

CUPMARKS IN CENTRAL INDIA

Abstract

Cupmarks (also called cupules) are a most complicated subject: they are found embedded on walls, ground surfaces, boulders and small rocks. During our research on central Indian rock art, we have noticed many deep and shallow cupmarks. Deep ones exist mostly on the ground surface of painted shelters. It is difficult to understand the real purpose for making them. Still, we have collected some information about their use or meaning.

Nearly every state in India has cupmarks. Their different sizes may be quite varied. Some are associated with painted rock shelters, others with megaliths and some are isolated. In Central India, we have noticed that most cupmarks are associated with rock art sites.

Where in India? A few examples

From North to South and East to West we have been advised of a number of States with cupmarks, but we are fully aware that there must be innumerable others.

In Kashmir, many cupmarks are known in the Burzuhama and Baramulla districts.

In Uttrakhand, many scholars, since 1856, have reported all types of cupmarks in different districts. For example, at Champavat, in the Devidhura village, several kinds of big and small circular depressions have been found on rocks just near the Varahi Devi temple. They include many types such as small dots, shallow dots, U-shaped and conical cupmarks. Some are large pits. They may be in a circle, in small rows and with different compositions. In the same district, at Noulagaon village, Yashodar Mathpal (1995) found cupmarks on a menhir where 21 such depressions were made in two vertical rows. In the Almora district, 200 cupmarks with petroglyphs have been recorded in the Dwarahat village near the Chandereshwar Temple.

In Jharkhand, S. Das (2014) found many cupmarks at megalithic sites in different villages of the Hazaribagh district. According to local tribals they could be symbolic

representations of local gods and goddesses.

In Orissa, in the Reserve Forest of the Bagh-Chagha-Kendu area, S.S. Pradhan (2001) mentioned many cupmarks all over a shelter wall. At least 826 specimens of cupmarks have been documented. Some are in long alignments in many rows, some are arranged in geometrical shapes and others are just randomly carved on the wall.

In Rajasthan, we saw big flattish cupmarks on a big boulder next to the painted wall of the Gararda 4 shelter (fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Gararda 4 (Rajasthan). Big cupmarks just below the painted wall.



At Putri-Kho 1 (Jamunpani) in the Madhya Pradesh state, a huge shelter has been used for ceremonies for thousands of years. A number of cup-marks have been made on a big rock several meters away from the wall and the rock (fig. 2) has been transformed into a small Hanuman sanctuary with numerous deposits and flags.

In the Betul district (Dharul Village) (Madhya Pradesh), populated by Gond and Korku tribes, we have noticed many deep and shallow cupmarks in various shelters at Gaimukh (fig. 3). Cupmarks may have been made on the ground and on the wall. At Munshadeo there are groups of cupmarks in both locations (fig. 4), but

most times they are on the ground. Sometimes, there may be one deep cupmark and several shallow ones (Ammbadevi). In the Salbardi shelter we saw many cupmarks on the wall associated with engravings of vulvas and footprints (fig. 5).

In the Pachmarhi area of Madhya Pradesh, we saw cupmarks on the ground in about half the shelters we visited.

Fig. 2. Chindwara/Jamunpani. A big rock covered with big cupmarks is used as a place for ceremonies.



Fig. 3. Dharul. Small cupmarks in a line and other small ones next to a big deep one.

Fig. 4. Dharul. Munshadeo. Dozens of small cupmarks on a wall.





Fig. 5. Dharul. Salberdi. Small cupmarks are here associated with deeply engraved vulvas covering a wall.

Fig. 6. Urden 30. Groups of small cupmarks on a big rock.



In the Raisen district, among many other shelters with cupmarks, Urden 30 stands out with a huge rock covered with many cupmarks of varying sizes, some in a group, others in a row and others isolated (fig. 6).

In the State of Chhattisgarh, out of the 63 painted sites we found, we have noticed deep cupmarks in at least fifteen sites (Dubey-Pathak & Clottes 2017). Their sizes may vary: the bigger ones in the ground can sometimes be 30cm deep. More rarely, some perpendicular ones in a wall are extremely deep (up to several feet). This is the case for Ushakothi 1 and Badra 5. At Likha Pakhna 2, a series of eight small cupmarks were drawn in a line on the ground. The other sites with cupmarks are: Kabra Pahar (floor and wall); Shitalamata (many on the floor) (fig. 7); Rabkhoh (floor and wall) (fig. 8); Lekhamada (floor); Hamtha (a dozen on the wall) (fig. 9); Badra 1, 2, 3, 4, Siroli Dongri 1 and Rainkhol 1 and 2 (on the floor). At Benipat, the flat rocky ground has many deep cupmarks as one approaches the rock art site (fig. 10).



