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RESEARCH ARTICLE

HITHERTO UNKNOWN PLEISTOCENE PORTABLE ART FROM INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Portable prehistoric art is rarely reported in rock art literature of India which focuses on graphic art of the caves or rock-shelters. In the name of portable art only a few engraved objects of chalcedony, bone and ostrich shells belonging to the Mesolithic/ Upper Palaeolithic period are recognised so far. Present paper reports five portable Pleistocene art objects, namely, a stone peacock on basalt, a stone peacock on chert, a bone pendant, a stone embryo-shaped pendant, and a painted cobble chopper. They are significant in understanding palaeoart development and expose the potential of India in origins of the Stone Age art.

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INTRODUCTION

India is very rich in Mesolithic-Neolithic graphic art and Pleistocene petroglyphs like cupules, found almost in entire length and breadth of the country with the popular examples of Bhimbetka (Wakankar, 1973, 1975; Bednarik, 1992, 1993a, 1993b) and Daraki-Chattan (Kumar, 1996). But, the portable archaeological art objects are very rare; Bednarik *et al.* (1991) relied on six Mesolithic movable engraved art finds in India- a chalcedony core from Chandravati (Sonawane 1991), a human tooth and four bone fragments. Later, Bednarik (2013) added two more, e.g., 'six-quartz crystals' from Singi Talav (Rajasthan) (Gaillard *et al*., 1983; D'Errico *et al*., 1989) regarded manuports of the Lower Acheulian and the other 'engraved ostrich eggshell' from Patne, western India, c. 25Kya. But, he refuted two other claims; a bone "female figurine" (Misra, 1977) recognized by him a damaged 'bone harpoon', and the claimed "grooved patterns" on 45 more ostrich eggshell fragments from central Indian sites (Kumar *et al*., 1988) as 'natural work of taphonomic agents' (Bednarik, 1993b, 2013). In the light of known meagre evidence of Pleistocene portable art, the present five portable art objects reported here hold greater significance. They include two bird figurines- as tone peacock on basalt and a stone peacock on chert, and two pendants, one on bone and the other on an embryo-shaped stone; the fifth is a painted chopper on cherty quartzite cobble. A further scrutiny of Indian rock art literature (Bednarik, 2013; Neumayer, 2013; Chakravarty and Badam, 2010; Chakravarty and Bednarik, 1997; Chakraverty, S, 2015; *bradshawfoundation*) reveals that such objects have not been reported from India so far.

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OBSERVATIONS

The metric details of the five Pleistocene portable art objects reported here are presented in Table 1, and their images are shown in Figures 1-5. They are briefly described below for their morphology as well as bio-stratigraphic and chronological contexts.

1. Stone Peacock on Basalt: It is a fantastic rare prehistoric portable art of the kind not reported anywhere in the world. It is made on a small thin basaltic crust, grey-brown in hue (Figure 1a, b). It measures 36 mm from head to tail, 22 mm from top to leg base, and 07 mm in thickness; it weighted 04 grams. The general shape, noticeably the distinct rising nape, great breast-belly bulge, the taller legs, and the large rounded wing bundle, all bear testimony that the figurine is unmistakably a peacock. It is so thin and could have been destroyed if had been exposed for some time, but as the luck would have been we discovered it in the buried in situ context (Figure 1c). It was found buried in the brown concretionary clay deposit of the Upper Pleistocene Baneta Formation which overlies the hominin bearing Middle Pleistocene Surajkund Formation (Tiwari and Bhai, 1997). Baneta Formation in Son River, a tributary of Narmada River contains the YTA (Youngest Toba Ash)

signatures dated to ~74Kya (Chesner *et al*, 1991; Acharyya and Basu, 1993). On that consideration this figurine could have been maximum 74 Kya and minimum 30 Kya (Patnaik *et al*., 2009), making thereby it the oldest figurine of the kind ever reported. Interestingly, Dr. Rajeev Patnaik (Personal Communication) has also found achert fragment from Hathnora bearing crossed engraved lines, derived from the topmost Surajkund Formation (U3 cenented gravel) they dated to 40 Kya.

