



## Project Gallery

# A rare depiction of a butchering scene in the rock paintings of Maser in Madhya Pradesh, India

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While hunting scenes are well attested in Indian rock art, only two depictions of butchering are known from sites in India, and are very rare globally. Here, the authors present the discovery of a rare depiction of deer butchering, found at Maser in the Raisen District of Madhya Pradesh, India.

Keywords: India, rock art, hunting scenes, butchering

## Introduction

Over the past 50 years, rock art scholars Wakankar (1984) and Tiwari (1976) have discovered numerous rock art sites in central India. The sites feature painted images that have been assigned dates between the Upper Palaeolithic and medieval periods (28 000 BC–AD 1500), on the basis of specific attributes such as subject matter, theme, style, superimpositions, colour and patina of the paintings (Wakankar 1984). Direct absolute dating, however, is required to verify the relative ages of many of these paintings.

In 1975, Tiwari (1976) conducted surveys in the region of the source of the Betwa River, in the Raisen District, and discovered numerous rock art sites spread over 11 individual sandstone hills. A further 16 hills in the region were not explored and have remained that way since 1975.

During the 2017–2018 fieldwork season, Saleem visited one of these isolated hills in the Betwa source region and discovered a group of 11 new rock art sites, including Maser, located approximately six kilometres south of Raisen (Figure 1) (Saleem & Chauhan 2019). The sites are located on the western side of an isolated hill and surrounded by dry deciduous forest. A total of 297 painted images are distributed between nine rockshelters.

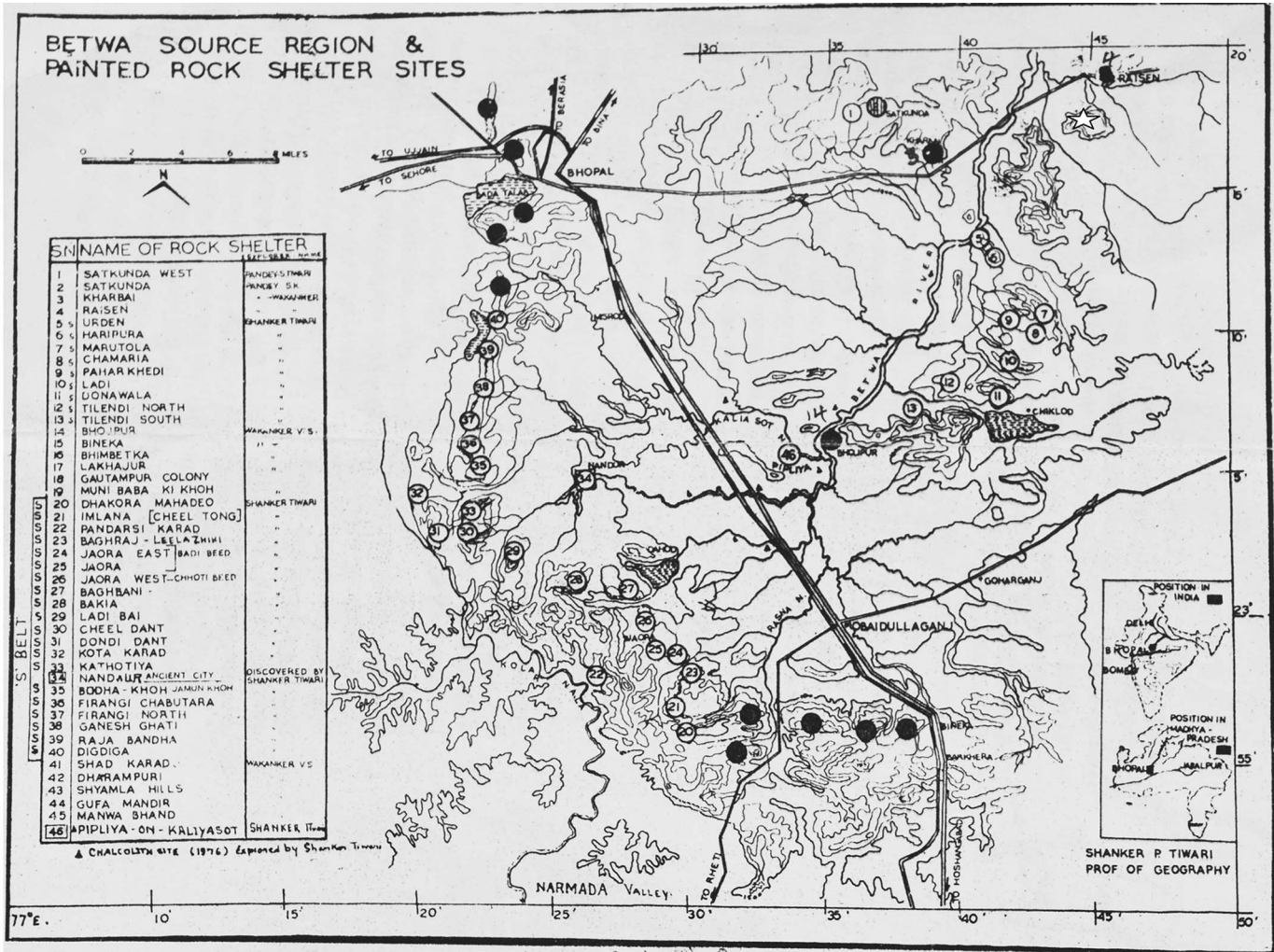
The rock art found at Maser was painted in green, red and white, and the images appear to belong to different phases, dating from prehistory to the historic periods (28 000 BC–AD 600). These images include 80 animals, 67 people, one bird, one flower, one bow, two arrows, one spear and one unidentified design. Of the images, 152 are well preserved, and 145 are faded.

