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PLEISTOCENE ART OF THE WORLD

Short articles



INDIAN PLEISTOCENE ROCK ART IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

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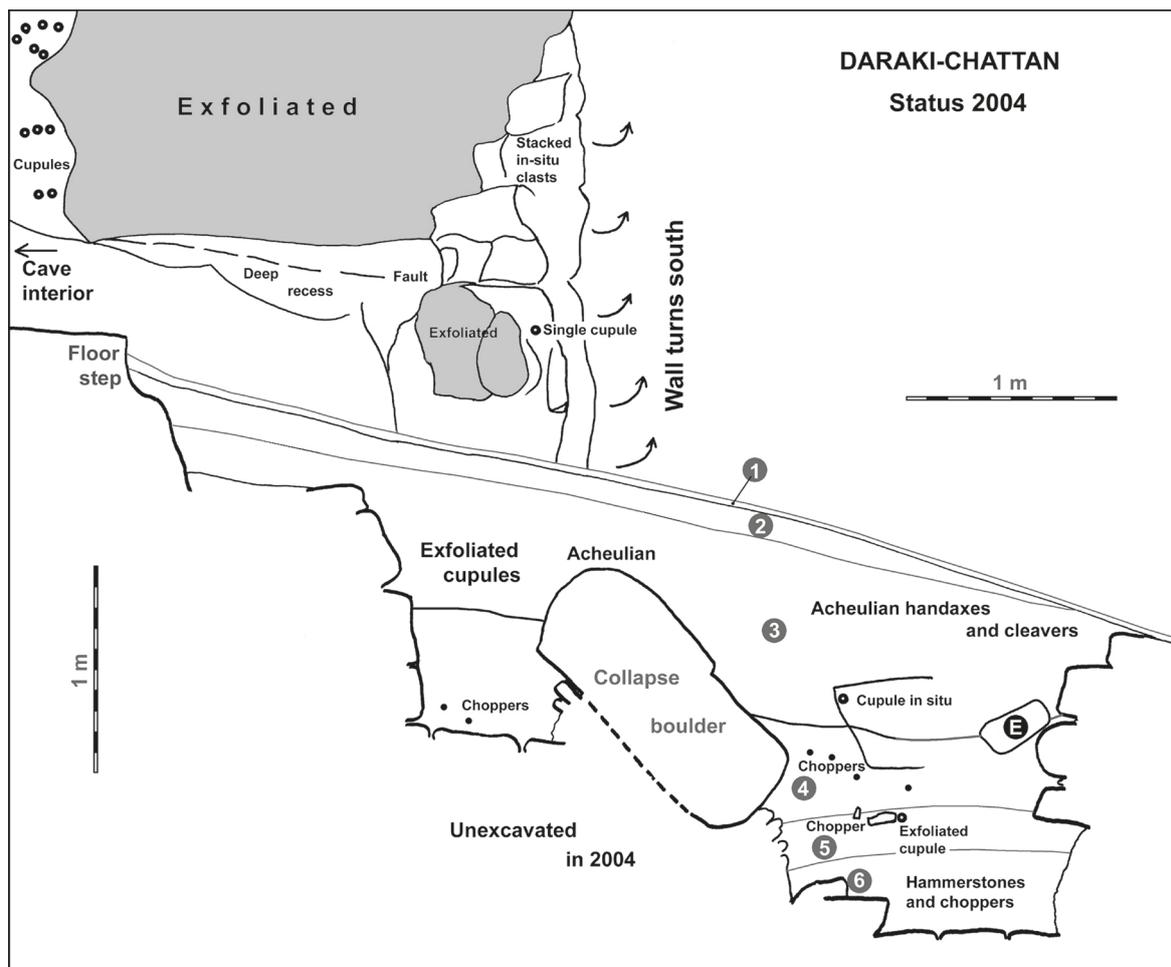
The incredibly early petroglyphs reported from central Indian quartzite caves immediately raise the issue of the compatibility of this information with our knowledge from the rest of the world. It is demonstrated that, with the exception of the presumably greater antiquity of the Indian finds, they are fully consistent with what five other continents have yielded. The Indian sites offer numerous cupules and a very few linear grooves; the oldest forms of rock art from Africa, Europe, Australia and the Americas comprise precisely the same forms of petroglyphs, and even the subsequent traditions are almost identical. This is demonstrated with the earliest known examples of rock art from those continents, and is partly attributed to the taphonomy of rock art. Rock paintings, similarly, are limited to regions where deep limestone caves were used by Pleistocene hominins, evidence for which is so far only available from two continents. Even the earliest known indications of portable palaeoart from India are entirely consistent with other parts of the world.