Fig. 7. Shitalamata Temple. A series of big cupmarks surrounded with stones. This sacred place is marked with a white flag. Offerings on the ground.



The purpose of the bigger cupmarks on the ground (fig. 11) was most probably the same as what we were told some years ago for identical man-made holes in the Pachmarhi region of Madhya Pradesh: they were made to grind or pound rice or other grains for offerings to the site gods and spirits in special ceremonies. Such uses would be impossible for other types of cupmarks such as the deep ones inside the walls or the groups of small ones. What we call cupmarks may in fact have had quite a number of different purposes.

Dating the cupmarks

Bhimbetka is the internationally best-known group of sites in India. Its core area extends over 1892 hectares covering five hills within the Vindhyan Hills. Many small painted shelters –some say hundreds– have been mentioned on those hills. Only the Bhimbetka hill is easily accessible, and less than twenty painted shelters are daily

Fig. 8. Rabkoh. Deep cupmarks close to the painted wall.



Fig. 9. Hamtha. A series of deep cupmarks dug vertically on a rock close to paintings.

opened to the public all the year round with convenient paths and guides.

Cupmarks are far from rare on the walls of some shelters (fig. 12). Some, however, are quite special. A few cupmarks have thus

Fig. 10. Benipat. Traces of ceremonies around big cupmarks.



Fig. 11. Astachal. A huge cupmark.





Fig. 12. Bhimbetka. Auditorium Shelter. Cupmarks on the wall.

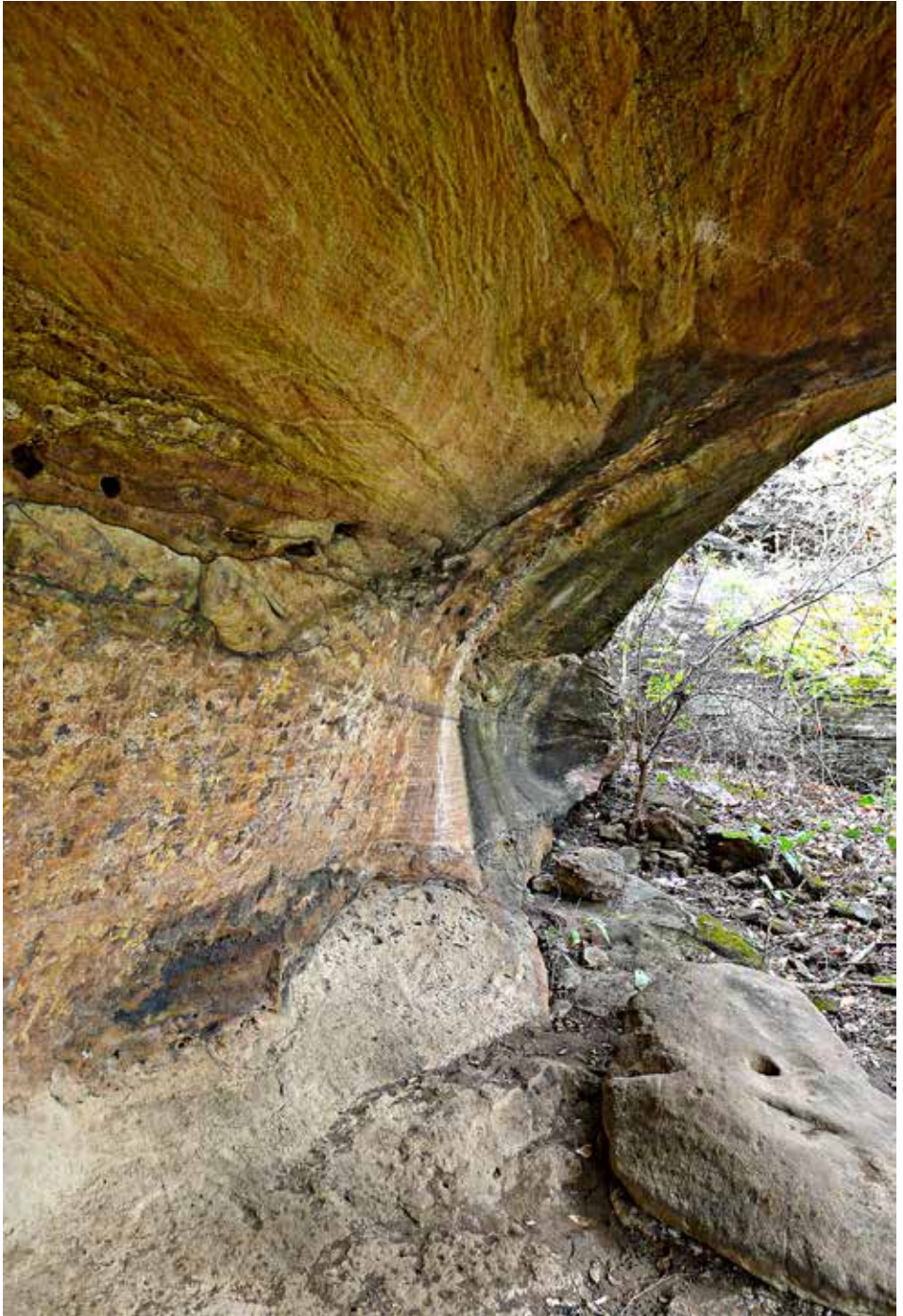
been published under Acheulean archaeological levels excavated in the Bhimbetka Auditorium cave. If those cupmarks are well dated and if they can be assimilated to rock art, as some specialists think, these would be the earliest instances of rock art so far discovered in the world (Bednarik 1993: 33-40). A French specialist who has long worked in India has however criticized at length their attribution to the Acheulean and written that "in no case, can they be retained as an example of Acheulean rock art" (Lorblanchet 1999: 202). Be that as it may the Bhimbetka cupmarks seem to be quite ancient.

