

# The Rock Art of the Bhimbetka Area in India

## Introduction and recent history

Bhimbetka, in the Raisen District of Madhya Pradesh, right in the middle of India (see maps), is the best-known rock art area in the sub-continent, so much so that it rated UNESCO's World Heritage list in 2003. The Bhimbetka core area extends over 1892 hectares covering five hills within the Vindhyan Hills, named Vinayka, Bhonrawali, Bhimbetka, Lakhajuar east and Lakhajuar west. Only the Bhimbetka hill is easily accessible, and less than twenty painted shelters are daily opened to the public (Fig. 1).

Despite their obvious importance, the Bhimbetka rock art sites did not attract scientific attention before 1957. Dr Vishnu Shridhar Wakankar, their discoverer, used to say that, when travelling along the hills on a train, he noticed the spectacular sandstone rock formations along the ridge. He got fascinated by them and by their surrounding landscape. He got down from the train to explore and he thus discovered Bhimbetka! From that momentous time, he started studying the numerous painted shelters and he never stopped until his death in 1988. He published articles, research papers and books in which the Bhimbetka rock art and its archaeological context played a major part (Wakankar & Brooks 1976; Wakankar 2005).

Several archaeologists, among whom K.D. Vajpai, S.K. Pandey, V.N. Mishra, S. Haas, Y. Mathpal and Wakankar himself led excavations in about a dozen shelters. However, the rock art, after Wakankar, was mostly studied by Yashodar Mathpal (Mathpal 1984).

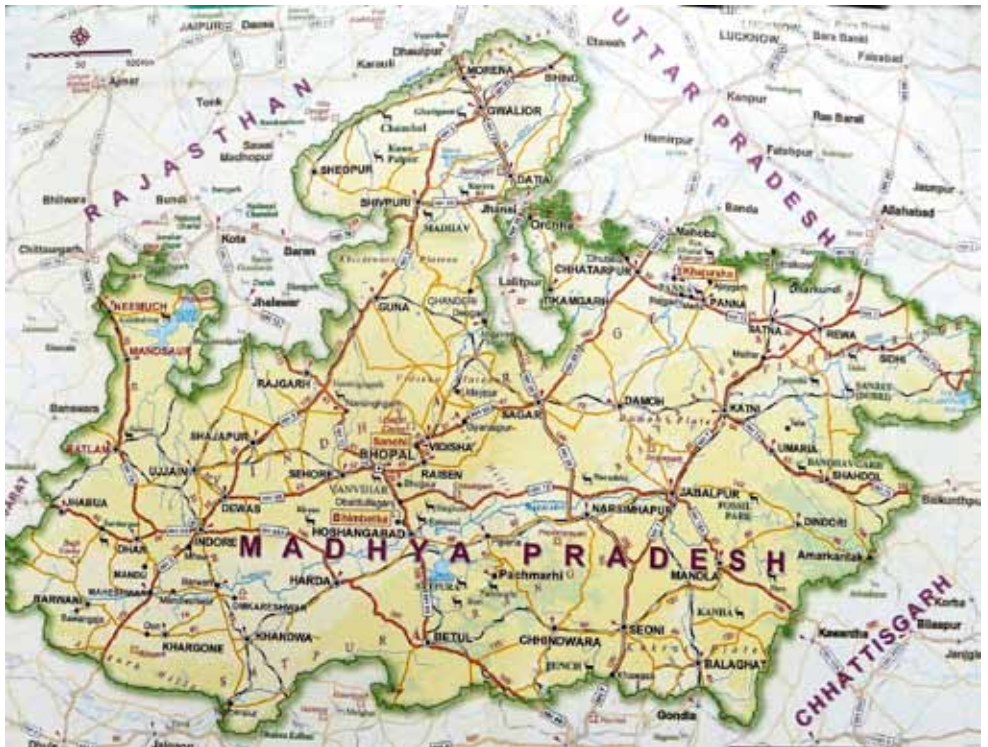


Map of India

The Archaeological Survey of India was instrumental in having Bhimbetka put on the World Heritage List in 2003.

## Presentation of the sites

The sandstone Vindhyan range is roughly 600 meters above sea level and 100 meters above the Deccan plain from which it stands out on the horizon. Even from several miles away, the Bhimbetka hills are prominent in the landscape with the big masses of rocks that crown them. It is obvious that the spectacular character of the place must have attracted people since the most remote times. Sandstone formations being prone to natu-



Map of Madhya Pradesh, showing Bhopal and Bhimbetka in the center.

ral erosion and weathering, the passage of time and the exposure to natural elements have led to the various shaped rock shelters as we know them now, with their unique natural architecture (Fig. 2).