The first rock art ascribed to the Lower Palaeolithic were the eleven petroglyphs in Auditorium Cave, Bhimbetka complex, Madhya Pradesh, India. Within a few years of this proposal of 1992 it was validated through a newly discovered site, the quartzite cave Daraki-Chattan. In response to these discoveries, I established the Early Indian Petroglyphs (EIP) Project with Giriraj Kumar, with the intention of testing these claims by an international panel of specialists. As part of the EIP Project, major excavations were commenced at Bhimbetka and Daraki-Chattan in 2002. Kumar's excavation at the latter site uncovered numerous exfoliated wall fragments from the Lower Palaeolithic occupation deposit. These rock slabs bear a total of 28 cupules, identical to those on the walls above. Also, two engraved grooves were found on a boulder excavated in the Lower Palaeolithic deposit, and one cupule was encountered *in situ* in the excavation. Stone tools exhibiting Lower Palaeolithic characteristics occurred both above and together with these slabs, in deposits that are considered undisturbed. Numerous hammerstones used in the production of the cupules were recovered from the excavation, mostly from the layer below the exfoliated wall fragments, which contained only chopping tools and was free of bifaces. There can be no reasonable doubt that the cupules, or at least some of them, were made by people of a Lower Palaeolithic tool typology that was dominated by choppers resembling those of the African Oldowan, and predating the Acheulian. This is the earliest stone tool tradition occurring in India.

While an antiquity of several hundred millennia may seem incredible to conservative archaeologists, it must be remembered that the earliest known petroglyphs in every continent (except Antarctica) are completely dominated by cupules. The earliest approximately dated cupules of Africa, the eight found on a sandstone slab excavated at Sai Island, Sudan, are thought to be in the order of 200 000 years old. Moreover, the Middle Stone Age and possibly Fauresmith petroglyphs Peter Beaumont has recently discovered are of identical inventories and occur on identical rock, very hard quartzite. Here, the surviving rock art begins also with cupules, linear marks, later followed by circle petroglyphs.

Australia, as far as we know, was colonised by hominins only around 60 000 years ago, by Asian seafarers with a Middle Palaeolithic technology who apparently brought with them a tradition of creating rock art, especially cupules and circular designs. But they developed the production of circular patterns to great complexity and variety in Australia, which continued in Tasmania into the late Holocene, together with a Mode 3 technocomplex. In contrast to Europe, where examples of Pleistocene rock art have so far remained limited to limestone caves, in Australia they can be found both in deep caves and at open sites.

In North America it has long been observed that the apparently earliest rock art traditions consist of the “pitand- groove” or “pitted boulder” genres. The same pattern pertains in South America, with the earliest petroglyph sites dominated by cupules. Even in Europe, this pattern is repeated at La Ferrassie, France. Since cupules on particularly weathering-resistant rocks tend to have the greatest longevity of all petroglyphs, the pattern of occurrence suggests that it is determined by taphonomy. This uniformity in the surviving rock art is equally apparent in much of the mobiliary art so far credibly attributed to the Pleistocene. The very limited Indian component is again consistent with other regions. The crosshatched design on the engraved ostrich eggshell



Schematic section of the entrance of Daraki-Chattan, showing the distribution of exfoliated cupules and excavated hammerstones.

from Patne occurs on the only known Chinese Pleistocene palaeoart, the engraved antler fragment from Longgu Cave, and on the perhaps more recent Chandravati core from India. A similar marking strategy is evident in the Urkan e-Rub II stone plaque and an ostrich eggshell fragment from Upper Besor 6, both of the Upper Palaeolithic of the Levant. It can perhaps be traced back to Mode 3 marking traditions in Africa, e.g. at Blombos and Wonderwerk Caves. Such a completely noniconic portable tradition even occurs in the final Pleistocene of North America, at the Gault site, Texas.





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