

OUT OF INDIA? THE WORLD'S EARLIEST ROCK ART

Robert G. Bednarik introduces his latest fieldwork that sensationally pushes the emergence of art back from the established 33,000 years old to c. 200,000 before present.

According to the current textbooks of archaeology, evidence of art-like production extends back to about 33,000 years ago. This supposedly earliest art includes the most sophisticated Upper Palaeolithic material, such as at the Chauvet Cave in the French Ardèche. The implausibility of art exploding onto the scene in such complex form is explained away by the replacement of the resident Neanderthal people by African 'moderns' flooding Europe at that time.

But there are several unexplained factors in this genocidal hypothesis. First of all we should take into account the absence of any such art wherever these hypothetical Africans came from or along any route they could have taken. There is also a lack of any skeletal evidence of moderns in Europe from that period. It is also noteworthy that there is a continuation of Neanderthal features in many specimens from subsequent periods and, indeed, among modern Europeans. Archaeologists toiling in central and eastern Europe also claim to perceive clear cultural continuity from the Middle to the Upper Palaeolithic in their regions. It is curious that more rock art has survived from Middle Palaeolithic traditions than from those of the succeeding Upper Palaeolithic,

particularly in Australia. The profound effects of the Campanian Ignimbrite Eruption on much of Europe (c. 39,000 to 41,000 years ago) should be taken into account, as should the complete lack of any Upper Palaeolithic tools from northern Africa until well after the claimed 'invasion'. Finally, it should be borne in mind that there is a lack of any other evidence for this African incursion, other than disputed genetic claims.

One even more compelling factor is that the presumed lack of preceding art traditions is illusory. Not only do these traditions continue down through the Middle Palaeolithic in four continents, but in rare cases they can even be traced back to Lower Palaeolithic times. Such controversial finds, which severely contradict current archaeological dogma, include portable engravings from Bulgaria, France, Germany, and South Africa; proto-sculptures from Israel and Morocco; beads from Austria, England, France, and Libya; manuports from China, England, India, Morocco, and South Africa; and evidence of the use of red pigment from the Czech Republic, France, India, Kenya, South Africa, Spain, and Zambia. Rock art of the Lower Palaeolithic period, which ended between 180,000 and 140,000 years ago, has remained elusive until

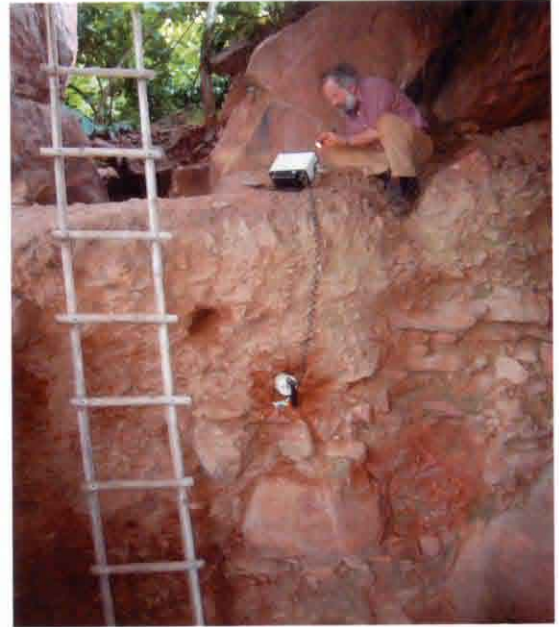


Fig 1. The author conducting optically stimulated luminescence dating at Bhimbetka, near Bhopal, in India.

Fig 2 (below). The author conducting gamma spectrometry for optically stimulated luminescence dating at the base of the Bhimbetka excavation, 3.5m below floor level in Acheulian strata (c. 150,000 to 200,000 years old).



Fig 3 (below). Part of the southern wall of Daraki-Chattan, showing some of the almost 550 cupules (cup marks) in the cave. These date from the Acheulian period.

Fig 4 (bottom right). The entrance of Daraki-Chattan cave, with excavation in the foreground. Excavated deposits contained stone tools and cupules (cup marks) from 20,000 to 200,000 years old.



recently despite tantalising clues about its existence reported from the mouth of the Blind River in South Africa over 70 years ago. However, this has now changed with sensational discoveries in central India.

I presented the first of these extraordinary claims in 1993, after finding two petroglyphs in an excavated trench where they had been covered by Acheulian occupation deposits, as well as by more recent strata. This was in Auditorium Cave, the central site of the Bhimbetka rock art complex near Bhopal (Figs 1-2), which has now been added to the World Heritage List. Within a few years, Dr Giriraj Kumar reported a second site of very similar characteristics, also in central India. Like the Bhimbetka Cave, Daraki-Chattan, near Bhanpura (Figs 3-5) is also in particularly hard quartzite, which in both cases has been quarried to make stone tools. Carved into this highly weathering-resistant rock are hundreds of cupules, or cup marks, which are perhaps the most ubiquitous form of petroglyphs in the world (Figs 3, 5). They have been made in all periods up to the Iron Age and even in medieval times, but they also constitute the oldest rock art in every continent. For instance, in Europe the oldest known rock art are the 18 cupules found on the underside of a limestone slab placed over the grave of a Neanderthal child in the French cave La Ferrassie. But while this burial dates from the Middle Palaeolithic, the Indian petroglyphs, now numbering almost 550, appeared to be of the Acheulian, a Lower Palaeolithic stone tool tradition.