Other very ancient cupmarks have also been published in Madhya Pradesh, at Daraki-Chattan. In this case their importance lies in the excavations carried out and



Fig. 13. Daraki-Chattan. Wall covered with cupmarks.

*Next page:
Fig. 14. Madhai. A deep cupmark on a rock in front of the painted wall.*



their discovery in a very archaic context. The now famous (among archaeologists...) Daraki-Chattan site is a small narrow cleft in a tall cliff face in the Rewa valley (Chambal basin, Bhanpura-Gandhisagar region of the Mandsaur district). Its sides are covered with many deeply patinated cupmarks, more than five hundred (fig. 13).

In his excavations there Giriraj Kumar found several cupmarks and two engraved grooves on slabs recovered from the archaeological layers. The lower layers are all Acheulean. Hammer stones supposed to have been used for the production of cupmarks were also found in them. These cupmarks would thus corroborate the Bhimbetka findings and, according to Kumar and to our Australian colleague Robert Bednarik with whom he has been working, they would be the most ancient rock art ever found in the world (Kumar et al. 2012).

Even if those cupmarks are as ancient as has been said, can they be considered as art and be compared with geometrics and other designs? When they are arranged in what looks like patterns, this could indeed be the case, as with the slab bearing eighteen cupmarks that was found deposited with the skeleton of a child in a famous Neandertal burial at La Ferrassie in France. On the other hand, when they appear randomly scattered or even grouped, it all depends upon our subjective interpretation of cupmarks, whether we consider that the end result their makers were after was a design (i.e. "art") or that they were just a consequence of an action for recovering some stone powder for whatever purpose. In which latter case, they would not constitute a "drawing" per se but the result of a practical action. We have no way of knowing what exactly happened and why.

Ceremonies with cupmarks

Most times, cupmarks, found at rock art sites either singly or in varying numbers, generally on the floor but sometimes on the wall, are as difficult to interpret as the

rock art itself. We shall give a few examples.

In some cases, deep cupmarks may have been used like a deep bowl, to mix colour (fig. 11). But in fact, we have no certainty.

