# The Prehistoric Rock Art of Bhimbetka, Central India

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*Introduction*

The popular image of Prehistoric or Stone Age man still continues to a great extent to be "nasty, brutish and short" as the French thinker, Rousseau, imagined it two centuries ago. This may be true of the earlier stages of man's biological and cultural evolution. But, as early as 50,000 years ago, men, who were indistinguishable from us in physical appearance, brain size and intelligence, had colonised most of the Old World. Nothing illustrates so clearly their close kinship with us than their art—painting, engraving and sculpture—the earliest available manifestation of which is dated *circa* 30,000 years ago in Western Europe. Indeed so strikingly modern is this art that when the paintings of Altamira in Spain were first discovered exactly a hundred years ago, they were dismissed by several distinguished scholars as modern forgeries. But subsequent discoveries and critical scrutiny soon convinced the sceptics of the genuineness and antiquity of this art. In the last hundred years Prehistoric Art—mostly paintings and engravings and also sculpture—has been discovered in many areas of the Old as well as New World. The richest areas of Prehistoric Art are Western Europe, Sahara, South Africa, Australia and India.

*Discovery of rock paintings in India*

It is a matter of some pride for us that the earliest discovery of Prehistoric Art was made in India. In the winter of 1867-68, A. C. L. Carlleyle, an assistant to General A. L. Cunningham, the first Director-General of the newly-founded Archaeological Survey of India, discovered cave paintings in the hilly and forested country of what are now the Mirzapur district of Uttar Pradesh and the Rewa district of Madhya Pradesh. He also excavated cave floors and found evidence of human habitation in the form of chipped stone implements, animal bones, ash, charcoal, human burials, and pieces of haematite or *geru*. These last had smooth facets produced by grinding them, obviously for obtaining pigment for the creation of paintings. Correlating the evidence from the excavations with the paintings on the cave walls, Carlleyle argued that the paintings illustrated "in a very stiff and archaic manner scenes in the life of the ancient stone chippers." Carlleyle was thus not only the first individual to discover rock paintings but also to argue convincingly for their Stone Age antiquity.[1]

In subsequent decades amateur archaeologists like John Cockburn, C. W. Anderson and C. A. Silberrad discovered rock paintings at several places in Central India, and F. Fawcett discovered engravings in Kerala. In spite of these propitious beginnings, the study of rock art was by and large ignored by professional archaeologists, and the situation remains, on the whole, unchanged even today. There are several possible reasons for this.

One is, without doubt, the difficulty of access to rock paintings since they are usually located in hilly and forested country away from the regular routes of communication and inhabited by dangerous wild animals and insects. The second is the difficulty of dating the paintings and providing them a historical chronology. The third is the lack of variety of the kind of cultural material one expects to find in an archaeological excavation.

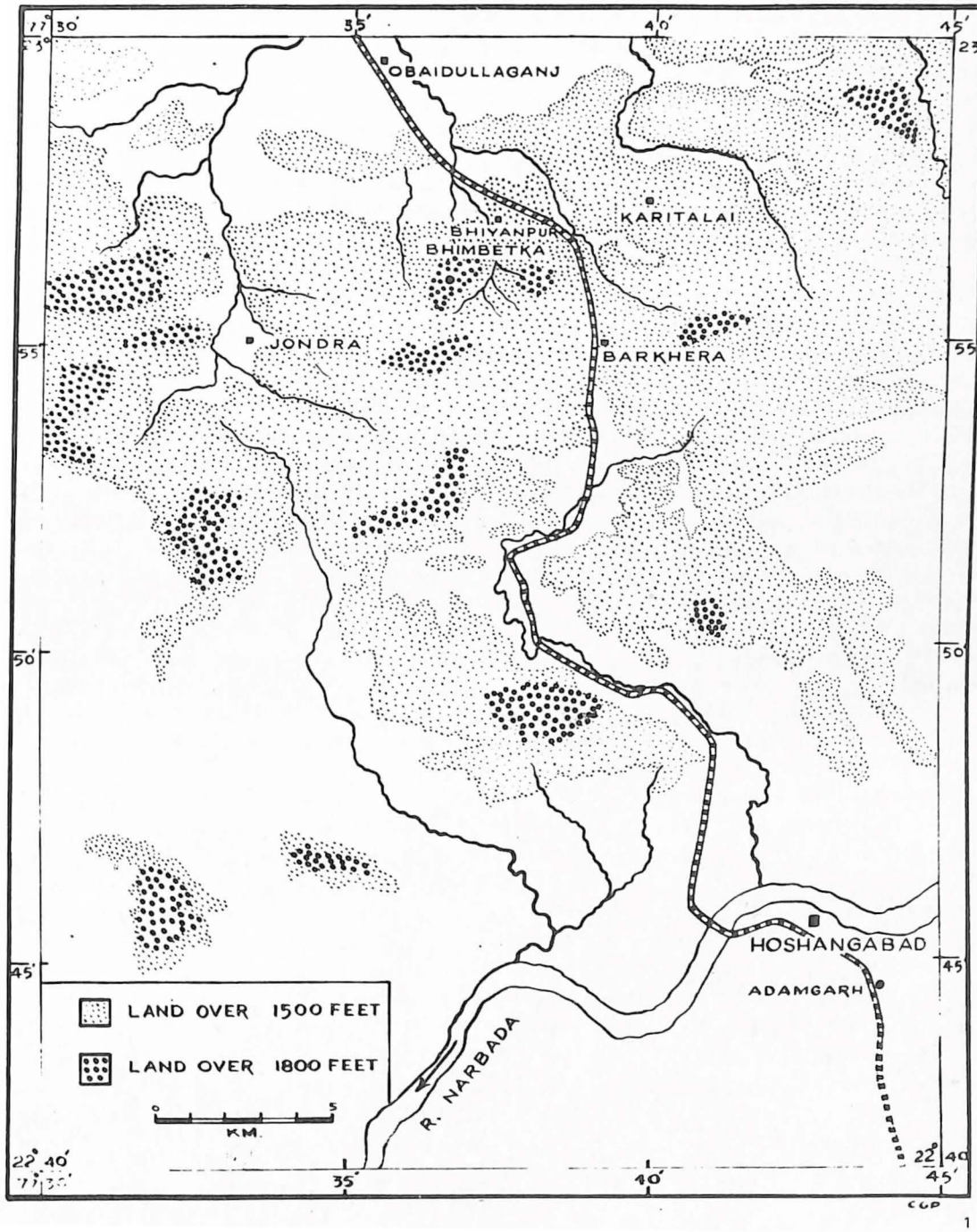
In the present century Manoranjan Ghosh[2] and D. H. Gordon[3] studied the rock paintings of Hoshangabad and Pachmarhi, respectively in the thirties and forties. During the last three decades, V. S. Wakankar has contributed more than any other worker to the discovery of new rock painting sites.[4] Other names that deserve mention in this field are B. Allchin, F. R. Allchin, R. K. Varma, S. K. Pandey, J. Jacobson, E. Neumeyer and Y. Mathpal.[5]