The name Bhimbetka is a corruption of the Hindi word Bhimbaithka meaning seat or sitting place of Bhim, one of the Pandava's brothers. Bhima is either a hero or a deity to each of the several tribes inhabiting the hills and forests in the surrounding area (Mathpal 1984).

Twenty-one villages situated in the buffer zone of this area are largely peopled by Gonds and Pradhans. Many of the communities still continue their traditions and culture.

One can notice many archaeological remains in the Bhimbetka area. Near the Bhonrawali hills several circular structures are probably Buddhist stupas. And a few Ashokan Brahmi inscriptions have been

incised on the shelter walls. Probably Buddhist monks occupied this area in early historic times (300BC-100AD).

Near the Banganga spring in the same area can be seen Shiva temple ruins of the Parmara period (1000-1100 AD) (Fig. 3).

All this shows that the Bhimbetka painted shelters do not stand in isolation either archaeologically or culturally. They represent some moments in time that were preceded by long periods during which hunter-gatherers roamed the area and they were followed by continuations and changes in the habits of worship.

Bhimbetka is part of the Ratapani wildlife sanctuary. The area is rich in varied animal species, like tiger, panther, sloth bear, wolf, hyena, fox, jackal, swamp deer, antelope, blue bull, stag, porcupine, monkeys, hare, mongoose. In addition, reptiles are abundant: python, cobra, krait, viper, and monitor lizard. Many types of birds can



Fig. 1. Shelter III F-23, where some excavations took place, is an example of the shelters nowadays visited by the public.



Fig. 2. The Bhimbetka site provides many examples such as this one of unique natural architectures.

also be seen, like peafowl, blue kingfisher, doves, etc.

Overall the landscape has a strongly appealing aesthetic quality, derived from the beauty of the naturally sculpted rock formations and the contrasting lush and densely wooded vegetation.

Out of the five groups of hills, only that of Bhimbetka is easily accessible to the public. This is the third (III) group with shelters, which lies between the Bhonrawali hill and Lakhajuar (east).

Bhimbetka is divided into six groups (A to F). The total number of shelters in this area is 243, of which 133 contain paintings. They were determined, numbered and identified by Dr. V.S. Wakankar and Y. Mathpal.

## Management and Conservation

Less than twenty shelters are daily opened to the public, from morning to evening, all the year round. Pathways have been laid to get to the site (Fig. 4) and to facilitate an easy access to each of the shelters that can be visited. A few of the pathways have

even been paved. Each shelter is protected with railings (Fig. 1) that keep the tourists away from the painted walls but do not prevent them from taking photographs, as photography is allowed. Along the way, a number of discreet panels provide enough information for the visitors (Fig. 5a) who can also get simple free brochures (fig. 5b). Guards ensure the protection of site and also provide information to the public. On an average, more than 40,000 persons visit Bhimbetka per year.

To protect the ground from over erosion due to the passage of many thousands of visitors, the managers have incorporated a kind of green fabric net (to reduce the wind effect and the growth of weeds) into the superficial layer of laterite (iron and aluminum) or *murrum* road. These surfaces can vary considerably in size and in the proportion of stone to dirt and sand.

## The subjects represented

The subject matter in Bhimbetka is particularly rich, representing many aspects of





Fig. 3. In the Bhimbetka area one can see remains of ancient temples, such as this one devoted to Shiva near the Banganga Spring.

Fig. 4. Paved pathways provide an easy access to the shelters.

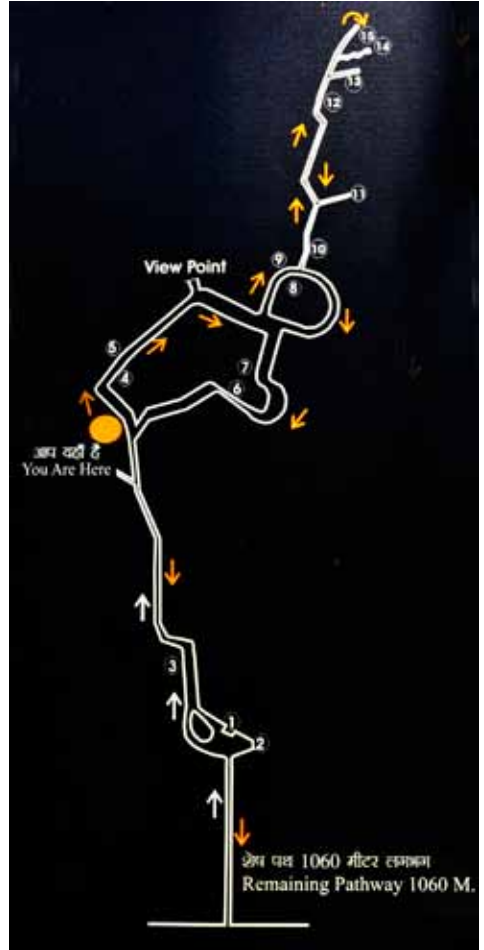


Fig. 5a. Information panels, clear and unobtrusive, line the pathways inside the main visited area.

