Research Reports

Myanmar prehistory: rare rock-markings revealed

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Abstract

New investigations of prehistoric sites in Myanmar by a joint Australia – Myanmar team have revealed important rock markings, including the first major cupule site from mainland Southeast Asia.

Myanmar is ideally situated for any study of the prehistoric movement and mixing of peoples, with its central and northern regions lying between India, China and Thailand. Today over 100 ethnic groups can be found within its borders but little archaeological survey, recording or excavation of prehistoric sites has occurred in over fifty years. In early 2004, we commenced a new project, beginning with an expedition to the Badalin (Padalin, Padah-lin) Caves, two sites about 340 metres apart in the limestone hills of the western edge of Shan State.

'Cave 1' is a large rock shelter with at least a dozen rock paintings of animals, human hand-and-arms with body decoration and a sun-like geometric design. This site was professionally recorded and partially excavated in 1969 by a team headed by the then Director of the Archaeological Survey of Burma, U Aung Thaw. A range of stone tools, used pieces of ochre, charcoal and bone was recovered from the excavation. Radiocarbon dating revealed some of the deposit is at least 11,000 – 13,000 years old (Thaw 1971:133). Until now, Cave 1 was the only recorded rock art site in Myanmar (Fu 2000:770). 'Cave 2' consists of a rock shelter with a rear passageway that leads down to a series of eight linked caverns. No rock art was reported and limited test pits revealed few indications of prehistoric human habitation (Thaw 1971:127).

During our preliminary visit we made two discoveries. First, at Cave 2, we noted that the panels either side of the entrance way to the deep caverns have faint remnants of dark red/purple pigment, for the most part fragmented, obscured by limestone wash, and partly covered by recent

Burmese text. However, some fairly clear marks can be seen on the eastern panel, a 4.0 x 2.8 metre expanse that begins 1.7 metres above ground level. In the upper left-hand corner and across the middle of the upper portion are the remains of several hand prints. Also at Cave 2, marks were found that appear splash-like and were either made by flicking a large paint-soaked 'brush' or by throwing some string-like material or other matter that was impregnated with paint against the wall. These marks are rare in world-wide rock-art but are reminiscent of some found at sites in northern Australia.

The second discovery is also similar to a phenomenon found in northern Australia, as well as many other parts of the world. In Cave 1 there are four clusters of pecked and abraded cupules, each arranged on protruding and convex portions of the limestone wall. The cupules are on vertical and sloping surfaces and could not have resulted from purely practical pursuits. Each cluster extends up from ground level until there is a change in the orientation of the rock surface. In essence, they infill naturally prescribed discrete areas. Significantly, at several locations it can be seen that the cupules extend down below the surface of the archaeological deposit. These areas were not excavated by Thaw and the cupules have not been noted or reported by anyone who has previously visited the site.

There are at least 346 cupules, including two isolated examples, 2.5 to 11 cm in diameter. Cupule depth ranges from 1 to 5 cm, with many partially or almost fully filled with flow-stone. Indeed, there is a crust over the top of all cupules and a small stalagmite has formed on a portion of one sloping cupule-filled surface. This has important implications for dating and during the next season of fieldwork some cupules will be sampled so that the crust can be analysed for AMS dating potential. The deposit next to cupule clusters will also be excavated to assist with determining minimum ages.

No other cupule sites have been documented in Myanmar or other parts of mainland Southeast Asia. However, sites of varying ages have been recorded in central India (Kumar 1996), China (Fu 1990, 1992), the Himalayas (Gansser 1990:66-68) and in the Kinabalu area of Malaysian Sabah (Gansser 1990:78-87). Areas where cupule sites are particularly widespread include southern Africa and northern Australia (Taçon and Ouzman 2004; Taçon *et al.* 1997). We anticipate further survey, recording and excavation in the Badalin area and throughout the country will reveal additional insights into Myanmar's deep past including the development of symbolic expression. This will be of relevance to those studying the prehistory of India, China, South East Asia and Australia, as well as making a contribution to global debates about the movement and interaction between groups of early modern humans.

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Early Lapita settlement site at Bourewa, southwest Viti Levu Island, Fiji

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Abstract

A newly-discovered Lapita settlement at Bourewa on southwest Viti Levu Island, Fiji, was established originally on an offshore island perhaps as much as 1220 BCE by people whose main concern was optimal access to the broad fringing reef. Satellite settlements were established at nearby Rove and Waikereira later in Lapita times. The three oldest radiocarbon dates obtained from the base of the tightly-packed shell midden layer excavated at Bourewa and charcoal in the beach sand below are calibrated/corrected to 1220-970 BCE, 1210-940 BCE, and 1130-910 BCE. The Bourewa Lapita site appears to be the oldest-known in Fiji.

Introduction

During December 2003, a team from the University of the South Pacific and the Fiji Museum targeted a site at Rove Beach in southwest Viti Levu Island, which was known from a collection of three Lapita sherds found during surface collection there earlier (Kumar and Nunn 2003). Excavation of four pits at Rove established the existence of a late-era Lapita site which was highly disturbed, probably as a consequence of alternate phases of storm erosion and deposition, and ploughing of fields adjoining the coast.

At the completion of the Rove excavations, a comprehensive surface collection of potsherds was made on nearby coastal flats and beaches. A large number of intricately-decorated dentate-stamped potsherds were recovered from the beach at Bourewa, nearly 2 km along the coast south of Rove, and we then undertook excavations in

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