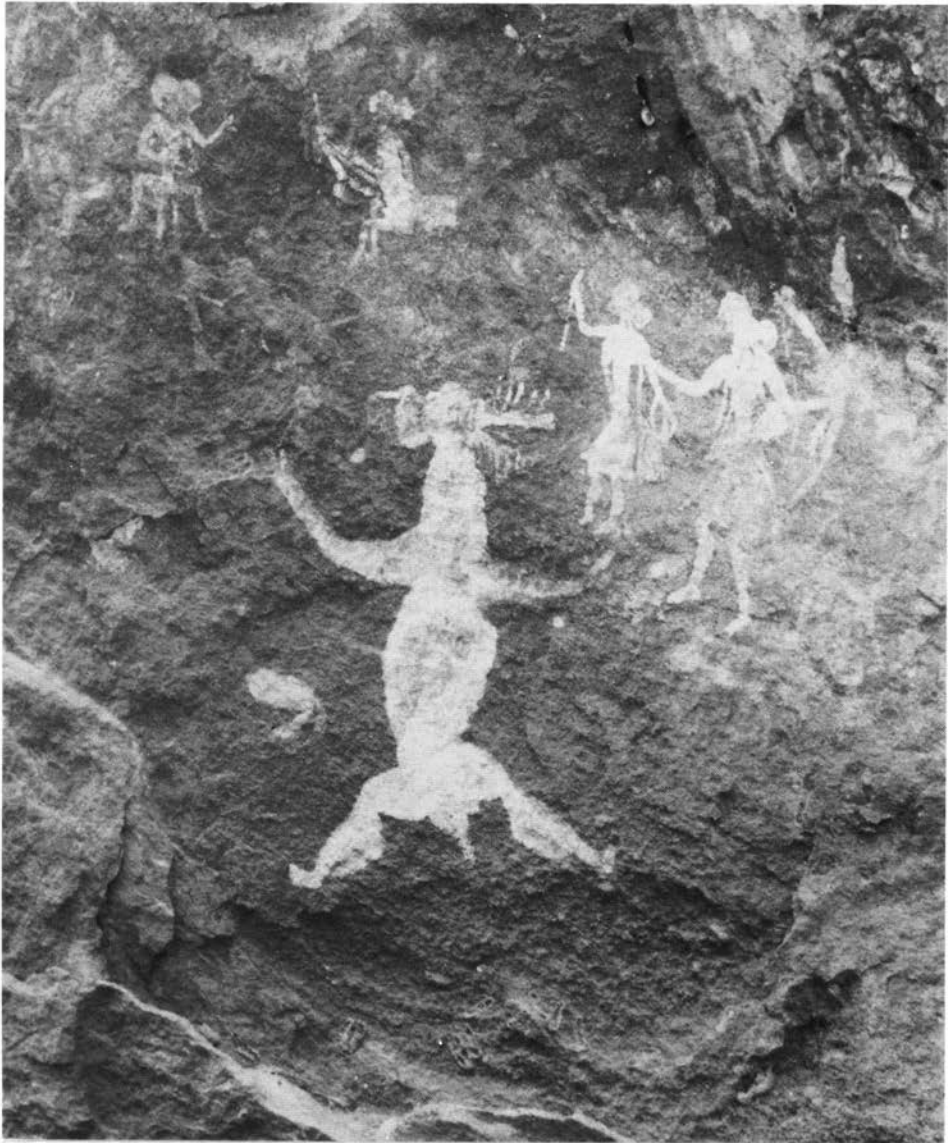


Fig. 46  
*Rajat Phrabat. Mesolithic figures of an animal with body decorated by a meander pattern, and a fish decorated with dots. Length of the fish: ca. 60 cm.*

*Fig. 47  
Rajat Phrabat Mesolithic en-  
graving; size of deer: 35 cm.*



*Fig. 48  
Rajat Phrabat; historic painting  
in white. Height of the demon:  
ca. 25 cm.*