To test this extraordinary claim I formed an international commission of several archaeometrists and archaeologists to investigate these two sites as well as a few others yielding similar material, such as Bajanibhat, a quartzite rock shelter near Kotapatli in Rajasthan. This commission proceeded to excavate the entrance deposits of the Daraki-Chattan Cave in 2001 (Fig 4). A year later, the excavation yielded its first spectacular results. The team uncovered a whole series of exfoliated wall panel fragments from the floor deposit, which means that the time of their detachment is reflected in the age of the sediment in which they were found. Obviously the cupules must be significantly older than that. The hunt was now on for clues to the age of these deposits, which were found to contain a large number of typical Acheulian tools, such as handaxes and cleavers. A series of soil samples from the entire stratigraphy was subjected to optically stimulated luminescence analysis. This method can determine when the individual grains in sediment were last exposed to daylight. This is achieved by precision measurements of

the background gamma radiation within the soil and a determination of how much energy has been trapped over time within defects in the crystal lattice of the sand grains.

The initial set of results showed that the uppermost stratum in Daraki-Chattan was around 20,000 years old, and a layer concealing most of the exfoliated wall fragments with petroglyphs was formed 106,000 years ago. The rock slabs fell from the wall much earlier and the cupules on them had to have been made earlier again.

The next sensational find was a block of rock well below this deposit bearing two abraded groove petroglyphs. Finally, a single cupule was found on a very large boulder at the base of the excavation concealed by up to a metre of Acheulian deposit. The conclusion was now inescapable: these deeply corroded and weathered petroglyphs certainly are of the Lower Palaeolithic. Their age remains to be determined with greater precision, but the most likely order of magnitude is 150,000 to 200,000 years ago - although an earlier date appears perfectly possible.

The implications from this appear paradigm changing: art-like productions were made five or ten times as long ago as the earliest listed in the textbooks. The truth, however, is that what we are finding at the Indian sites only confirms what we should have recognised long ago: that symbolic productions have been made by hominids for several hundred millennia. For instance, we have long known that the Acheulian people made and wore beads. This would be impossible to account for in the absence of symbolising, social complexity, an effective communication system, and conscious awareness of the self. Beads have no purpose other than as symbols: they convey complex social, economic, emblematic, ethnic, or ideological meanings, or any subtle combinations of these. That beads can be traced back at least 300,000 years, and probably much further, should have long been seen as an indication that these societies were of commensurate cultural complexity. There should, therefore, be nothing particularly perplexing about finding simple petroglyphs from more recent times - we should have expected it (Fig 6). Moreover, it should now be expected that we will go on finding more evidence of cognitive sophistication of early hominids.

Once again, the dominant model of archaeology has been false. Hominids of relatively modern behaviour did not suddenly arise in Africa and embark on a mass migration into Europe, wiping out the physically stronger and climatically much better adapted Neanderthals

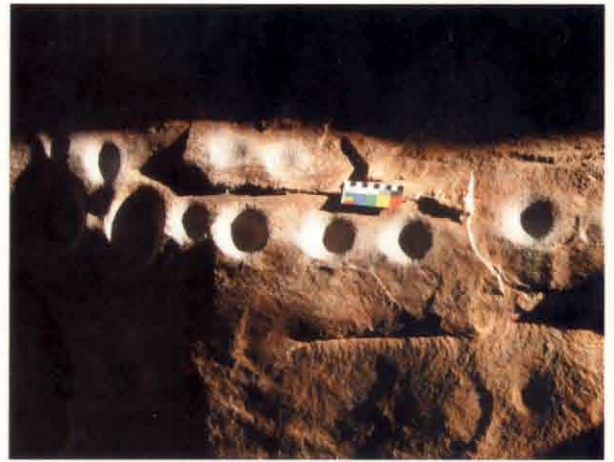


Fig 5 (above). Acheulian cupules on the wall of the quartzite cave, Daraki-Chattan, central India; about 150,000 to 200,000 years old.

Fig 6 (below). Cupules engraved onto an open site boulder at Ajmer, Rajasthan, are 12,000 years old.

in the process. There is no evidence that this occurred. But there is good evidence that cultural sophistication commenced very much earlier, and that it did not first appear in Europe. Evolutionary dynamics more likely focused on the central theatres in the human ascent, including southern Asia. The prospects of that part of the world having been central in the evolution of human cognition and culture are much better than those of Europe, a small appendage of Asia and perhaps a cul-de-sac in human development. Southern Asia was continuously occupied by hominids for at least two million years, and it is there that the most audacious early technologies developed, notably the practice of seafaring. Maritime navigation began there around a million years ago, leading to the occupation of various islands, while the use of fire facilitated the colonisation of cold regions such as northern China by what was essentially a creature of the tropics. Ice Age archaeology has failed to take these factors into account. Its dogma prefers invented armies of marauding Africans to the formulation of plausible and testable explanations of the human ascent. ▣

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