

## ROCK ART DISCOVERIES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: A HISTORICAL SUMMARY

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Although over thirty rock art sites have been discovered during the last hundred years in Southeast Asia, until recently little attention has been given to them. Executed on the walls of caves and rock shelters, the paintings include representations of historic events, hunting and fertility rites, and other symbols.

In some cases dating has been possible by means of the consistent recurrence of motifs or by association with artefacts retrieved during excavation. Such attempts at dating have been largely inconclusive. Efforts have also been made to establish chronologies through stylistic analyses, but styles have proved so diverse that the problems of age, origin and meaning of the paintings have in most cases remained unsolved.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a summary of rock art discoveries in parts of Southeast Asia. The various sites are therefore presented according to geographical Location and date of discovery.

### *Malaysia*

One of the earliest reports of rock painting discoveries was in 1879 when H.C. Syers explored three huge Limestone caves at Batu-massif, near Kuala Lumpur in Western Malaysia. Wall drawings in charcoal were found extending from the Gua Gelap (formely Gua Lambong) to the entrance of the higher situated Temple Cave (formely Gua Belah). Syers assumed these simply styled drawings were the work of the 'Orang Sakei', the 'Wild Men' who lived in the rainforests of that area. Much later, excavations in the caves revealed stone tools and ceramic shards that indicated the caves had been used intermittently by Neolithic man. It is therefore possible that the works are prehistoric, rather than 'Sakei' art. Unfortunately, before systematic recording could be undertaken, most of the charcoal drawings had been destroyed by vandalism.

In 1927 I.H.N. Evans discovered hundreds of well preserved pictures in the Gua Badak or Rhinoceros Cave near Lenggong, Upper Perak (Western Malaysia). He was able to distinguish 14 repetitive motifs done in coal and white paint.

Discoveries were made in 1958 in Sarawak (Eastern Malaysia) by scientists of the Sarawak Museum. Under T. Harrison's leadership, investigations of a newly-found cave in the rock massif of Niah revealed several prehistoric boats containing human bones. Analysis of associated ceramics and stone tools provided a Neolithic date for the site. Poorly preserved red paintings were also discovered at the rear of the cave, showing figures such as animals, as well as manned rowing boats. These representations of death-ships or soul-boats are clearly related to the achial funeral boats found within the cave. Their presence supports the assumption that such burials were part of a death cult, which, in a slightly modified form, is still practised by contemporary 'Punan' natives. Paintings in the same style were recorded in two other caves on the same mountain.

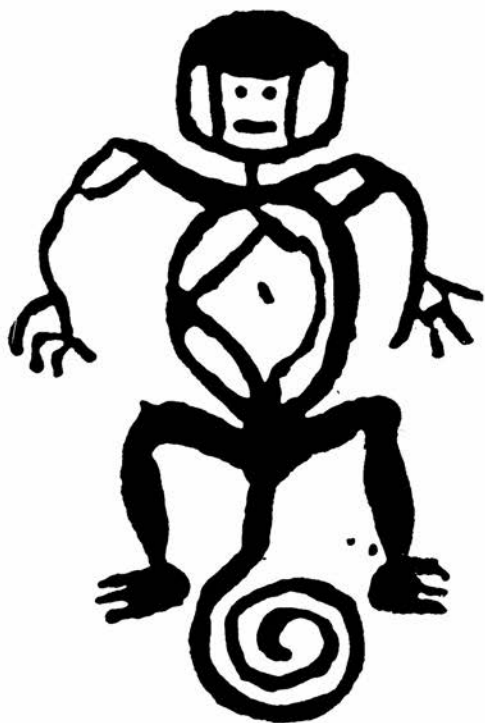


Fig. 95  
Male ancestor picture, Arguni Island, Indonesia (after Röder & Hahn).



Fig. 96  
Male ancestor picture, Arguni Island, Indonesia.