life from early times to later periods, from hunting scenes to religious folk symbols. The subjects of the rock art have been classified into different categories, such as human figures (man, woman, indeterminate), animals (different species), scenes (hunting (Fig. 6), battle, music and dance, rituals and family), mythology, nature (Fig. 7), decoration and material culture.

According to Mathpal (1984) human figures total 2330. They have been divided into various sub-groups: man, woman, boy, girl, infant, anthropomorphic figure,



Fig. 5b. A box provides free brochures about Bhimbetka and its art.

hunter, horse rider, elephant rider (fig. 8), bull rider, soldier, attendant, drummer, man with axe, man engaged in other activities, drinking, dancing, copulation, masked man, ritual performers and mother goddess (includes pregnant women).

The total images of men are 2076, of women 71, of boys 24; girls are only 2 and children 6. Apart from them Mathpal registered 151 fragmented indeterminate figures.

There are less animal images than humans: 1377 in all, including wild and domestic animals (Fig. 9). They belong to about 29 species, with 3 lions, 15 tigers (fig. 10), 25 leopards or panthers, only 1 cheetah, 1 rhinoceros, 88 wild buffaloes, 2 bulls, 66 cows including 5 calves, 2 bison, 6 *neelgai* or blue bulls (*Boselaphus tagocamelus*), 29 *chinkara* (*Gazelle gazelle*), 1 black buck (*Antelope cervicapra*), 28 *sambhar* or stags (*Cervus unicolor*), 17 *barahsinga* or swamp

Fig. 6. On this complex panel of Shelter IIIc-21, a hunting scene is superimposed upon earlier images belonging to different periods and styles.







Fig. 7. Depictions of nature are rare. Here a tree with a bird sitting at top left has been painted in white in Shelter III C-29.

deer (*Cervus duvauceli*), 113 *chital* or spotted deer (*Axis axis*) among which 53 males, 55 does and 5 fawns, 3 barking deer or

Fig. 8. Battle Scenes abound at Bhimbetka, and may include elephant and horse riders, as well as soldiers armed with bow and arrows, lances, shields or swords.



*muntjac*, 17 goats, 1 sloth bear, 23 wild boar -including 5 images of mythical boar (three of them with horns)-, 1 hyena, 1 wolf, 21 dogs, 32 *langurs* (black face monkey), 1 monkey (*Macaca mulatta*) (with a red face). Among the 61 images of elephants, 36 of them with riders, only 11 are prehistoric, the rest of them belonging to later periods. 561 images of horses have been found and all belong to historic times. 510 of them, i.e. a large majority, are shown with their riders. More than 300 images of animals are unidentifiable. Rabbits and squirrels are also recorded, as are 13 images of small creatures, such as lizard, frog, fish, crab and scorpion (Fig. 10). Birds (Fig. 11) total 24 images with jungle fowl, peafowl (Fig. 12), spoonbill and magpie.

The compositions in Bhimbetka rock art are numerous. They comprise scenes of hunting, fighting, dancing and family life. We know 20 hunting scenes and 285 figures of hunters. We may stress the fact that nine of them show women as hunters.

Battle scenes and warriors belong to a late period of the rock art (Figs. 13, 14). They include 510 horse riders, 36 elephant riders, 49 pedestrians as attendants to the



Fig. 9. Shelter III C-50 is one of the most visited. It is popularly known as “Zoo Rock” because of the abundance of animal representations (see also Fig. 24).

riders and 377 identified soldiers, all armed with swords, scimitars, daggers, elongated and round shields, spears, battle-axes, bows and arrows; they may sometimes be shown wearing armour.

Dance and music are represented in cultural scenes. Generally, men and women are shown dancing together either arm in arm or in rows or circles (Fig. 15). Dancers (161) may be accompanied by drummers (14) (Fig. 16). Drums are associated with musicians, dancers and sometimes with marching soldiers (Fig. 13).