*Geographical distribution of rock art*

In the last few years the antiquity of Prehistoric Art in India has been pushed to about 20,000 years ago. This early age consists of incised ostrich egg shells from Patne in the Dhule district of Maharashtra and a bone human figurine from Belan valley in the Allahabad district of Uttar Pradesh. The main body of Prehistoric Art in India, however, consists of cave paintings. The vast majority of these paintings are to be found in Central India — mainly Madhya Pradesh and also the adjoining areas of Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan. Isolated paintings are to be found in Karnataka, Kerala and the Uttar Pradesh Himalayas. The reason for the concentration of paintings in Central India is purely geological. The Vindhyan rocks in this part of the country are formed of sandstone which, being a soft rock, weathers easily under the impact of temperature fluctuations, rain and wind. During the course of several hundred million years of geological time, these rocks have weathered to form several thousand shelters and caves, ranging from small hollows in rock walls to large subterranean caves. These shelters provided ideal habitation places for Stone Age hunter-gatherers. Central India also receives adequate rain, has several perennial rivers, and a dense vegetation cover. Its forests contain a great variety of trees and plants with edible wild fruit, seeds, flowers, roots and tubers, and plentiful game. Ecologically, the region was richly endowed for supporting populations based on hunting-gathering economy, and archaeological research shows that it has been densely inhabited by such communities for at least two hundred thousand years. The descendants of these prehistoric peoples are to be found among the tribal communities of today who still retain an element of hunting-gathering in their economy. It is for this historical reason that Central India has the largest concentration of tribal population in the country.

*Location of Bhimbetka and its environment*

There are a number of concentrations of painted rock shelters in Central India, mainly in the districts of Hoshangabad, Raisen, Bhopal, Sagar, Chatarpur, Mandasaur and Rewa in Madhya Pradesh and Mirzapur in Uttar Pradesh. However, the richest site of Prehistoric Art not only in Central India but in the country as a whole is Bhimbetka in the Raisen district of Madhya Pradesh. Bhimbetka (77° 37' E : 22° 50' N) is the name of a hill about two kilometres south-west of the village of Bhiyanpur, which is situated

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45 km. south of Bhopal and 30 km. north of Hoshangabad. Both the highway and the railway line between these two towns run by the side of the village. The hill itself is now connected to the village by a tarred road and is, therefore, easily accessible. The site was discovered in 1957 by V. S. Wakankar but it did not become known to the public until 1973 when the Deccan College, Pune, and the Vikram University, Ujjain, initiated a large-

scale excavation of habitation deposits in the shelters and brought the wealth of rock paintings to the notice of the general public and scientific community through articles in the popular press and in scientific journals.[6,7] During this period Yashodhar Mathpal made a comprehensive and scientific study of the paintings on Bhimbetka hill for a Ph.D. degree from Pune University.[8] During the course of our excavations at the site, from 1973 to 1977, thousands of people from Bhopal and elsewhere visited the place to see the rock paintings. The site is now fairly well-known in India as well as outside, and is being developed as a major tourist centre by the Madhya Pradesh Government.

The Bhimbetka hill is prominent in the local landscape because of a long and high quartzite ridge that tops it. Erosion during geological time has broken the ridge into several discrete monolithic rocks. Caves and shelters are located at the foot of these rocks as well as on the slopes of the hill. There are well over a hundred painted shelters on the Bhimbetka hill proper. But we use the word Bhimbetka now for a complex that includes six other hills in its vicinity (Vinayaka, Bhaunrewali, Lakhajuar East, Lakhajuar West, Jondra and Muni Babi ki Pahari) between the village of Kari Talai in the east and the Ubaidullaganj-Rehti Road in the west, in a stretch 10 km. in length. There are well over a thousand rock shelters on these hills of which more than five hundred contain paintings.

