



BRIEF REPORTS

2002 progress report of the EIP Project

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The primary purpose of the Early Indian Petroglyphs (EIP) Project is to investigate extraordinary claims from India that imply that the earliest known rock art tradition in the world may have been found in that country (Bednarik 1993, 2000/01, 2001a, 2001b; Kumar 1995, 2000–2001: 49–68). If correct, certain archaic art traditions in India could be several times as old as the oldest previously dated rock art, that of the Upper Palaeolithic of France (dated to up to about 32 ka in Chauvet Cave; Clottes et al. 1995). The principal Indian sites in question are Auditorium Cave at Bhimbetka (near Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh), Daraki-Chattan (a recently discovered cave near Bhanpura, Madhya Pradesh), and Bajanibhat (a rockshelter near Kotaputli, Rajasthan). The first and second phases of fieldwork at these three sites, as well as other rock art sites in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, were completed in October 2002, having been commenced in April 2001. These include the preparatory fieldwork, excavation at Daraki-Chattan, and sample collection and scientific investigations for the dating of rock art.

Most importantly, the unexpected discovery of several decorated stone slabs in the excavation of the floor of Daraki-Chattan cave by Giriraj Kumar in May and June 2002 has been of immense value to this project, and to our understanding of the origins of palaeoart. Numerous pieces of decorated slabs were excavated by the end of the 2002 field campaign (Fig. 1), and the in-situ recovery of some of them has been witnessed by numerous scholars, including official observers from the Archaeological Survey of India. The associated stone artefacts represent a transitional phase from Lower Palaeolithic to Middle Palaeolithic typology.

The propositions of an extremely early cultural sophistication in southern Asian rock art are of the utmost importance to world archaeology, to hominid evolution and to profound questions of the origins of culture, cognition and art-producing human behaviour. Extraordinary claims deserve extraordinary care in their consideration and scientific testing, and it is the purpose of the EIP Project to conduct such testing. This project has assembled an international commission of senior scholars to review the claims made concerning early Indian petroglyphs (Bednarik 2001a, 2001b). It uses methods such as carbon isotope AMS analysis, optically stimulated luminescence (OSL) dating, microerosion analysis and archaeological excavation. The



Figure 1. Exfoliated quartzite fragment excavated in Daraki-Chattan, bearing two cupules. The central depression is a natural feature. This fragment was recovered from one of the actual OSL samples, having had to be removed to place the gamma spectrometer.

Commission intends to report its findings to the international research community during 2003.

Sampling at several sites of the Bhimbetka complex, at Daraki-Chattan, Raisen (north-east of Bhopal) and at sites at Chaturbhujnath in the Chambal valley has been completed successfully and the Commission is confident in resolving the issues it is investigating. It is also hopeful of determining the time-depth of human occupation of the region. This had so far evaded scientific definition but it is of great significance in exploring the appearance and duration of hominid presence in southern Asia. The Commission's sampling work has included the collection of sediments for OSL dating and sedimentary analyses at three sites (Daraki-Chattan in Chambal valley, and Misra's Shelter and Auditorium Cave at Bhimbetka), the collection of field radioactivity data for OSL dating, extensive sampling of mineral accretions and paint residues at numerous sites for ^{14}C dating, and the collection of microerosion data at three cupule sites in Rajasthan (Morajhari, Moda Bhata and Bajanibhat).

Subsequent to the core work in Madhya Pradesh, two members of the Commission (G. Kumar and R. G. Bednarik) travelled to Rajasthan to investigate several more putative very early petroglyph sites near Ajmer (Kumar 1998) and Kotaputli (Kumar and Sharma 1995). This led to the discovery of important new sites as well (Fig. 2). The EIP Commission has now concluded its fieldwork for this phase of the project, and processing of the numerous samples by a variety of analytical methods is commencing. Together with the results of extensive field observations, the information the Commission expects to be able to extract from this phase of the project is very substantial. The EIP Project

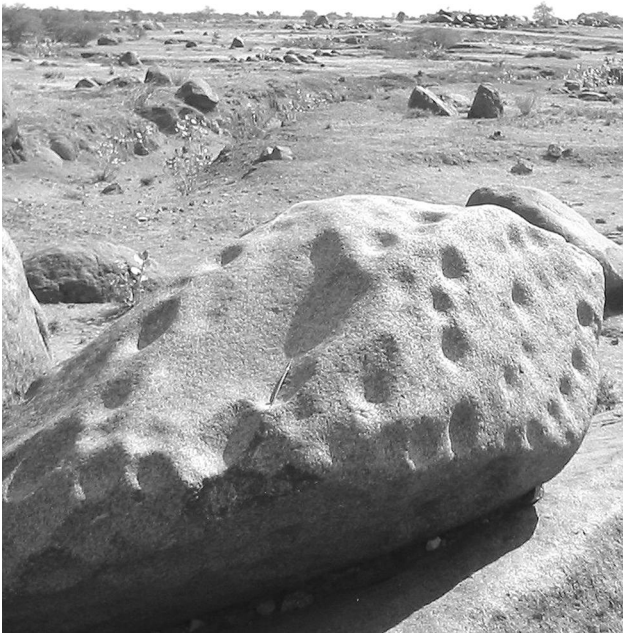


Figure 2. Cupule-covered gneissic boulder at Morajhari, an extensive cupule site near Ajmer, Rajasthan.

is already by far the most substantial program of rock art research ever undertaken in southern Asia, as well as one of the largest to address the region's Pleistocene archaeology. It is ultimately expected to yield the following tangible results:

1. Provide the first scientific datings for any Indian rock art;
2. Provide the first comprehensive dating sequences for Indian Palaeolithic cultures, especially the hitherto poorly defined Lower and Middle Palaeolithic successions;
3. Foster in-depth and long-term collaboration between Indian and Australian experts in various fields, such as AMS ^{14}C dating, rock art science and Pleistocene archaeology;
4. Focus international attention on the great importance of Indian Pleistocene archaeology within a global perspective of human evolution, and to examine the possibility that cognitive and technological evolution may have been centred in southern Asia rather than in Africa, where physical evolution is thought to primarily have taken place.

This project is a collaboration between RASI (Rock Art Society of India) and AURA (Australian Rock Art Research Association) under the auspices of IFRAO (International Federation of Rock Art Organisations). It enjoys the backing and collaboration of several research laboratories in Australia and numerous Indian scholars, and it has sub-

stantial support from the Archaeological Survey of India, the Indian Council of Historical Research and the Australia-India Council in Canberra. The EIP Commission thanks these and other Indian and Australian organisations, as well as many individuals, for their enthusiastic support and collaboration. We also thank here the government-appointed witnesses of all our sampling work, Dr Chaturvedi and Dr Rana Dy SA (C), ASI Agra and Indore respectively. In view of the profoundly successful completion of this crucial phase of our fieldwork, we are most confident that the eventual results we expect to produce will amply justify the support we have been given. This project is anticipated to result, within a very short time, in a massive increase in our knowledge of Indian rock art and Pleistocene archaeology.

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