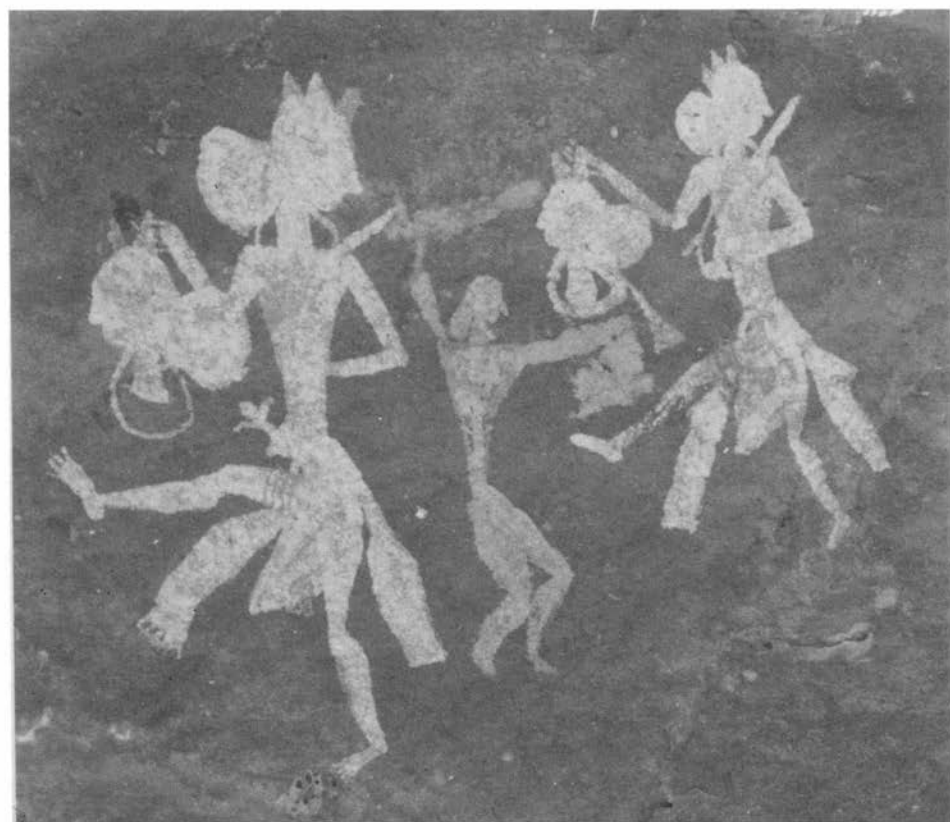






*Fig. 49*  
*Rajat Phrabat; historic painting in white.*  
*At least three phases are represented on*  
*this surface. The horse is ca. 35 cm. long.*

*Fig. 50*  
*Rajat Phrabat; historic painting in white.*  
*Head-hunters return with their booty. The*  
*man to the left: 45 cm. high.*



Hunting and food-gathering are shown rarely. The majority of the paintings seem to belong to a cultic context, as can be seen clearly in the paintings which show human figures and over-sized fish in one and the same composition

The clothes and adornment of the people also seem to indicate this. Men as well as women wear over-sized head decorations and decorative strings around their arms and knees.

The stylistic difference in portraying women and men in Mesolithic paintings led D. H. Gordon wrongly to see a stylistic development from stick-like figures in the earliest paintings to more solid depictions of figures in the later phases. Mainly using that criterion, he constructed a stylistic sequence from the earliest paintings to the later ones, which very often are placed on the same rock walls.

Today, after many thousands of paintings from the Vindhya Hills have been analysed, we know that it is the stylistic convention of Mesolithic art to portray men as stick-like figures while women are mostly shown with square-shaped bodies.

Women are mostly shown in dance scenes, rarely in food-procuring activities.

Mesolithic art all over India has in common a number of particular designs. Among the most eye-catching are honeycomb patterns, which sometimes appear as designed squares with unknown symbolic value. Sometimes the same patterns appear as body designs on animal figures. These puzzling designs are found in Mesolithic art all over India, in places as far as several thousand miles apart. Animal depictions are quite naturalistic compared to anthropomorphic figures, even if the expression "naturalistic" can only claim a subjective system of perception of the viewer. The antlers, horns and legs of animals are always shown in a "twisted" perspective, i. e., from the front, whereas the animals' bodies are shown in profile. The intestines of the animals are often shown in an "x-ray" view, in all grades of schematisation. Deers, pigs, antelope and fish form the majority of the Mesolithic zoo. Birds are rare, and in the Mahadeo Hills depictions they are confined to peacocks.

The earliest paintings in the Mahadeo Hills tally with the early Mesolithic paintings from the Vindhya region in many respects. Stratigraphically earlier paintings, which in the Vindhya are often executed in green, are absent in the Mahadeo Hills. A slightly modified form of that style may be represented by a single group of paintings from Bori, showing the hunting of a bovine animal. This painting makes it clear that Mahadeo paintings may be as old as the earliest rock paintings in the Vindhya Hills.