A large proportion of the images (76) are located in rockshelter 6. This shelter has two storeys, is around eight metres long and two metres deep; it is located above a shallow cave (Figure 2). The images in this shelter comprise 19 animals, 24 people, one unidentified design, one flower, one bow, one spear, two arrows, one bird and 27 other images that are

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Figure 1. Map of Betwa source region showing the locations of painted rockshelter sites; the white star marks the location of Maser (after Tiwari 1976).



Figure 2. Rockshelter 6 at Maser (photograph by S. Saleem).

too faded to identify, but they use the colours green, white and red. Of the 19 animals featured, 11 are deer, of various species; there is one rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros indicus*), one wild boar (*Sus cristatus*) and one gaur or Indian bison (*Bos gaurus*). These animal figures are drawn in naturalistic style and some, but not all, have bodies decorated with geometric patterns. Five of the images appear to be animals, but are too faded to identify a species. At rockshelter 6, all but one of the images appear in panels not superimposed by any other figures. The one exception is a deer drawn as an outline in naturalistic style; this is superimposed over a faded and unidentified image in red.

A variety of human figures are evident in the images at Maser rockshelter 6, including known types of representation such as 'S' type and square-shaped stick figures. One of the 'S-shaped' human figures at Maser is, however, unique; it depicts a stylistically male figure squatting down to participate in butchering by cutting the belly of the animal. The figure is shown holding an arrow in his left hand while a bow and a spear lie on the ground beside him; another partially visible arrow is depicted sticking out of the belly of the deer, suggesting that the deer had been hunted (Figure 3).

The male figure appears to be removing the arrow from the belly of the deer, while an unidentified object similar to a cutting tool, scraper or flake, painted in red, is placed near the forelegs of the deer. The male figure is depicted wearing bands on both elbows and ankles. The deer is drawn in a naturalistic outline style with red paint and using the 'X-ray' style, which shows the internal organs. The deer is depicted lying on the ground with one forelimb bent and the other almost straight, suggesting a lifeless position. One of the hind legs is bent,



*Figure 3. Detail of butchering scene in rockshelter 6 at Maser (photograph by S. Saleem).*



*Figure 4. Detail of human figures and deer in rockshelter 6 at Maser (photograph by S. Saleem).*



*Figure 5. Detail of wild boar image in rockshelter 6 at Maser (photograph by S. Saleem).*

the other is partially faded. Although the anatomical features of the deer are not diagnostic enough to determine the species, the antler morphology suggests that it is a swamp deer (*Barasingha*).

Another S-shaped human figure painted in red is shown at the top of this panel, apparently watching the butchering of the deer. Both S-shaped figures are shown wearing a similar feathered headdress. Another faded human figure equipped with bow and arrows at the bottom side of this panel is shown walking towards the deer. All of the images on this panel, which include the three S-shaped figures, one sambar deer, one flower, one bow, two arrows, one spear and a cutting tool similar to a scraper or a flake, appear to be part of a single panel painting and are not superimposed by other images. The entire panel on which this scene is located is at risk of weathering and erosion due to its orientation in the shelter.

Also in Maser rockshelter 6, but on a separate panel, eight stick-shaped human figures in red are depicted equipped with bows and arrows aimed at a deer. Ten other deer images appear in a separate panel and are painted in red and white; they are drawn in naturalistic outlines with bodies either decorated with lines or left blank. One of them is superimposed over an unidentified image in red (Figure 4). On another panel, a wild boar, painted white, is drawn in naturalistic outlines with the body decorated by geometric patterns; it is comparable to the mythical wild boar figures found at Bhimbetka, Lakhajuar and Kharwai (Misra 1986) (Figure 5). Similar images depicting deer and wild boar, as well as the stick-shaped human figures have been attributed to the Mesolithic period (Wakankar 1984).

One *Bos gaurus* figure, painted in red, is drawn in naturalistic outlines, while a rhinoceros figure, also in red, is drawn in thick outlines and X-ray style; its body is decorated with vertical and horizontal wavy lines and dots, and it is depicted close to a square-shaped figure. Six square-shaped female figures painted in red were drawn in outline and shown wearing long skirts and headdresses; they are depicted standing close to a rhinoceros figure, and are superimposed over unidentified figures painted in green. One male figure painted in dark red is shown walking with unidentified objects in both hands.

## Conclusion

Although a butchering and feasting scene stylistically assigned to the Chalcolithic period is known at Chibbadnala, in the Chambal Valley (Kumar *et al.* 1992), representations of butchering activities such as the one at Maser are rarely found at Indian rock art sites. In fact, scenes of butchery are extremely rare globally, with the only comparable example being that from the hunter's shelter in the Guadalupe Mountains of southern New Mexico (Mark & Billo 2009). While no direct dating has been undertaken, S-shaped human figures, similar to those at Maser, discovered in Madhya Pradesh, central India, were assigned to the Upper Palaeolithic period on the basis of rock art attributes (Wakankar 1984). The dating of the Upper Palaeolithic phase in India, however, has changed significantly over the decades. This period remains problematic, as it does not consistently or exclusively occur between the Middle Palaeolithic and Mesolithic periods; rather, in many regions of India, Upper Palaeolithic evidence overlaps considerably with that of the Middle Palaeolithic and Mesolithic periods (James & Petraglia 2005; Chauhan 2019). Sites that appear exclusively Upper Palaeolithic have not yet been directly dated. Only with the application of scientific dating techniques

will it be possible to establish absolute dates for S- and stick-shaped human figures, as well as associated animals.

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