2. Stone Peacock on chert: It is a typical later Middle Palaeolithic triangular scraper made on a blackish grey, shining chert flake, detached from a large mother core (Figure 2a, b). It measures 35 mm in maximum length, 27 mm in height and 11.5 mm in thickness, and weighted 10 gm. A triangular oblique striking platform with a prominent bulb of percussion is visible on the smooth ventral surface. The dorsal surface has a prominent thin and sharp tripartite mid-rib responsible for the basic structure of the bird wings. It gently descends to the anterior beak-like apex, and forms the mid sloping superior and inferior sides and surfaces. Its mid bifurcation forms a sloping and slightly concave posterior surface with bird wing shape after slight vent. The oblique striking platform on posterior dorsal surface forms a twist of the wing tail. The margins of the three sides are sharp and retouched used as scraping edges. Additional flakes have been removed from the superior side forming a concavity with the rising nape leading to the crown at the head. The head is small, straight and tapering and becomes conspicuous with an inferior neck. As above, a large flake removed from the inferior side forming a concavity, which contributes to a leg like structure behind and a prominent convex breast -cum- belly bulge, typical of a peacock. The tool reveals several intentional efforts to give it an artic bird-like shape and reflects the aesthetic skills of the hominin at the top of its utilitarian value.

3. Bone Pendant: It is an animal bone having two natural anatomical holes/ marrow canals, which traverse to other end too (Figure 3 a, b, c). A cord could be roped in and tied like a pendant, which is evident from the ground surface along the length, top and the base of the bone; the corners are made blunt by the use-wear. It measure 70 mm in maximum length (or height), 65 mm in width and 40 mm in thickness, and weighted ~80 gm. Contemporary tribes in various parts of the world also bear bone and dental pendants as necklaces of various shapes. They are considered of mystic magical power in curing certain ailments or guarding from the malevolent spirits, a common belief among the contemporary tribes of central India and elsewhere. The present evidence indicates considerable antiquity of such tradition since prehistoric times as the bone pendant was found along with typical Middle Palaeolithic flake tools made of quartzite and igneous material, like chert, chalcedony, quartz and agate. It was found at the U3 Boulder Conglomerate unit of the topmost layer of the Surajkund Formation exposed at Netankheri (like Hathnora) from which the author has reported a human humerus and bone tools (Sankhyan, 2010; Sankhyan *et al*., 2012a,b) and recently two human fossil sacra (Sankhyan, 1917). Since this stratum falls below the Baneta Formation known for containing the YTA signatures, and therefore could be slightly older than 74Kya.

4. Stone Pendant: This specimen has been discovered by the author recently from the ancient river terrace of the Sir Khad at Ghumarwin, District Bilaspur, Himachal Pradesh. Sir Khad is one of the seven tributaries of the major River Satluj flowing through Ghumarwin-Bilaspur. From the same stratigraphic level the author has collected over eight dozens of Acheulian chopping tools, cleavers, scrapers, etc. from the Sir Khad terrace at a number of locations. However, the date of the pendant may or may not be Acheulian, but likely of the Upper Palaeolithic, ca.40 Kya. The pendant is formed on a rounded and flattish metamorphosed basalt rock nodule containing quartz crystals. The rock nodule is rounded coil-like with one side round and the other having a concavity gap. Such a form could have taken place when the rock chunk was entrapped in a water whirl for long. Interestingly, the coiled rock has acquired a natural shape resembling a human 'embryo' with thick head and coiled body ending in a tapering tail. There is a gap of 13 mm between the head and the tail. The basalt nodule is metamorphosed and pores of the mother rock containing various minerals are visible. Some pores have widened and formed shallow and deep pits of varying sizes. Two pits on the either side of the "head" have been intentionally penetrated deep to open on the other side. Intentional human effort is quite apparent to make the "eye holes" at the 'head" of the "embryo-shaped pebble" which could be threaded. The pebble measures 68 mm in maximum length, 56.5 mm in top-bottom width and 30 mm in maximum thickness, and weighted 136 gm. With such small dimensions and light weight it is quite suitable to be born as a pendant by inserting a cord. With its unique shape and cool touch, it could be speculated that the stone pendant could have been borne by a pregnant prehistoric woman to protect her baby in the womb from malevolent spirits- a belief prevalent in ancient tribes.

5. Painted Pebble Chopper: On 23rd June 2017 the author collected a fist-size (115 x 85.5 x 55 mm) chocolate coloured pebble chopper that weighted 505 gm (Figure 5 a, b, c). Like the stone pendant it also came from the Sir Khad terrace at Ghumarwin. The chopping tool retains the original smooth cortex on one side which bears artistic human and animal images, whereas the other side has been flaked by removing two large and one small flake that result in a long wavy cutting edge, which is blunted by considerable use-wear. The pebble chopper is painted in black, which is quite rare as most of the prehistoric rock paintings are in red ochre and white pigment. We can see real images of young and adult animals, and those of adult and young humans depicted in typical X-shape body form. The largest image is that of a black hyena depicted in the centre in a charging / attacking position before a young human (x-shaped), who is being pulled away by the arm by an adult (X-shaped) person on the right end. A baby hyena is also depicted behind the adult large hyena whose head is concealed below the tail of the adult hyena. At the top edge of the cobble, the images are not much clear but look like a small peahen and a long-necked peacock are depicted facing each other. Other images at the top are ambiguous.