Bhimbetka and the other hills are fairly well covered with deciduous forest vegetation. The general setting is very picturesque and tranquil.

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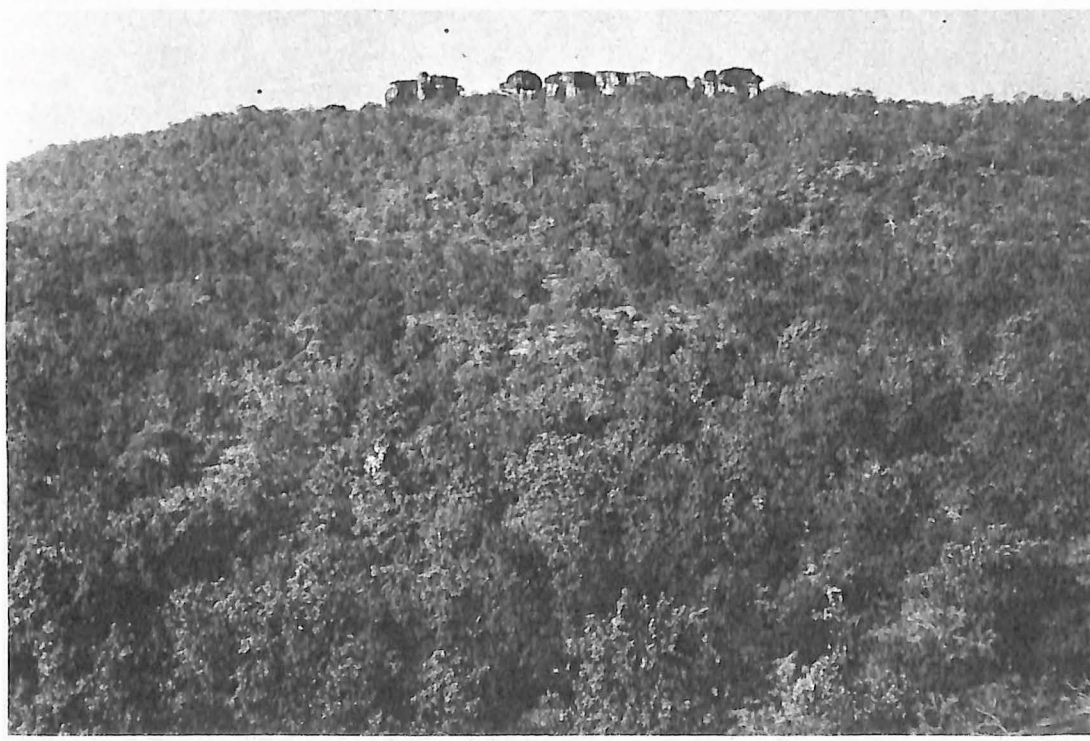

Human settlements consist of small hamlets and are located in the valley to the north-east of the hills. Their population mainly consists of the Gond, Pardhan and Korku tribes. The forest abounds in edible food materials which are extensively exploited by local inhabitants. Several species of wild animals like sambhar, nilgai, wild boar, sloth bear, langur and scaly anteater are found in the forest. There are several perennial springs in the area which are the only source of water for both human and animal populations. The area, therefore, has all the attractions for hunter-gatherer societies. Our excavations in several rock shelters have produced plentiful evidence to show that the shelters were occupied by man since Lower Palaeolithic times, more than 100,000 years ago, till the very end of the Stone Age about 2,000 years ago.

For purposes of study we have divided the rock shelters of Bhimbetka into eight groups (I-VIII) from east to west. In each group, clusters of shelters have been isolated and named in Roman letters (A, B, C etc.). Finally, individual shelters in each cluster have been numbered in Arabic numerals (1, 2, 3 etc.). This three-tiered number (for example, III F-23) has been put down in black Indian ink on an inner wall in every shelter.

*Location of paintings*

Paintings are found on cave walls and ceilings as well as in small hollows or niches formed by natural weathering of the rock. Most of them are located within a height of one or two metres from the cave floor where the artist could have executed them standing or sitting on the floor. But sometimes they are located at considerable heights and hazardous spots where the artist must have needed an artificial base to support himself during the activity of painting. No specific criterion seems to have been adopted in selecting surfaces for painting: broad and even surfaces are sometimes left unpainted while uneven and rough surfaces and corners bear paintings.

*Colour and background of the paintings*

Most of the paintings are in red or white colours but occasionally bluish green and yellowish colours have also been used. Green paintings appear to be the oldest since they are preserved only in fragments and occur at the base of the painting sequence. Many shades of red, ranging from scarlet through pale red to dark chocolate colours, are seen. The pigment was obtained from natural minerals. The main material used was haematite or *geru* which was easily available in local geological formations. Numerous nodules of haematite in more than twenty hues, with many of them having smooth facets produced by grinding them for pigment, have been found in habitation deposits during excavation. The pigment produced from these nodules was diluted with water or other substances like glue or animal fat. All paintings are made on the natural rock surface; never was the surface prepared by applying any artificial substance. This rock surface ranges from a light dusty through a light rose to a greyish colour.