In 1959 R.L. Rawlings discovered the third rock art locality in West Malaysia, east of Ipoh in the Kinta Valley (Perak). At 30m above the valley floor on the western flank of Gunung Panjang mountain, a rock shelter was found that is about 120m long and 20m deep. More than 50 individual paintings, red-brown in colour, were executed on the relatively dry sections of the shelter walls. They mainly depict human figures, abstract patterns, hand-positives and animals, some of which have a length of over 2m. J.M. Matthew described these paintings in 1960 and differentiated three styles. A comparison of the styles with other Southeast Asian rock art types was carried out by scientists of the University of Malaya but no similarities were found whatever, not even with the nearby rock art of Badak at Lenggong.

### Indonesia

F. Grabowsky was the first to report the existence of rock paintings in Kalimantan, Indonesia. His work in the Labuan district in 1883 led him to the Liang Lumba cave at Mount Mandella, where he found figures on the walls drawn with coal. The drawings were given little importance aside from a description as 'scribbling of the natives'.

Further discoveries were made by A. Jakobson on the Little Kei Island in 1889. Within caves along the coastal cliffs he noted drawings of masked human beings, sun symbols, boats, birds, geometrical forms and negative handprints, as well as dancing and fighting figures.



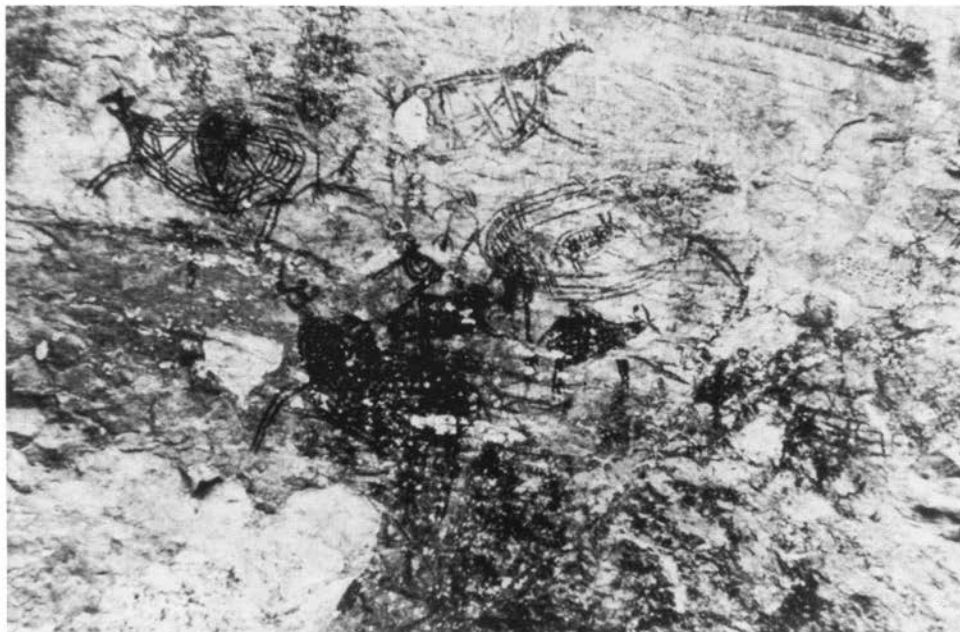
Fig. 97  
*Ship-of-the Dead, wall paintings in red haematite; 'Kain Hitam' at Niak Caves, Sarawak, East-Malaysia.*

In the course of the Frobenius Expedition to Indonesia in 1937/38, J. Roeder recorded red and white rock paintings at five sites on Seram Island, in the Seleman Bay near Rumasokat village. Various figures are represented: hand-negatives, a sun symbol, a bird and a human figure. In the south-western part of the island horizontal arrays of wall engravings are present depicting animals, birds, people, boats, sun symbols and eyes. More rock paintings are reported in the south and northwest of Seram, although precise descriptions are as yet unavailable.

The greatest discovery of wall paintings was made by Roeder on Indonesian Irian Jaya. Along a 30km stretch of MacCluer Bay he came upon numerous motifs on overhanging rocks. On the offshore islands of Irian Jaya rock paintings were found which resemble these of the Australian aborigines. These include human beings and animals, hand negatives, masks, spirals, 'magic' symbols, boats, birds, monkeys and figures in 'X-Ray' style.