At Chindwara/Jamunpani, the top of a big rock a few meters away from the wall is covered with big cupmarks. The site having been taken over for ceremonies, particularly to God Hanuman, a small sanctuary with various deposits has been created on top of the rock (fig. 2). A bell hangs over it all. The problem is that we have no way of knowing whether the cupmarks were created for that express purpose or whether they had already existed for hundreds or thousands of years when the site was given its modern meaning and purpose.

In the Salberdi shelter (Dharul), numerous deep engravings on the wall represent

Fig. 15. Madhai. One of our tribal guides showing us the depth of a cupmark close to the wall.





Fig. 16. Shitalamata Temple. A cupmark filled with oil and incense sticks. A coconut, a lamp, rice, flowers and one coin have been offered.



Fig. 17. Shitalamata Temple. A local woman sitting next to the worshipped cupmark.



Fig. 18. Mandu. Neelkanteshwar Temple. A double series of seven cupmarks on a slab in the second entrance of the temple, near the Shivling (God Shiva).

Fig. 19. Mandu. Bazbahadur Mahai. Another series of ten cupmarks in the palace.



probable sketchy vulvas. As we have seen (fig. 5), among them are small cupmarks, some in a double column, others alone or incorporated in a few vulvas. Would the cupmarks in that case have a sexual meaning?

In Madhya Pradesh, in painted shelters, one or several cupmark(s) are often on the ground in front of the paintings, or on a big rock in the same position (fig. 14). Some of them are quite deep. In Pachmarhi, we were told that for some ceremonies, cupmarks played a special role. The day after Diwali, local Gonds used to go to painted shelters and offered soaked rice ground in a deep cupmark (fig. 15).

In Chhattisgarh, at Shitalamata, cupmarks receive offerings, such as a coconut and flowers, they are half filled with oil and incense sticks burn inside them or near them (fig. 16). A white flag would then be stuck on the ground and a woman would pay her respects and conduct a ceremony (fig. 17).

Finally, from the jungle we shall go to a temple and a palace in Madhya Pradesh! At Mandu, in the Neelkanteshwar Temple, a cemented slab bears fourteen cupmarks, in two rows of seven each (fig. 18). In the Baz Bahadur Palace, another slab bears ten, also in two parallel rows (fig. 19). What can they mean?

We shall thus finish on a question mark, which is not surprising for such an intriguing item.

Dr Meenakshi Dubey- Pathak
309, Sector C, Raksha Vihar, 3 EME Center
Bhopal bypass Rd, Bhopal Bhopal (M.P.)
462031 INDIA
meenakshividushi@gmail.com

Dr Jean Clottes,
11, rue du Fourcat,
09000, Foix, France,
j.clottes@wanadoo.fr

References

- Bednarik R.** 1993. Palaeolithic art in India. *Man and Environment* 18 (2), pp. 33-40.
- Bednarik R., Kumar G., Krishna R.** 2018. Dating the Daraki-Chattan Petroglyphs: A Progress Report. *Purakala* 27-28: 23-29.
- Das S.** 2014. *Unknown Civilization of Prehistoric India*. Kaveri Books, New Delhi.
- Dubey-Pathak M. & Clottes J.** 2017. *Powerful Images. Chhattisgarh Rock Art and Tribal Art*. New Delhi, Bloomsbury India Publishing PVT LTD.

Kumar G., Vyas N., Bednarik R.G., Pradhan A. 2012. Lower Palaeolithic petroglyphs and hammerstones obtained from the excavations at Daraki-Chattan Cave in India. In: Clottes J. (dir.), *L'art pléistocène dans le monde / Pleistocene art of the world / Arte pleistoceno en el mundo*, Acts of IFRAO Congress, Tarascon-sur-Ariège, september 2010, Symposium «Art pléistocène en Asie». N° spécial de *Préhistoire, Art et Sociétés, Bulletin de la Société Préhistorique Ariège-Pyrénées*, LXV-LXVI, 2010-2011, CD: 879-893.

Lorblanchet M. 1999. *La Naissance de l'Art. Genèse de l'art préhistorique*. Paris, Éditions Errance.

Mathpal Y. 1995. *Rock Art in Kumaon Himalaya*. New Delhi, Indira Gandhi Centre for the Arts.

Pradhan S.S. 2001. *Rock Art in Orissa*. Aryan Books International, New Delhi.