*Technique of making paintings*

The paintings were made with thin brushes, probably made of twigs. Usually, and especially in the earlier phases, the animal and human body was

shown only in outline but sometimes the whole body was filled with colour. In the later stages, the animal body was decorated with geometric patterns like lattice designs and wavy lines. Even in the earliest paintings, a considerable mastery of drawing technique is seen as independent strokes merge imperceptibly into one another, and there is no distortion in the shape of the subject drawn. The animal and human figures are usually drawn in profile, and though scientifically the perspective is not always correct, the visual effect is quite convincing. Greater realism is shown in the depiction of animal figures than in the case of human figures which are almost always shown in a stick-shaped form. It is clear that the animals dominated the mind of the artists. This is not surprising since they were the most significant feature of prehistoric man's environment and life.

*Superimposition of paintings*

Quite often the artists of a later date executed their work on already painted surfaces. Thus we find younger paintings partially overlapping older paintings. While such a situation detracts from the aesthetic impact of the paintings, it is a boon to the archaeologist since it provides him with a stratigraphy of the paintings, and enables him to arrange them in a relative chronological sequence on the basis of their superimposition. Sometimes in a single shelter as many as five layers of paintings can be seen. Correlating the paintings of one shelter with those of others, on the basis of their position in superimposition, it has been possible to recognize as many as sixteen layers. All the paintings do not belong to a single time period or culture. Indeed, they were produced over a period of about ten thousand years, and, therefore, one can easily see changes in their style and subject-matter, as the way of life of men who produced them underwent change.

On the basis of superimposition, and the subject-matter and style of the paintings, they can be grouped into nine phases and three broad cultural periods. The paintings of Phases I-V belong to the Mesolithic period when the economy was based entirely on hunting and gathering. The paintings of Phases VII-IX belong to the Historical period when settled village and urban life was established in the region, and these paintings were produced under the influence of civilised life. The paintings of Phase VI belong to the transitional period when the hunter-gatherers had taken to domestication of animals under the impact of Chalcolithic agriculturists of the plains.

*Preservation of paintings*

The paintings are in varying states of preservation, depending upon their age and location. Younger paintings are naturally better preserved than older ones. Similarly, paintings which are more exposed to sun, rain and wind have suffered more than the paintings located in protected parts of the shelters. Rain water flowing down the walls of the shelters had partially or almost wholly washed away many paintings; others have been covered by a deposit of calcium carbonate which comes down in solution along with rain water and gets slowly deposited on cave walls. Some paintings have become so faded that they become visible only when the surface is moistened with water. Vandals visiting the caves disfigure the paintings by writing their names or producing scratchings with charcoal and stone.

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*Subject-matter and style of paintings*

The paintings of the two main cultural periods (Mesolithic or Prehistoric and Historic) differ markedly in their subject-matter and style. Those of the Prehistoric period are technically superior to, aesthetically more pleasing and ethnographically more informative than the paintings of

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the Historic period. Wild animals, hunting and fishing scenes, and food-gathering activities are the most common subjects of these paintings. Almost

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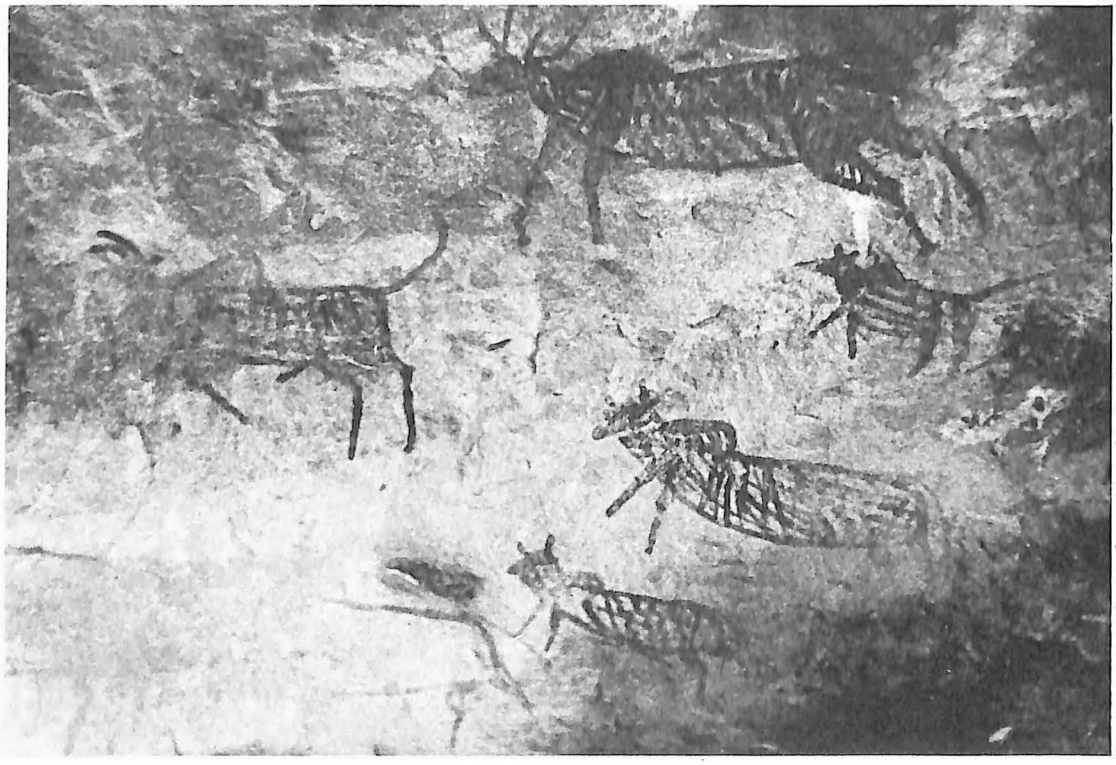