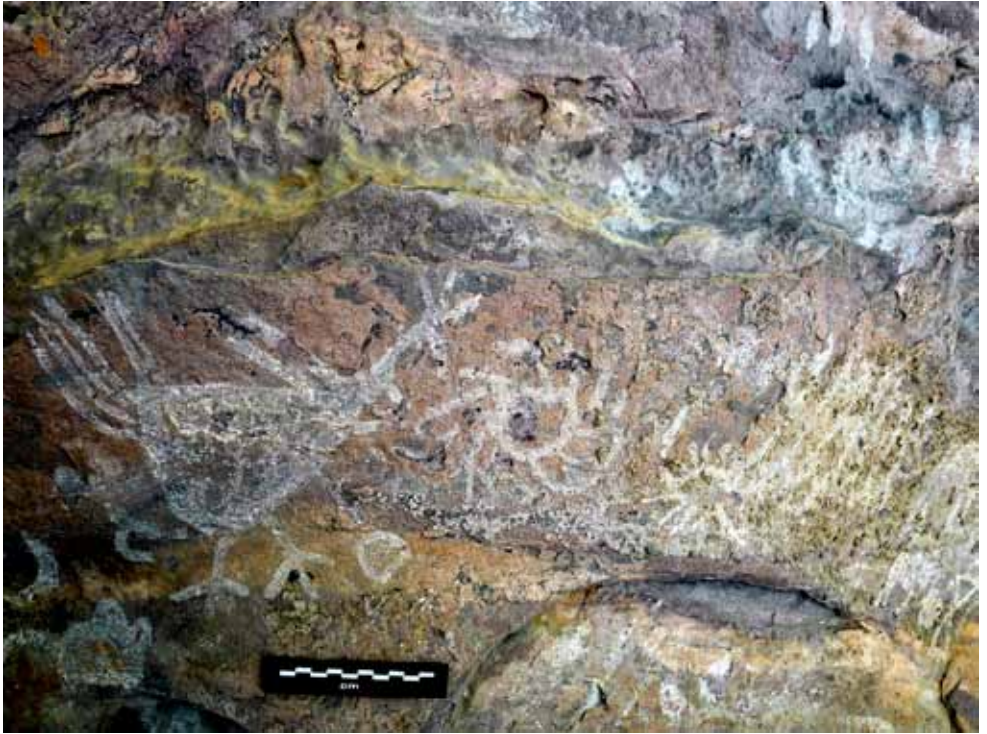
Family life scenes show a pregnant woman, 3 children of different ages, 4 masked boys running, 10 masked men running in a row, a couple in an erotic posture.

Mythical scenes show a few Puranic Hindu gods like Ganesh and Shiva and symbols like swastikas, Nandi (the sacred bull) and tridents.

Fig. 10. A famous Historic Period panel on top of a small shelter (III C-43) includes soldiers, dancers and various animals (tigers, peacocks, jungle fowls, scorpions). Image enhanced with D-Stretch.







*Fig. 11. Jungle fowl and symbols painted in white in Shelter III C-6. Historic.*

*Fig. 12. A pair of peacocks. Image enhanced with D-Stretch.*







*Fig. 13. Soldiers and horse rider accompanied by drummers. Historic. Shelter IIIc-50. Image enhanced with D-Stretch.*

*Fig. 14. Historic warriors and riders with different kinds of weapons. Shelter IIIc-50.*