DISCUSSION

Bird figurines of modified Middle Palaeolithic implements are known from America, Europe and China (Bednarik, 2013). Much more important is its in situ contexts which suggest a minimum 30 Kya date (Patnaik *et al*., 2009). But, the so well-formed and meticulously made peacock of basaltic crust of the kind under reporting is not seen anywhere. There is also no report of such a bone pendant from India though smaller pendants and Pleistocene beads are known (Bednarik, 1997). The painted Acheulian pebble under reporting may at present sound a puzzle or even a case of pareidolia (Bednarik, 2016), i.e. the work of nature and part of the mother rock.

Table 1. Metrics and stratigraphic contexts of the five portable Pleistocene art objects

Measurement (mm)	Stone Peacock on basal	Stone Peacock on chert	Bone Pendant	Stone Pendant	Painted Pebble Chopper
Max Length	36	35	70	68	115
Max Height	22	27	65	56.5	85.5
Max Thickness	07	11.5	40	30	55
Weight (gm)	04	10	~80	136	505
Stratigraphic Context/ Age	Baneta Fm. Late Pleistocene 70-40 Kya	U2/3 Upper Surajkund Fm U2/3 Later Middle Pleistocene ~75- 40Kya	Baneta Fm. Late Pleistocene 70-40 Kya	T2 Late Pleistocene 70-40 Kya	T2 Middle to Late Pleistocene 100-40Kya

Figure 1-5. 1a, b, c basalt bird figurine; 2a, b, c. chert bird figurine; 3a, b, c bone pendant; 4a, b, c stone pendant; 5a,b,c a painted pebble chopper

But, author's long email discussion with Dr. Robert Bednarik (though he wishes to personally examine the specimen) clarifies that the images on the cobble are on the cortical surface only and do not penetrate deep into the rock unlike pareidolia, where we can find deeper natural images on the cobble/boulder splits. The details of the images on the cobble also speak for human artistic activity and not natural pareidolia. Another question arises, why at all the prehistoric man chose the Acheulian chopper for the art work? The answer may be indirect. With the prolonged use the sharp edge of the chopper got blunt such that it could no longer be utilised for chopping work, but, being a very uncommon raw eye-catching raw material in the area, that too was not thrown away but honoured with painting on it and preserved as a master piece of art.

Then comes the question of Acheulian antiquity of the painted tool as nowhere graphic art has been associated with Acheulian. But, Bednarik (2013) breaks the myth of attributing the advent of human modernity to the beginning of the Upper Palaeolithic contending that virtually millions of exograms precede these events, either chronologically or technologically. In other words we may expect human modernity in Middle Palaeolithic. He refers to the evidence of Epipalaeolithic

limestone Acheulian cobble bearing extensive geometric engraved marks on both sides, from Urkan e-Rub, Israel. Considering this, the painting on the Acheulian pebble under reporting, perhaps marks the early "explosive" beginning of the graphic art in India. Moreover, the penetrance of Acheulian in the Siwalik area of the Soanian domain was probably late in the Middle or early Upper Palaeolithic time, 70-40 Kya. Perhaps 40 Kya may also sound quite early to the disbelievers and the present findings would evoke considerable interest and debate among the rock art scholars accustomed to regard the skills of graphic art of Mesolithic or Neolithic, not more than 25-30Kya.

In his global synthesis of 'art origins' Bednarik (2013) contends that the graphic Ice Age art of the rest of the world is almost entirely non-figurative, whereas the three-dimensional (3-D) figurative art has a much longer history in China, Japan and Russia in the form of artificially perforated flat pebbles used as pendants. Hence, he regards Asia as the key continent to hold a great promise in Pleistocene 'art' for understanding early cognitive development of hominins, but, this potential has remained almost entirely unexplored, especially in India. He, therefore, emphasised need to examine the Indian Middle Pleistocene palaeoart development effectively in view of the Central Narmada valley a well known hub of the Lower and Middle Palaeolithic hominin activities evident from their fossil remains (Sonakia, 1984; Sankhyan, 2017a,b).The present report therefore is an important contribution in exposing the potential of India in origins of the Stone Age art alongside the human origins.

Conclusion

Present study reporting rare Pleistocene portable art from the Central Narmada valley and from the Sir Khad-a tributary of River Satluj, exposes the potential of understanding art origins vis-à-vis human origins in the wake of reports of hominins fossil remains.

Conflict of interest: None.

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