To specify its age in an absolute number of years is a difficult undertaking in India, as there is no way of dating it directly, and no comparable works of mobiliary art have been found in datable layers of controlled archaeological excavations. The only indications of particularly early mobiliary art are engraved ostrich egg-shell pieces, engravings on bone and stone, and a bone artifact which could be an anthropomorphic figurine. The bone artifact and the ostrich egg-shells come from layers which might date to 20,000 B.P. or earlier. It is more than probable that the beginning of rock art goes back as far into antiquity.

This art relates to an extremely long period, that of the microlith-using hunting and gathering societies, which seems to cover from before 20,000 B.P. until the introduction of agriculture during the Chalcolithic period in the third millenium B.C.

The Chalcolithic period is represented in the paintings, if at all, only by a few isolated figures. It seems as if the higher elevations of the Mahadeo Hills



*Fig. 51  
Rajat Phrabat; historic painting in white.  
At least two phases overlap on this surface.  
The earlier phase includes stick-like human*

*figures and small animals. The later phase  
illustrates two human larger figures repre-  
senting a head-hunting scene. The figure to  
the left is ca. 35 cm. high.*

were abandoned during that period.

### *Rock Paintings of the Historic Period*

The most numerous and the best preserved rock paintings belong to the historic period. Their thematic as well as technological content allows us to place these paintings in the first millenium after Christ. Careful analysis has indicated that these paintings are expressions of a society which is otherwise unknown in written history. We are dealing with the art of a population which now would be called "tribal".

The stylistic and thematic differences between these paintings and those of the Mesolithic period are conspicuous. Even so, the paintings are full of the movement and descriptive qualities so typical of Mesolithic art in India, but generally absent from Historic paintings. The treatment of perspective, space and other stylistic characteristics tempts one to classify them with the "folk arts" of India.

The technical execution of many of the Historic paintings is not inferior to that of modern Pat-paintings (2). The graceful line of the drawings stands in strange contrast to the rough and rugged surroundings in which nature has set these shelters.

Some of the large compositions must be understood as illustrations of legends or myths, but without the verbal explanation of the artists it is very difficult to reconstruct them. Who are the enthroned warriors or chiefs? The sword-wielding head-hunters? The monkeys in human clothes and jewellery, the warriors draped in leopard-skins? Who were these people who ventured into the dense jungles to paint on hidden rock walls?

The technological information we gather from the paintings shows that the



Fig. 52  
Rajat Phrabat; historic painting in white.

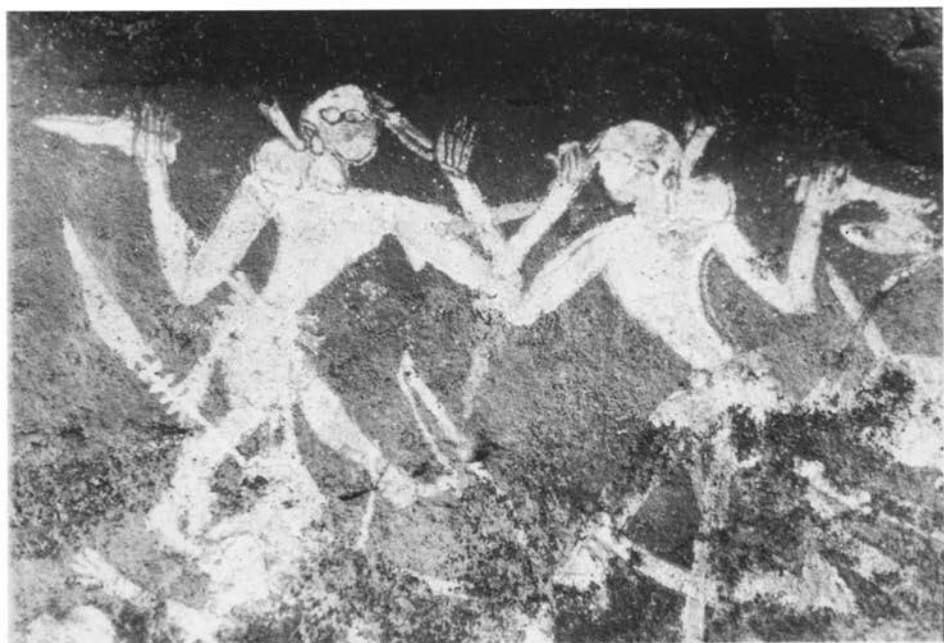
A group of fish caught in a net. The bowman to the left is ca. 15 cm. high.

people used iron weapons. The forms of axes, swords and daggers are comparable with those of weapons used during the Gupta period. But cultic elements in the drawings show strong affinities with Chalcolithic paintings from the Vindhya region. Here as well is the fat-bellied hero or chief sitting on a small chair, swinging his bow, surrounded by strange adjutants, half-man, half-animal. The monkeys in human make-up could belong to the Ramayana Epos, or to a legend widely known in India and incorporated into the Ramayana-Cyklus. The two fighting monkeys in the rock paintings on Kites Crag may depict two heroes of that legend, Hanuman and Sugrya.