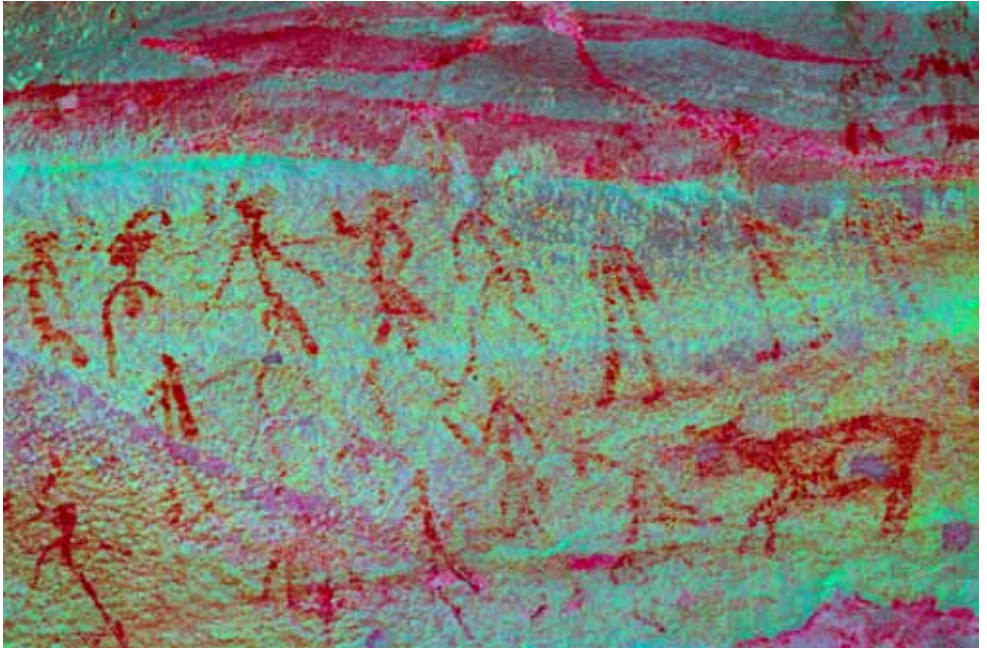


Fig. 15. Early Period dancers in red. Image enhanced with D-Stretch.

Fig. 16. Later Period dancers in white. Shelter III C-48.





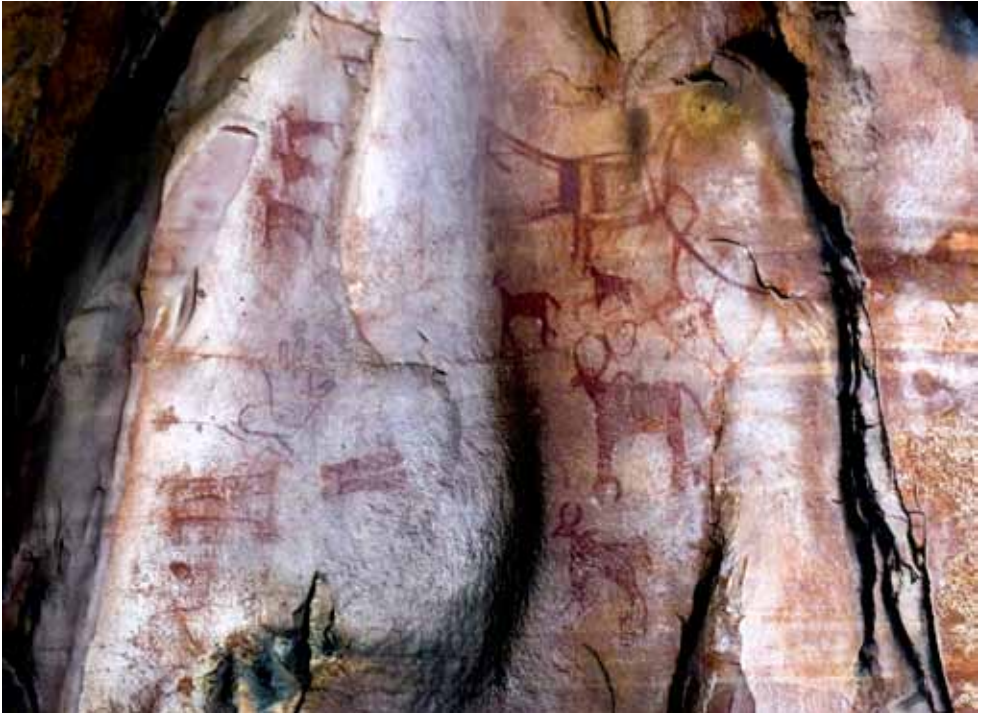


Fig. 17. Auditorium Rock, III F-24, with an outlined hand and animals.



Over all we know 222 hands (Fig. 17), most of them handprints, 15 of children and 207 of adult, 16 fist prints, 510 fingerprints and fingertip dots, wheels, lines, angular lines and patches of colour. A total of 584 abstract patterns have also been registered.

The representations of a mother goddess, ritual performers, bull riders and of mythical animals are strong indications of their mythological origin. The most spectacular mythical animal we know combines the characteristics of boar, ox and elephant. At the top of a spectacular shelter (fig. 18), it seems to be chasing a small masked man and a large crab (fig. 19). The size of the boar is 1.26 meters in length and 0.87 meter in width. The animal is surrounded by armed men, quite small compared to it. The Korkus, a local tribe, worship wild

Fig. 18. Shelter III C-19 is the most famous in Bhimbetka, because of the strange scene (see Fig. 19) painted at its top.