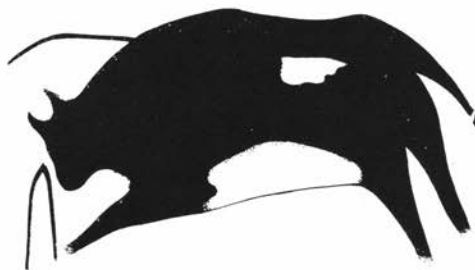
In a 1959 publication, T. Harrison reported his 1945 discovery of rock engravings in the upper part of the Great Kayan River at Long Po, Kalimantan.

H.R. Van Heekeren carried out excavations that uncovered rock art in the caves of the Turicale District of Southern Sulawesi in 1950. At the same time C.H.J. Franssen also investigated caves in this area and was able to find



*Fig. 98*  
*Rock paintings at Tambun rock shelter, Perak, West-Malaysia. They could represent sambhur deer. Note one large figure with a smaller one drawn inside; this may represent a pregnant female.*

*fig. 99*  
*Wall painting of a wild cattle in Little Padab-Lin Cave, Burma.*



other figures in the Leang Saripa cave. In the Leang Djari E and Leang Lambattorang caves, similar rock paintings were discovered, including negative handprints on a red background and a figure of a pig. A reinvestigation of know cave paintings was undertaken by the 1969 Australian-Indonesian Archaeological Expedition to South Sulawesi but no new finds were made. However, because only a relatively small area has been investigated closely, we can certainly expect more rock art discoveries in Sulawesi.

In the sixties T. Verhoeven reported Mommesteeg's discovery of rock art on the island of Flores. Simple black paintings of ovals and fish were found at about 500m above sea level on the Mbikong Cliff near Wangka.

Rock paintings were reported by R. Cinatty in 1963 from the Tulual-tract in caves on the northern coast of Timor. He described warriors, magical boats, geometrical figures, running human beings and one negative handprint in red. Cinatty likened their style and technique to the paintings in New Guinea and the New England Tableland of northern New South Wales, Australia.

Two years later T. Harrisson and J.L. Reavis investigated the Sarang Limestone caves in the Bintulu district of Sarawak, Western Kalimantan. Theirs was the first discovery of charcoal drawings, although the caves had already been investigated several times. In the Lobang Batu Puteh, line drawings of human beings 50 to 60cm high were recorded, extending over a 9m section



*Fig. 100  
Prehistoric paintings in shelter at Khao Kien, South-Thailand. Naturalistic and geometric figures.*



*Fig. 101  
Rock-paintings in Tham Roob, West-Thailand. Geometric lines and human figures.*

of a rear wall. The style and technique of the drawings found on the northern wall of the main hall in the second cave, Lobang Ringen, were identical with those of Lobang Batu Puteh.

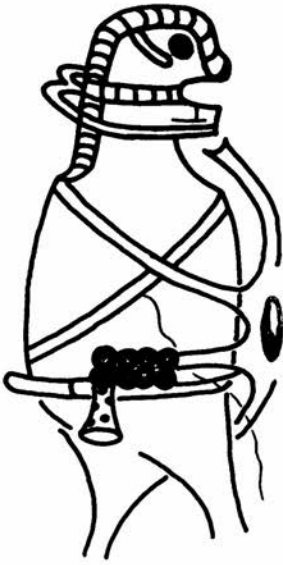
Investigations of rock engravings on Kalimantan were carried out by M. Baier during 1974 and 1978. He reported work on three sites: Pa Upan, Batu Pilipus at Main Apa (Kerayan), and Bulongan.

### *Thailand*

In 1912 L. de Lajonquierè discovered rock paintings in the Karst area of Phangnga Delta, Southern Thailand. A variety of animals and unusual geometric figures are represented, some of which are in outline form. Most of the figures are coloured in a uniform red or brown. Lajonquierè considered the paintings unimportant and attributed them to the local fishermen. However, they claimed that the paintings were very old and, according to legend, had been done under orders of a 'demon'.