all major denizens of the forest are depicted. These include gaur (popularly but wrongly called bison), cattle, buffalo, elephant, rhinoceros, nilgai, black-buck, sambhar, chital, four-horned deer, boar, tiger, leopard, bear, fox, jackal and monkey. The sambhar, with their graceful antlers, dominate the animal world. The animals are shown standing, moving, running, grazing and being hunted. They are depicted individually as well as in large herds of up to fifty animals. In rock shelter III C-50 (Zoo Rock), a large flat ceiling, more than 8 m. in length and 5 m. in width, is almost completely filled with a forest of animals which include most of the species depicted in the Bhimbetka paintings. The size of the animals ranges from miniature figures of a few centimetres to life-size as well as more than life-size figures nearly 4 m. in length. The drawings are characterized by naturalism, vigour and correct rendering of the animal body. Pregnant cows are shown with the drawing of the calf in their stomach. The artists not only had accurate knowledge of animal anatomy but were also familiar with the animals' habits and movements. The depiction of animals in various postures and moods exhibits a deep emotional bond between the artist and his subject. Some of the miniature paintings, like that of a fawn grazing or of another looking back with its neck gracefully turned or a sambhar grazing happily but unaware of a hunter who has sneaked stealthily from behind and is poised to attack it with a spear, are eye-arresting.

The paintings also throw a wealth of light on the economic, technological, religious and social life of cave dwellers, and greatly supplement our knowledge derived from materials found in the excavations. We learn about a variety of techniques of hunting, trapping, fishing and collecting of wild

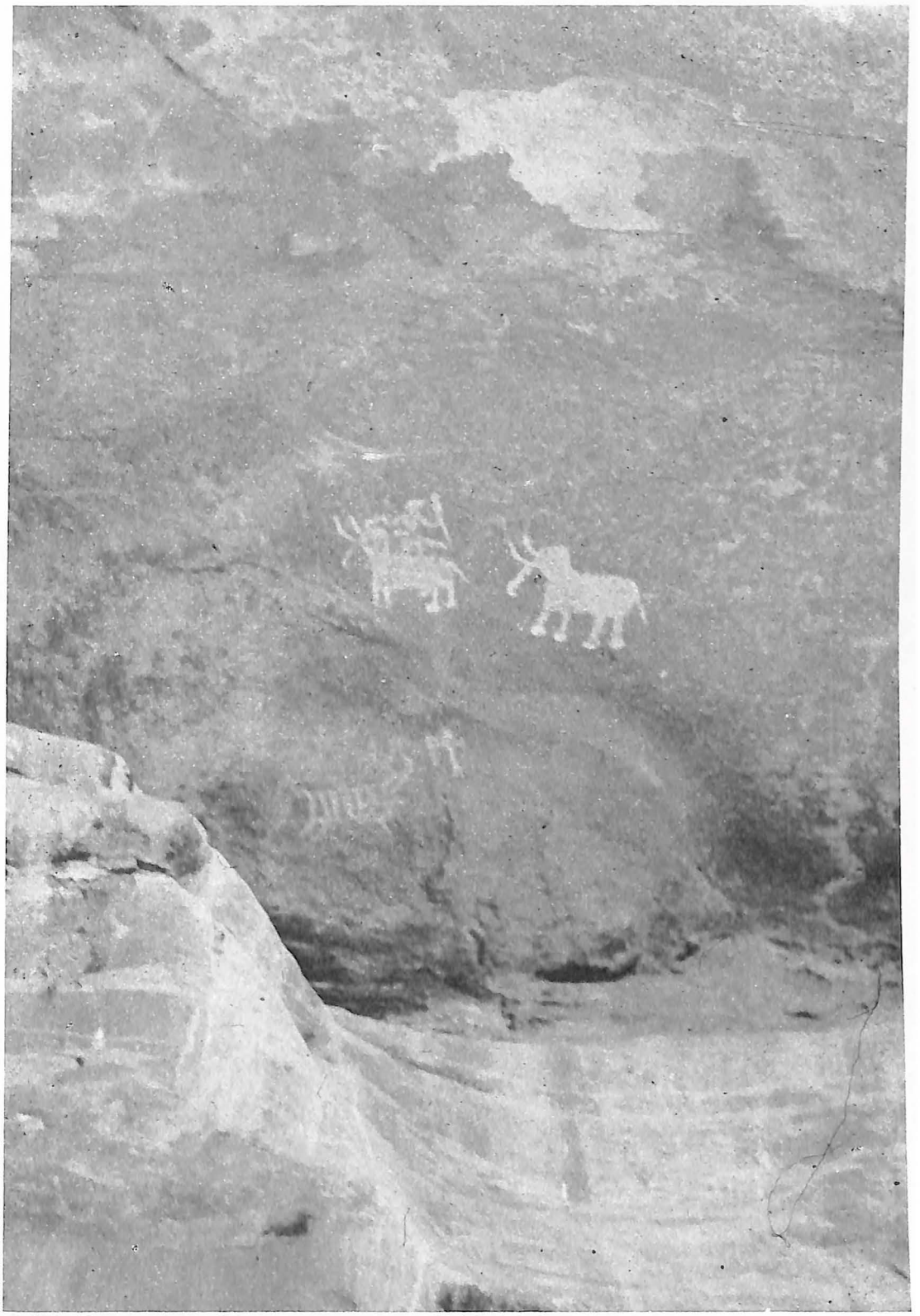
7

8

vegetable foods. In cave III C-21, a herd of animals, probably chital, is seen falling down a precipice. This probably represents a hunting technique, already known from Upper Palaeolithic in Europe, in which animals were herded together and then stampeded down a steep cliff to meet a mass death. In several paintings, men are seen hunting individual animals or groups of animals with spears or arrows, the ends of which are tipped and barbed with stone points. In other scenes, women are shown digging out rats from holes and trapping them. There are scenes showing men and women climbing trees with baskets suspended on their backs for collecting flowers, fruits and honey. There are also scenes of trapping of birds and fish. Fish of many kinds and sizes are also shown purely as artistic creations. Our knowledge of the use of traps, baskets and projectile stone points by Mesolithic man is derived solely from rock paintings.

