

Excavations at Bhimbetka

Bhimbetka is situated 45 kilometres south of Bhopal on Hoshangabad road in the district of Raisen in the state of Madhya Pradesh between the geo-coordinates 24⁰05'N and 76⁰45'E. There were about seven hundred sixty two rock shelters of different periods of which more than four hundred have rock paintings. Perhaps this number is largest in the world for a single complex. The site is scattered over an area of 10x3 kilometres, in northern range of main Vindhyan system. The entire area is covered by dense vegetation.

UNESCO declares the rock paintings of Bhimbetka, a World Heritage Site in 2003. The antiquity of Bhimbetka may be dated to nearly 1,00,000 years. There are more than four hundred rock paintings which belong to different periods. The colors used were vegetable colors. The site was excavated by V S Wakankar of Vikram University, Ujjain; V N Misra of Deccan College Post Graduate and Research Institute, Pune; Sussan Haas, of the Museum fur Volkerkunde, Basle, Switzerland and others during the field seasons 1971-72 to 1976-77. Further the excavations at Bhimbetka were carried out by K D Banerjee, S S Gupta and others of Prehistory Branch of the Archaeological Survey of India during the field season of 1981-82.

The excavations revealed that these rock shelters were occupied by the settlers during lower Palaeolithic period and continued with breaks up to late Medieval period.

Lower Palaeolithic Period-The excavation at the site revealed two working floors. Artifacts yielded Acheulian

tools, more handaxes than cleavers, pebble tools, flakes and choppers. These tools were made of quartzite and sandstone.

Middle Palaeolithic Period-The excavations revealed the some artifacts from this deposit like scrapers, flakes, points and borer. Quartzite was used for these tools.

Upper Palaeolithic Period-The deposit of this period comprised thin blades, single and double-end scrapers on blade, side scrapers, borers, burins, flakes and cores; lunates some were large sized, and points. It was noticed that during this period these shelters were painted.

The paintings in the cave depicted the figures of bison, boars and stick like human.

Mesolithic Period-The artifacts recovered from this period were blunted back blades, lunates, burins and side and end-scrapers, triangles, trapezes. Chert, chalcedony and jasper were commonly used for making tools. Few blades on sandstone were the other specimens of this period. Burials of a child and an adult were also exposed in the excavation. A number of haematite pieces with rubbed faces showing their use for making colour for paintings. Other antiquities included quern and mullers. Red ware was introduced during this period at the site.

The paintings in this period depicted the figures of communal dances, birds, mothers and children, men carrying dead animal and pregnant women.

Chalcolithic Period-The excavations revealed the use of microliths including long flakes and blades. The occurrence of painted pottery, which possibly was inspired through contacts with Malwa, was an important introduction at this site. Copper objects, steatite beads,

and rubbed haematite pieces were the other noteworthy findings of this period.

Faunal remains were represented by bones of deer, boar, antelope, and peacock.

The paintings of this period depicted the figures of men and women, birds and animals etc. The paintings also revealed that the dwellers of this period were in the contact with the agriculture community of Malwa, exchanging goods with them.

Maurya/Sunga Period- The cave at Bhimbetka also has a inscription of the Maurya/Sunga period. Some small stupas have been found in this area. Besides the stupa, enclosure wall and other structures were also found. Several pieces of small crucibles, two iron arrowheads, several nails and a small piece of brass sheet, and beads were the other important findings during this period. The ceramic assemblage was represented by red ware and grey ware.

The inscriptions bearing *Shanka Lipi* in the rock shelters were noticed here. The paintings in the caves depicted *yaksha* figures, religious symbols, tunic-like dresses, horses and horse riders.

Medieval-The deposit of this period consisted of red ware and stone image of Ganesha.

Now paintings of Brahmanical gods like Ganesh and Natraja was depicted during this period. The painting during this cultural period depicted the other figures like elephants, bison, deer, *barasingha*, peacock and snake.

Hunting scenes with hunters carrying bows, arrows, swords and shields were also depicted in the paintings.