Dancing scenes in well-constructed huts seem like illustrations of life in a Muria Ghotul, or "youth dormitory" of the Muria tribe. Girls are seen exhausted and reclining on the floor, or being massaged by friends; necklaces are scattered on the floor, while in the background the dancing continues. Other paintings show demons – fat, hairy, frightful beings with awful fangs and muzzles – catching hold of diminutive humans or animals.

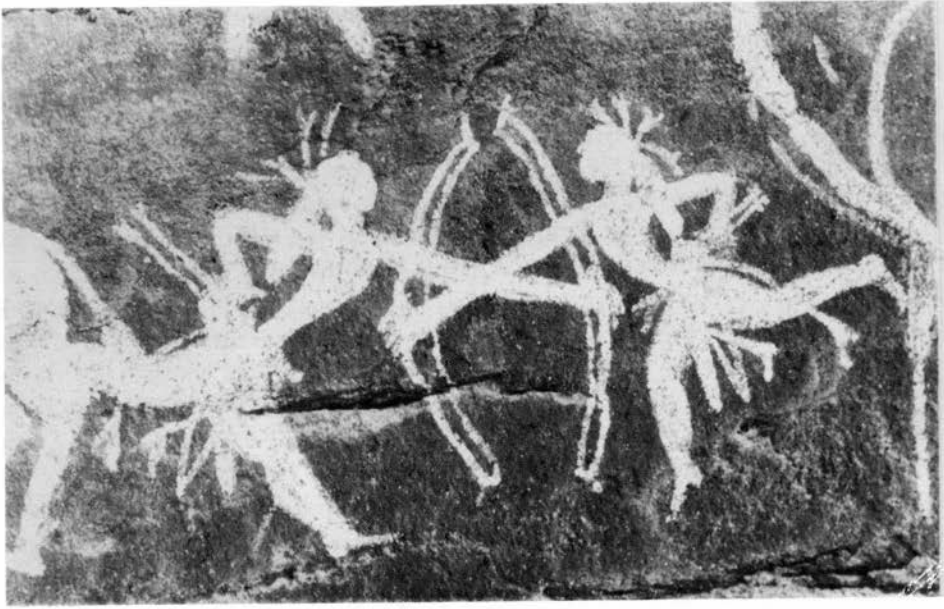
War is a favourite theme. Some of these depictions show armed quarrels after the stealing of cattle. The hillmen, armed with bows and arrows, drive away herds of cows, hard-pressed by mounted warriors on horses armed with swords, spears and lances. Signals are blown on horns or trumpets. The fights are shown with a brutality unknown in rock paintings elsewhere in India. Arrows stick through the necks and bodies of foes, heads are chopped off. Depictions of head-hunting are known only from the paintings in the Mahadeo Hills. However it is not clear if these drawings repeat one mythological event over and over again or depict a common practice of that time.

Contrary to the cruel depictions of war, the camp scenes are a picture of peace. Women do their cooking, stirring the food with big spoons, their



*Fig. 53*  
*Bori East; historic painting in white, partly in red outline; height of the fighters: ca. 15*

*cm. The heads are painted in profile but both eyes are shown.*



*Fig. 54*  
*Bori East; two bowmen fighting; historic;*  
*height of the fighters: ca. 15 cm.*

children on their laps, the kitchen utensils neatly arrayed or hung from roof-poles. Even the fire is indicated beneath the pots.

Several paintings show the collecting of honey. Honey still plays an important role in the economy of the tribal people around Pachmarhi, as a source of hard cash for many families who otherwise could not rely on any salable surplus from their small plots of land. The technique of harvesting honey is shown minutely. Ladders lead to the honeycombs or dangle down over precipices; the collector clinging to it is surrounded by a cloud of bees. The work of honey-collecting is done today in the same dangerous way. One man climbs down on ropes made of creepers and splitbamboo over vertical rock walls of over 100 metres' height, while other men at the bottom try to ward off the enraged bees with smoke.

Hunting with dogs is shown but rarely. Deer and wild buffalo seem to have been the main prey.