A decade later, in 1922, A. Kerr explored an area southeast of the town Amphoe Mukdahan, in the Changwat Nakhon Phanom, northeastern Thailand. Here, 3 to 4 km west of the Mae Nam Khong (Mekong) and about





*Fig. 102*  
Painted figure of demon; rock shelter at Khao Kien, Phangnga, South-Thailand.

*Fig. 103*  
Prehistoric painting; rock shelter at Khao Kien, Phangnga, South-Thailand. Exact period unknown.



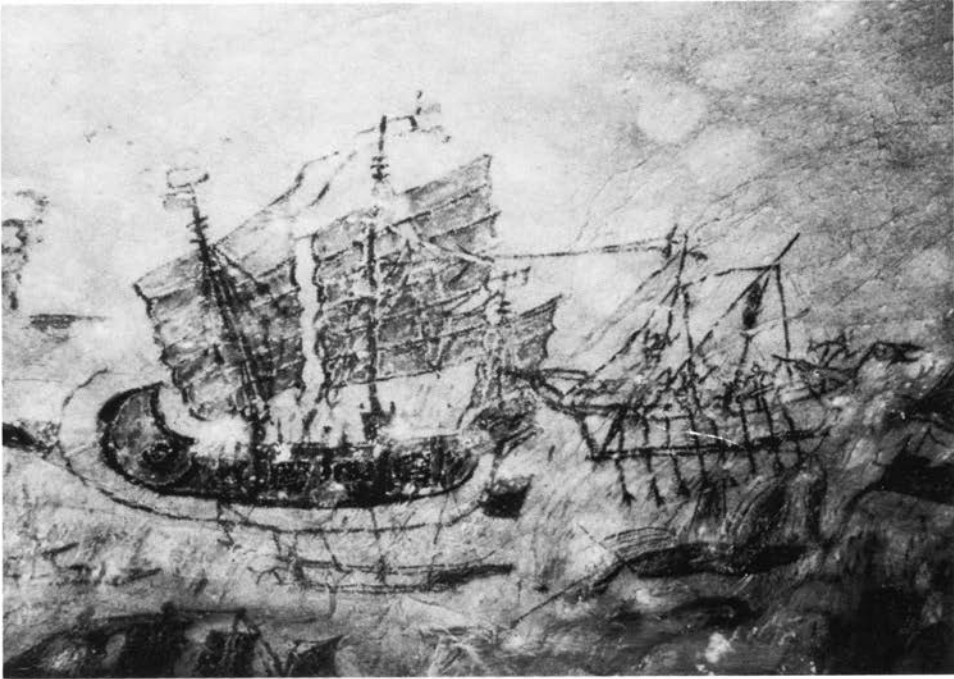
*Fig. 104*  
Ship painted in black-brown and ochre-orange on the wall in Swallow cave of Ko Phi Phi, South-Thailand. 500-900 A.D.

300m above sea level he found the 'Red Hand Rock', a smooth overhanging wall 42m high, covered in red handprints (both negative and positive) as well as human figures. All the handprints are 'right-handed'. Other discoveries of his were an anthropomorphic figure 18cm wide and 33cm high on the western part of the wall, and a second red figure more than 30cm high, plus 4 other representations of human beings about 5m in height. According to Kerr there were no legends concerning the paintings, yet the local natives claimed that they had always known of their existence, probably having passed on the knowledge orally through the generations.

The Thai-Danish Prehistoric Expedition to Western Thailand from 1960 to 1962 reported more rock art within the Tham Roob (Picture Cave). This cave and a nearby rock shelter are located at Khao Kiew on the upper reaches of the Mae Nam Kwae Noi (River Kwae), in the Kanchanaburi Province. A study of this site by Nielsen, Chin You-Diand Knuth, documents 'prehistoric' figures representing humans, elephants, reptiles, turtles, and abstract patterns, all executed in various shades of red.