In several cases the animal drawings are not just simple portrayals of the animal world and its many moods, but are a medium to tell a mythological or religious tale. For example, in shelter III F-19 (or Bull Rock), a large animal is shown, with its body filled by a wash of red colour and having an enormous face like that of a boar, the horns of a bull and its hair raised on the back. This unnatural animal seems to be attacking a small fleeing human figure in front of which is shown a large crab. This is probably a mythological scene and the large boar or bull is perhaps a deified animal. The same scene, on a slightly reduced and modified scale, is also shown in two other paintings. Other large drawings of bulls and buffaloes with their terrifying or awe-inspiring faces seem to depict venerated animals.

In one case, a man is shown pouring a drink into his mouth from a pitcher. There are several scenes of dancing, where men and women are



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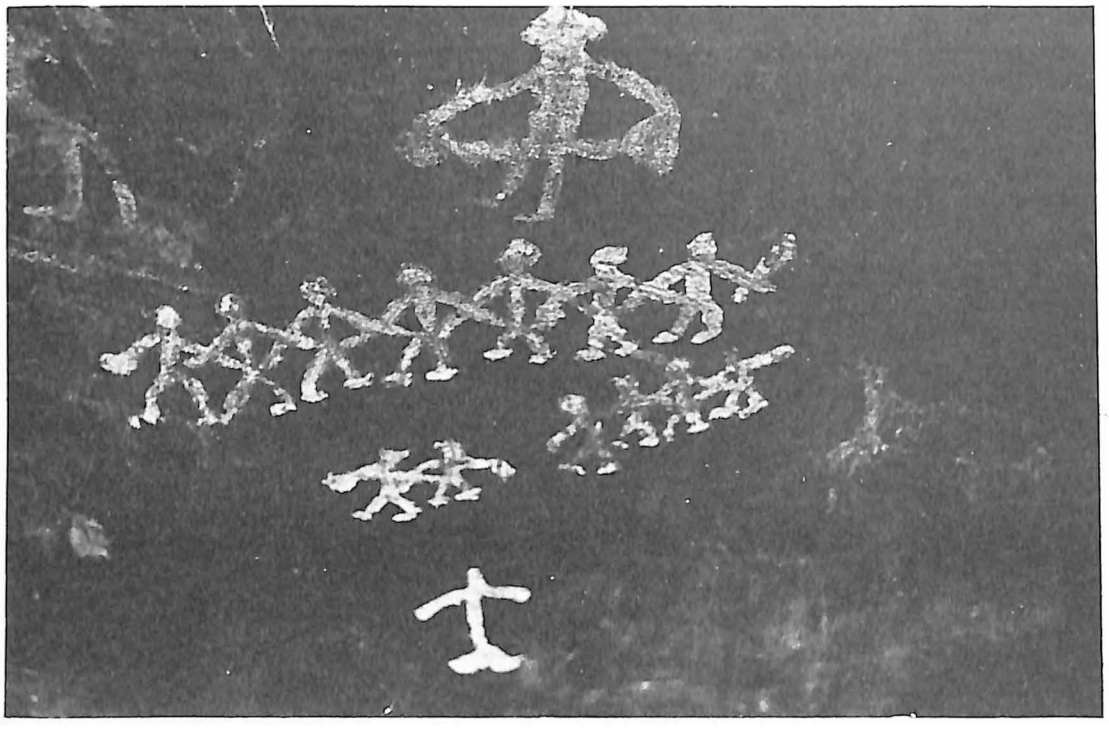
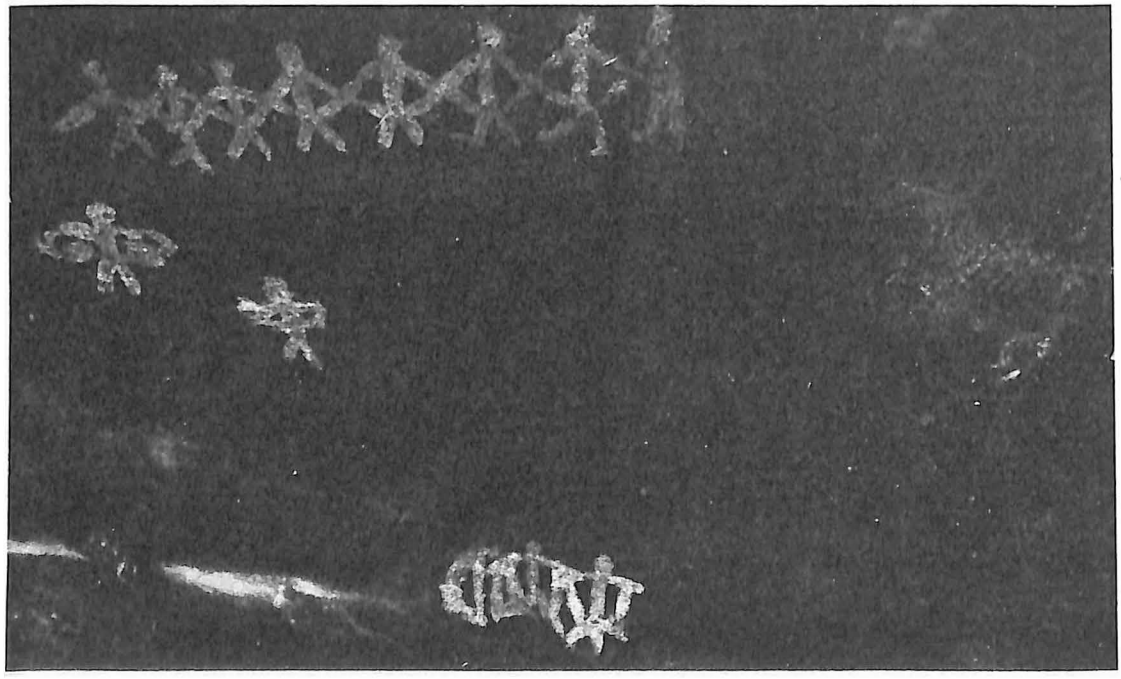
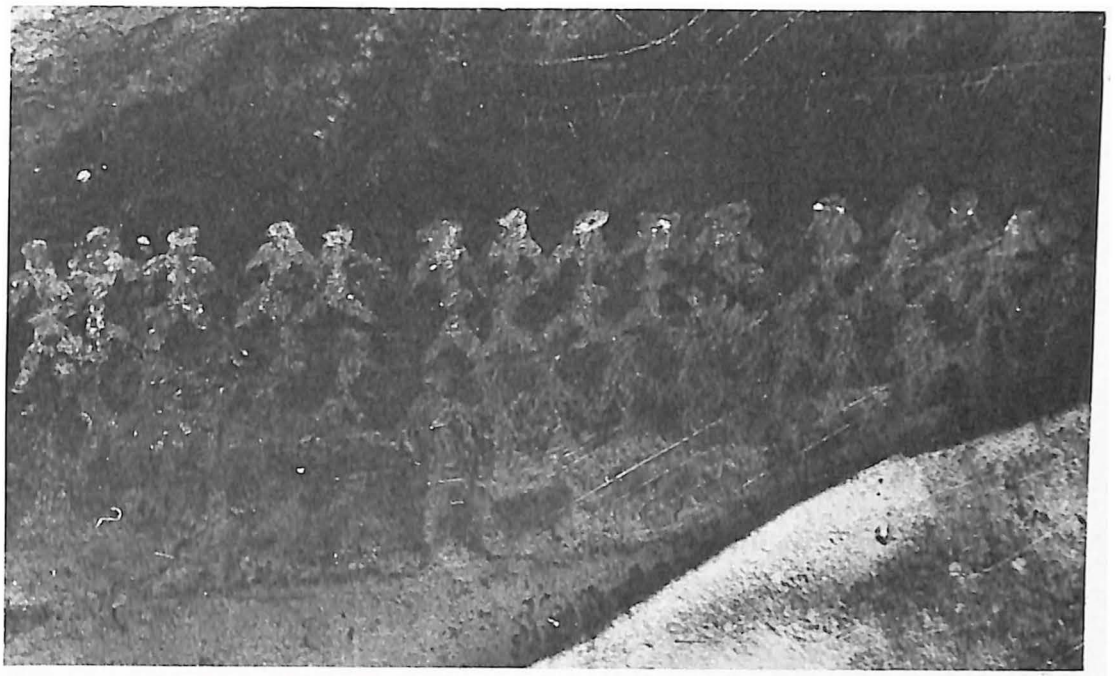