Fig. 19. Shelter III C-19. A mythical boar with horns seems to be chasing a human preceded by a crab. Other persons are below and above the animal. Mesolithic. Image enhanced with D-Stretch.

boar while another tribe, that of the Gonds, will sacrifice them during their yearly ritual (Mathpal 1984).

Items of the material culture in the rock art belong to different groups, like weapons (bows and arrows, spears (probably tipped with microliths), slings, sticks and traps), utensils (pots made out of hollowed out gourds -a kind of vegetable), baskets and leather bags), masks (12 types of mask were used), clothing (in the early periods of the rock art, men and women were shown naked but in later periods human images used to wear some kind of garments), ornaments (knee bands worn by both men and women hunters, head gear), musical instruments (drums), huts and tents (Fig. 20).

Inscriptions in caves and shelters are associated with monks and hermits living in isolation in early historic times. It is still a common practice in the many hilly and forested areas where they dwell (Fig. 21).

There are 56 inscriptions in white and red. 47 in *shankha* (conch) script, 7 in post-Gupta script and 2 in *Ashoka Brahmi* (king

Ashoka's time). 2 are engraved on the rock surface. Some inscriptions, in *Ashoka Brahmi* (300-100 BC), have been deciphered by Wakankar: "*Sihakasa Lene*" means the cave of *Sihakasa*. In the Gupta and Post-Gupta script (300-900 AD), *Pisach* is the name of a person. In Early Nagri Script (1000-1400 AD), *Kesavasya* means "belongs to *Keshav*" and *Trisul gota* "of the trident clan" (Wakankar & Brooks 1976).

## Techniques

No engravings have been found in the Bhimbetka area. The paintings may be made with three different techniques: - mixing the colour with a lot of water for it to be thin (transparent technique); - mixing the pigment, possibly of several colours, with water (opaque technique); - applying the pigment directly on the wall as with a crayon (crayon technique). In the early phases the first technique (transparent) was more common, even if the figures in green belonged to the second technique. The





*Fig. 20. Two Historic warriors are represented inside a tent in Shelter IIE-21 on the Bhonrawali Hill. Image enhanced with D-Stretch.*

*Fig. 21. Script dating to Post Gupta time in one of the shelters.*



paintings of the Historic period -dark crimson and dark red- are also non-transparent.

Out of 6214 images at Bhimbetka, 3319 (53.41%) are executed in transparent, 2803 (45.11%) opaque and 57 (0.92%) crayon techniques. 35 (0.52%) paintings were too badly fragmented to ascertain the technique used. 2 (0.04%) inscriptions were incised on the rock surface (Mathpal 1984).

## Styles

The Bhimbetka rock paintings have been divided into three main styles. Each was then subdivided into 12 sub-styles by Wakankar and then by Mathpal.

1. Representational or Naturalistic approach: silhouetted, decorative, partially filled, outlined natural styles (Fig. 22).

2. Geometric approach: silhouetted, decorative, partially filled, outlined geometric styles (Fig. 10).

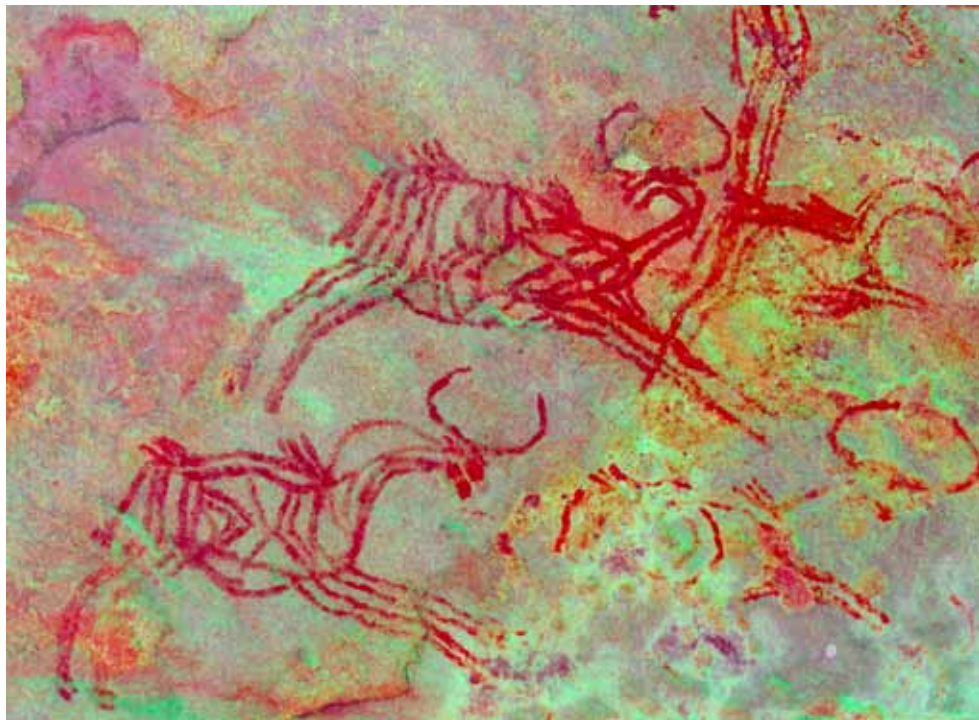
3. Abstract approach: silhouetted, decorative, partially filled, outlined styles.