During research work in the caves of Thailand between 1973 and 1978, I. Staber and H. Kusch reinvestigated wall paintings that were originally discovered by Lajonquierè in 1912. These paintings occur in a shallow cave at the foot of Khao Kien ('The Mountain of Paintings'), near the fishing village of Ko Pannyi in Phangnga Province, Southern Thailand. Dark reddish-brown silhouette figures are spread over a 4m length of one wall in detailed naturalistic and geometric style. These paintings have been badly weathered.

Examination by boat of the precipice behind Khao Kien revealed further vestiges of rock paintings within grooves. The colour and style of these paintings is identical to those in the above-mentioned cave, but they have been



destroyed to such an extent by weathering that individual figures could not be identified.

Further drawings were found in the Swallow Cave on Ko Phi Phi island in the Changwat Krabi, Southern Thailand (approx. 50km. southeast of Phuket

A third rock art discovery was made in the Tham Mae Pim cave of the Changwat Ratchaburi, Western Thailand. Three very simple figures were noted; an outlined human hand, two straight parallel lines with a zig-zag pattern between them (a snake) and a figure which might represent a human body. The age of the paintings is unknown.

Island in the Straits of Malacca). The cave measures 80 x 115m and contains a 20m section of rock paintings at a height of 1-2m. They consist mainly of representations of various ships, and with one exception, all were done in coal. A large orange-brown figure of a three-masted outrigger is of major interest, because it is similar to those which have been found on a stone relief in the Borobodur Temple at Java (800 A.D.) and on a stele in Eksar, Southern India (900 A.D.). These types of ships were once used in intensive sea trade between India and the islands of Southeast Asia, and thus their presence as paintings could possibly indicate the course of early sea routes in the 5th and 9th Centuries A.D. Other coal drawings on the walls and ceiling of the cave show hunting and fighting scenes plus representations of horses and a pig.

In 1966 four caves were found in the Changwat Ratchaburi area that are decorated with relief and stucco figures (Tham Ruesie, Tham Chin, Tham Fa To and Tham Cham in Khao Ngu). Remnants of colours on the walls indicate that originally the entire cave had been painted. Such paintings in Western Thailand are predominantly of the Dvaravati period (6th-9th Centuries A.D.).

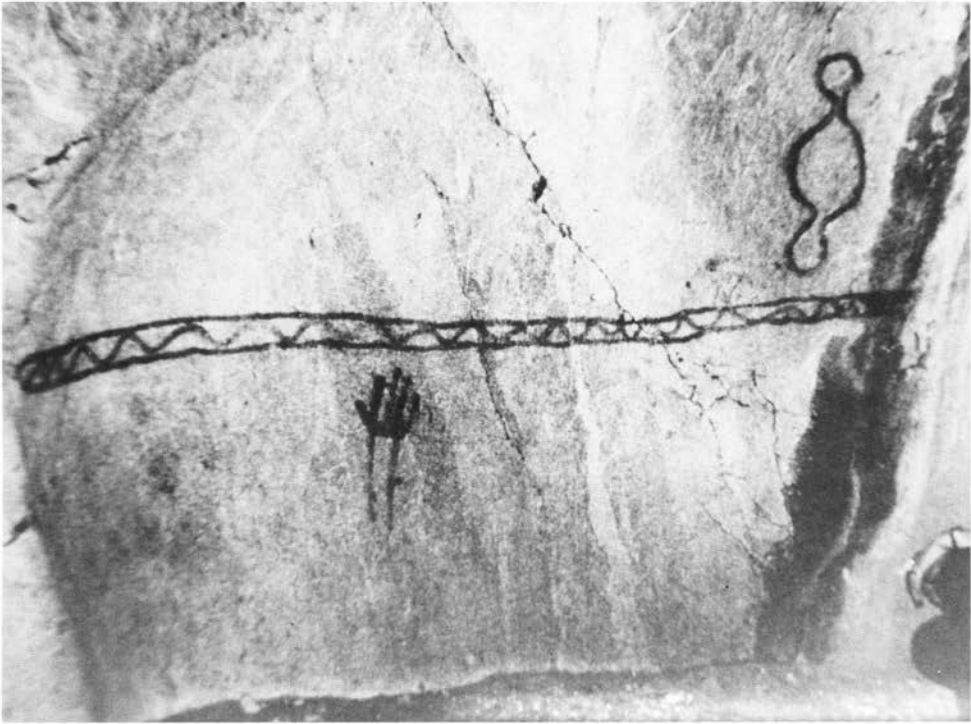
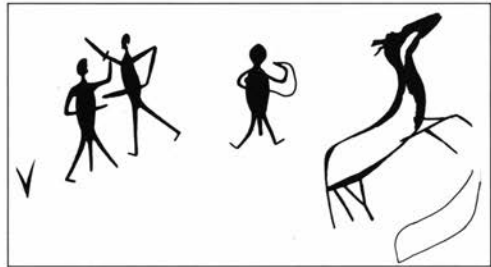