engaged in a group dance, with their arms intertwined, and a drummer is shown beating on his instrument. In another scene, a family is seen huddled together over what appears to be the corpse of a child, as if in mourning. There are also scenes of sexual intercourse and of pregnant women. Men and

11





12

women are usually shown wearing a loin-cloth with tassels. During hunting expeditions men are often shown wearing masks.

This early art of Bhimbetka is characterized by its closeness to nature, dominance of animal figures and hunting scenes, naturalism and vitality of the animal body and representations of various aspects of the hunting-gathering way of life. The portrayal of the animal body shows considerable mastery of technique and attention to the various postures and moods of the animal. In contrast the human body — both male and female — is usually shown in a stick-like form and is carelessly drawn. In a few paintings, however, women are shown with full body and breasts. It is clear that the paintings known to us are too mature as works of art to be the first manifestation of man's artistic urge. Obviously, there must be older paintings which are either yet to be discovered or have completely disappeared. But even the known paintings take back the antiquity of art in India by several thousand years beyond the art of the historic civilizations. They also constitute a valuable source for our knowledge of the natural environment and human life of Stone Age society.

The paintings of the transitional period or Phase VI are limited in number. They belong to the stage when the hunter-gatherer society had begun to receive economic, technological and artistic influences from the settled Chalcolithic farmers of the Betwa plains. Domestication of animals had been added to the hunting and gathering economy. Men are seen grazing animals and calling the herds. The impact of the geometric motifs of Chalcolithic pottery designs is seen in the decoration of the animal body. Intricate designs like lattices, zigzags, wavy lines and spirals are extensively employed to decorate the animal's body.