At Bhimbetka, drawings of representational (2116 images, 34.03%) and abstract styles (2392 images, 38.49%) are more common than in the geometric style (1558 images, 25.07%). Out of 6066 images (excluding 56 inscriptions and 92 indeterminate drawings), 3487 (56.09%) images are silhouetted, 1684 (27.10%) are outlined drawings and the remaining 895 (14.40%) are semi silhouetted and partially decorated (Mathpal 1984).

## Dating/ Chronology

Wakankar, who discovered the largest number of rock paintings in India, proposed a chronology of Indian rock art between 1973 and 1976. He classified it into five periods and 20 styles (Wakankar & Brooks 1976: 34-60, 96-103):

Fig. 22. A few of the wild buffaloes on the run in Shelter III C-21. The inside of their bodies is filled with complex patterns. Mesolithic. Image enhanced with D-Stretch.





Period 1. Mesolithic or earlier (8000(?)-2500 BC). Styles 1-6.

Period 2. Neolithic/Chalcolithic and Early Iron Age (2500-300 BC). Styles 7-10.

Period 3. Early Historic (300BC-800 AD). Styles 11-16.

Period 4. Medieval (AD 800-1300). Styles 17-18.

Period 5. Recent (1300 AD-Present) Styles 19 and 20.

In addition, he dated green figures to the Upper Palaeolithic and placed them out of the present chronology (Fig. 23). The humans are stick figures engaged in very vivid activities, such a dancing and hunting of *Bos*. The rhythm of those scenes contrasts with what will follow and may suggest different motivations and purposes.

**Period 1** (Fig. 19). The drawings of *Style 1* are in very faint reddish, brown or dark brown colours, without outlines, and represent very large (2 to 8 feet long) single animals, such as elephant and bison, and no humans. *Style 2* depicts buffaloes and bison of considerable size in red outlines. In *Style 3*, animal images are in thick outlines and with partially filled and decorated bodies. Hunters are then shown chasing rhinoceros, bison, elephants and antelope. *Style 4* shows bison, deer and antelope, outlined and with non-geometric body infilling (x-ray style). *Style 5* includes body decoration and geometric patterns. *Style 6* depicts geometric and floral patterns in thin lines.

**Period 2** (Figs. 22, 24) starts with red and brown silhouetted drawings of bison, buffalo, elephant, blackbuck and monkeys in *Style 7*. *Style 8* shows red simple outlines of cattle, boar, jackal, deer and antelope. Thick and crude white drawings done with fin-

Fig. 23. Green paintings, like these dancers superimposed on older red figures have been ascribed to the end of the Palaeolithic. Bhonrawali Hill.





Fig. 24. Neolithic/Chalcolithic. Panel with numerous white animal figures. A man sitting at lower right is called *The Shaman*. "Zoo Rock" (Shelter III C-50).

gers can be seen in *Style 9*. *Style 10* shows white and off-white silhouettes of animals like tiger, ox and humans. Superimposed by Period 3.

**Period 3** (Figs. 13, 14) (*Styles 11-16*) covers 1100 years of early historic times. *Style 11* represents the Maurya and Shunga period. It shows symbols like swastika, hollow crosses and inscriptions. *Style 12* is dated to the Kushana period, with images very similar to Chalcolithic pottery designs. Horse and elephant riders in red and white outlines represent *Style 13*. Polychrome decorative patterns, *Gupta* and *Shankha* inscriptions belong to *Style 14*. Decorative designs with multicoloured patterns (red, white and yellow) characterize *Style 15*. Naturalistic human silhouettes depict social and cultural life and scenes of tribal conflicts in the post-Gupta period of *Style 16*.

**Period 4**, the latest one (Fig. 8), includes *Styles 17 to 20*. *Style 17* with red and white riders and soldiers. *Style 18*, with silhouette and linear images of elephants, horses and humans in vivid reds and whites. *Styles 19* and *20* represent geometric human figures and *devanagari* script.