Fig. 105  
Drawings in Tham Mae Pim, Ratchaburi,  
West-Thailand. Human hand, two lines with a  
zig-zag pattern (snake?) and a figure (human  
body).

Fig. 106  
Rock drawings from Swallow cave of Ko Phi  
Phi, Changwat Krabi, South-Thailand. Left,  
a fighting scene; right, a warrior with horse.



About 100km further south, Staber and Kusch located another temple cave (Tham Rong in Changwat Petchaburi). This also contains evidence that the interior was once painted. A stucco-relief is present near the entrance and in the main cavern several Buddha statues made of rock were found. Traces of paint are clearly visible on them.

Other paintings and frescos were noted in the Changwat Nakhon Si Thammarat in Southern Thailand. In the Tham Taksin cave, paintings of unknown origin were found. To the south the Tham Slipa cave in the Changwa Yala contains frescoes of the Srivijaya period depicting religious scenes. These frescoes have been partly damaged by vandalism.

### *Burma*

The paintings of the Padah-Lin Caves in the southwestern Shan Highlands of Burma are among the most important discoveries of Southeast Asian rock art. Following the initial discovery in 1960 by U Khin Maung Kyaw, an expedition was carried out in 1969 by the Archaeological Service of Rangoon under U Aung Thaw. The two caves at this site are situated on a mountain spur near a jungle path leading from Nyaunggyat to Yebock village. Excavations at the entrance to the Great Padah-Lin Cave provided few



findings but in the Little Padah-Lin Cave, about 200m away, paintings 3 to 4m in height were found, covered by a translucent Layer of sinter. Poor preservation did not prevent recognition of 12 different figures; two human hands, a sun symbol, wild cattle and stags, as well as an unidentified motif. Carbon-14 dating of stone tools and ceramic shards present in the cave sediments gave an age of 11,000 years which corresponds to the Mesolithic-Early Neolithic transition. Thus by association, these rather isolated rock paintings were attributed to the Hoabinhian period.

In summary, most of the rock art sites discussed are situated on the South-east Asian mainland and on the island of the Sunda Archipelago, but a correlation between artistic styles exists at only a few localities. Because of the great chronological differences and physical distances of these sites, a detailed classification of style and execution techniques must await more complete documentation.

*Résumé:* L'auteur présente une vue d'ensemble des connaissances sur l'art rupestre du sud-est asiatique. La plupart des sites d'art rupestre sont situés sur la partie continentale de l'Asie du Sud-Est et sur les îles de l'archipel de Sunda, pourtant l'on ne trouve une corrélation dans les styles que dans quelques rares localités. Compte tenu des grandes différences dans les périodes et les espaces proposés en ces sites, une classification des styles et des techniques d'exécutions exige une documentation plus complète.

*Riassunto:* L'autore presenta una visione di insieme delle attuali conoscenze sull'arte rupestre del sud-est asiatico. I siti sono concentrati nella parte continentale e nelle isole dell'arcipelago della Sonda. Solo raramente si trovano delle correlazioni stilistiche e tipologiche. Tenendo conto della grande varietà tematica e delle notevoli differenze cronologiche e ambientali, una classificazione stilistica e tecnica dovrà attendere la disponibilità di una documentazione più completa.

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