That animal domestication was known to the rock painters is clear from the depiction of cattle-herding scenes as well as from pictures of horse-riding and animals roped to a manger.

Agriculture is not shown directly, but the hill population must have had enough contacts with the agriculturists of the lowlands to understand the principle of agriculture. An ox-cart is even depicted in the pathless hill area where no wheeled vehicle could ever have moved.

The dating of the Historic paintings is difficult. Nowhere do inscriptions accompany the paintings. Also, the similarities of their style to more easily datable paintings from the Vindhya Hills should not be overestimated, and thus cannot be used to derive dates of any certainty.



*Fig. 55*  
*Bori East; historic painting in white. Length in the centre and the second bowman from the left overlap paintings in pale yellow.*

The Mahadeo Hill paintings have a whole array of stylistic peculiarities which do not appear in other rock paintings but which can be found in some periods of early Historic art and even in recent "folk arts". An eye-catching peculiarity is the treatment of facial features. Rock painters all over India drew heads in profile. In the Mahadeo Hills this convention was followed, but both the eyes are usually indicated. In some paintings both eyes are placed on the visible half of the face; in others the second (invisible) eye is placed outside the profile line. The facial expressions of these paintings are very similar to those in early manuscript paintings from Maharashtra. Many artists even struggled hard to depict the half-profile, with some success. The bodies of humans are always shown frontally, the legs and feet in "profile".

By comparing the paintings with medieval hero-stones (3), D. H. Gordon dated them to around 1000 A. D.

Their date could be further clarified by excavating some of the shelters to find out how they were used and what the relation was between the hill-people and the better-known cultures of the Narmada Valley.

The veneration in which some of the hidden shelters and springs and many of the hill-tops are kept indicates a long continuity of cultic activities in these areas. The remembrance boards, which the local Khoriku people place under a holy mango tree after the death of a member of their people, show a number of similarities with many of the rock paintings. Ethnological studies into the customs and folklore of the tribal people in the Mahadeo Hills could bring us closer to an understanding of the myths and legends which are woven into the paintings on the shelter walls themselves.

- NOTES: (1) *Mela*: Village or temple fair, which can combine trade entertainment and religious events.  
 (2) *Pat-paintings*: Paintings on clay-stained cloth or canvas with religious or secular content and/or use. This technique of painting is still current in Bengal and Orissa.  
 (3) *Hero-stones*: Remembrance stones for warriors.

*Résumé*: En Inde, il existe de très nombreuses oeuvres d'art rupestre dans les collines de Mahadeo, dans l'Etat du Madhya Pradesh où se trouvent quelques-unes des plus importantes concentrations d'art rupestre du sous-continent indien.

On y observe deux groupes principaux de peintures: l'un, du Mésolithique, comporte des représentations d'animaux dont le corps est décoré de motifs géométriques, l'autre, d'époque récente, englobe une grande partie des deux derniers millénaires et on y voit représentées des scènes de la vie quotidienne, ainsi que des cérémonies et activités religieuses. Les scènes où apparaissent des chasseurs de têtes sont fréquentes.

Des recherches ultérieures pourraient permettre d'établir une chronologie plus précise des phases représentées.

*Resumen*: Una importante concentración de arte rupestre de la India se encuentra en Mahadeo Hills, en el estado de Madhya Pradesh, que posee algunas de las concentraciones más grandes de arte rupestre del subcontinente indio.

Las pinturas se pueden dividir en dos grupos principales: las del período mesolítico y las de un período más reciente. Las correspondientes al período mesolítico representan animales con motivos geométricos en el cuerpo. La época reciente acapara los dos últimos milenios, y las pinturas representan escenas de la vida cotidiana, ritos y actividades religiosas. Abundan las escenas relativas a los cazadores de cabezas.

Se necesitarán nuevas investigaciones para lograr una definición cronológica más precisa de las fases representadas.

*Riassunto*: Una importante concentrazione di arte rupestre in India si trova a Mahadeo Hills, nello stato di Madhya Pradesh dove si trovano alcune tra le maggiori concentrazioni di arte rupestre del sub-continente indiano.

Si riscontrano due principali gruppi di pitture: l'uno del periodo Mesolitico con figurazioni animali che hanno il corpo decorato da motivi geometrici, l'altro di epoca recente, copre gran parte degli ultimi due millenni e in esso sono rappresentate scene di vita quotidiana, di riti e di attività religiose. Sono frequenti le scene che fanno riferimento ai cacciatori di teste.

Ulteriori ricerche potrebbero portare ad una più specifica definizione cronologica delle fasi rappresentate.

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