A few cupules have been found under Acheulian archaeological levels in the Auditorium cave. If cupules can be assimilated to rock art, as many specialists think, these would be the earliest instances so far discovered in the world (Bednarik 1993:33-40).

### Excavations and the Archaeological Context

The first excavations took place in the Archer's cave, in 1967, on the western edge of the Bhimbetka hill. They were carried



out by Wakankar and Pandey. In 1969, Wakankar excavated Auditorium rock. The lowest layer gave Acheulian tools (hand axes, cleavers, a variety of scrapers, denticulates, knives, notches, flakes and blades). The middle layers yielded middle Palaeolithic quartzite sandstone tools, and the top layer, Mesolithic tools of fine-grained quartzite.

In 1972, Wakankar excavated a painted shelter (IIB-33). In the first layer he found microliths. In the second layer, also microliths but with Chalcolithic pottery and a copper pendant (an elongated oval in a copper sheet perforated at one end). He also found two pieces of haematite showing signs of having been rubbed at one end, and two beads probably of ostrich egg shells (Wakankar 2005: 344-346).

In 1973, two more shelters (IIIF-22 and 23) were dug up by V.N. Misra and Susan Hass. Shelter IIIF-23 had a very thick deposit (nearly 4 meters) with Lower, Middle, Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic layers.

The same year, Wakankar excavated shelters IIIA-28 to 31, and IIIF-24. He found a late Upper Palaeolithic skeleton of a child who had been ceremoniously buried (IIIA-28). It had a long bone pendant on the neck most probably painted before burial, a rubbed haematite fragment and the stone on which colour had been prepared, next to the skeleton. A round stone alignment protected the body. From the Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic deposits of all the excavations, green, red and white stones used for preparing colour were recovered. As green was not found in later layers, this is the reason why Wakankar assumed that green exclusively belonged to the late Palaeolithic or the early Mesolithic.

Other burials were also found. In one of them, the lower jaw of an elderly man -in his fifties- indicated the loss of first molar a long time before his death, but the tooth had been carefully preserved, perhaps in a leather bag, and buried with the dead. Two beads had been made with ostrich eggshells.

Snails and shells were found associated to various human remains (offerings as food for the dead?). Burials in extended and

crouched positions were both discovered in the Mesolithic. During Chalcolithic times extended positions were more common. The head was covered and cushioned by hand-made unevenly fired clay bowls. During Historic times, iron axes were buried with the dead and a vessel of water was placed near the head.

Some items of portable art such as ostrich shells, worked bones and pendants made with antlers were discovered from the Mesolithic onwards and not before, despite there being engraved ostrich shells in the Upper Palaeolithic at Patne (Maharashtra) dated to 25,000 BP  $\pm$  200 (Wakankar 2005: 70).

In Mesolithic times, a maximum number of shelters were occupied by humans. Haematite red pigments and rubbed stones found from the earliest Mesolithic phase suggest their use in the rock art in a ritual context. In the later periods, the appearance of copper tools and pottery (both painted and unpainted) shows contact between the Mesolithic people of the shelters and the Chalcolithic people of the plains. Iron tools, coins and early historic pottery in the uppermost layers indicate the persistence of the Mesolithic way of life into early historic life. *Sankha* script dates the later historic period from 600BC to 600-700AD.

The tradition is going on. The Vindhyan range has been considered sacred and suitable for the abode of hermits since very early times and it still is. In many of the Bhimbetka shelters we can see what remains of stone and mud walls; haematite and white clay also coat some cave walls indicating an occupation in recent times. In the paintings there are Hindu religious motifs and images of Shiva and Ganesha. Some drawings may have been made by hermits and monks after the 6-7<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, or maybe a few hundred years or decades ago. Even today a series of spectacular shelters at Bhimbetka are used as a temple for the Hindu Goddess Durga (Fig. 25). It is a very common practice in central India. Some of the painted shelters are still regarded as sacred by local Hindu villagers including the Gond and Korku tribes who go to them on special occasions in order to perform their



Fig. 25. An impressive temple devoted to the Goddess of Power Durga has been anciently built over some of the shelters.

rituals and ceremonies (Clottes & Dubey-Pathak 2011, 2013). From local testimonies we just recorded, a few decades back Gonds and Korku used to come to the Bhimbetka shelters to do the same.

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Fig. 26. From the Auditorium Cave, one leaves the Bhimbetka Hill and its shelters directly into the jungle.

*tribal dans le centre de l'Inde*, Errance, Arles (France).

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