13

The paintings of Phases VII-IX are quite numerous but decadent in quality. They are very often superimposed over the older, prehistoric paintings. Their subject-matter, for the most part, consists of royal processions, battle scenes, men riding caparisoned horses and elephants and weilding metal-tipped spears, bows and arrows, swords and shields, and of dancing scenes. There are also depictions of Hindu religious motifs and geometric patterns. Wild animals, on the other hand, virtually disappear from the artist's repertoire. There is a considerable and steady decline in the portrayal of the animal body which is drawn in a disproportionate and distorted form. Horses are sometimes shown with such elongated necks as to be mistaken for giraffes. In each succeeding phase, the drawings tend to be more and more stylized till in the end the horses are portrayed simply as semi-circles, with necks and legs appended to them. Clearly this art was not close to the life of the artists. It had no genuine inspiration behind it; instead it was simply the product of a ritualistic repetition of a tradition, much like the folk art of rural India today. Indeed, this art is quite close in theme and style to presentday tribal art. By this time the artists were no longer living in caves. Instead, they had adopted the agricultural way of life and descended from the hills to live in the plains below. By this time rural and urban life was securely established in the fertile plains of the Betwa valley. The tribal artists were witness to the royal processions and battles, and depicted those scenes in the caves in perpetuation of a continuing tradition of cave art. The last painting activity in the caves consists of the elongated characters of the Shankha or conch shell script datable to the sixth-seventh centuries A.D. While this script always overlies the paintings, in no case are the paintings seen to overlie it.

*Motivation behind rock paintings*

It is not easy to delve into the mind of Prehistoric Man, but from circumstantial evidence one can draw some inferences about the motivation behind his art. The paintings are not always restricted to the caves inhabited by Prehistoric Man; on the contrary, some of the most profusely painted caves are those which have no or little traces of human habitation. It can, therefore, be safely asserted that the paintings were not created to decorate or beautify living places. Again, many paintings have superimpositions of later paintings over them which mar the visual and aesthetic appeal of both older and younger creations. Thus the artist was not always interested in seeing his creations being admired by fellow beings. Several of the paintings are clearly mythological or religious in nature. Shelters containing them might have served as holy places or shrines for the initiation of young members of the community into magico-religious beliefs and rites — a practice common in many tribal societies. Other paintings may simply be the product of the creative urge of artistically gifted individuals in the society.

*Dating of paintings*

The dating of paintings is a very difficult task for two reasons. First, they are not stratified in the manner of archaeological data buried under the earth's surface. Secondly, they are not associated with the kind of organic and other materials which are amenable to physical dating methods. We can, however, try to form some idea of their age with the help of the contents of the paintings themselves and by correlating them with archaeological evidence found in the excavation of cave floors formed by human habitation. The paintings of Phases VII-IX clearly belong to the period between 500 B.C. and 1,000 A.D. though some of them might be even later. The caparisoned horses and elephants, metal-tipped spears and arrows, swords and shields, battle scenes and royal processions all belong to a period when urban life was well-established in the area and use of iron had become common. The archaeological and historical evidence shows that this pattern of life was not established much earlier than the middle of the first millennium B.C. The paintings of Phase VI which show the influence of Chalcolithic economy and pottery designs obviously belong to the second millennium and early first millennium B.C.

The paintings of Phases I to V ante-date the second millennium B.C. and the earliest among them may well go back to 10,000 years before our time, if not earlier. For one thing, their subject-matter clearly represents a hunting-gathering way of life; there is no indication in them of agriculture or domestication or village life. They are truly Prehistoric in character. The presence of numerous haematite nodules with tell-tale evidence of ground surfaces in the excavated Mesolithic levels of the shelters abundantly shows that painting activity was vigorously carried on in this period. The paintings of Phases I-V can, therefore, be assigned to this phase. We now have a number of radiocarbon dates from Mesolithic deposits at Bhimbetka. The earliest of these dates go back to *circa* 8,000 years before our time. At least some of the paintings are, therefore, certainly 8,000 years old. But there is every likelihood that some of the Mesolithic deposits for which we have as yet no radiocarbon dates or which are yet to be excavated are considerably older, and there may be contemporaneous paintings.

The Prehistoric art of Bhimbetka and other sites in Central India is our earliest known art. It is not the heritage of a particular community, race or religion. It belongs to a stage of cultural evolution when the ancestors of all peoples in our country were leading a hunting-gathering way of life. It is, therefore, the common heritage of the entire Indian society. In the advanced countries of Western Europe, in South Africa and Australia their Prehistoric art is receiving considerable attention by way of appreciation, recording, publication and preservation. In India, largely due to factors which are also responsible for the neglect and damage to later and better known art, Prehistoric art has yet to find its due place in our aesthetic and historical consciousness.

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## List of Illustrations

1. Map of Bhimbetka area
2. Forest setting
3. Zoo Rock (III C-50)
4. Elephant legs superimposed over buffalo's head, and part of horse-rider superimposed over elephant's trunk (II E-2)
5. Panther, elephant-rider and other figures (II E-21)
6. Cattle (II E-8)
7. Buffalo and other animals (III C-21)
8. Bewildered animals (III C-50)
9. Elephant-riders (Historic period) (III F-23)
10. Dancers (III C-48)
11. Dancers (III C-48)
12. Dancers (III E-19)
13. Marching soldiers (Late period) (III B-20)