

Original article

A SYMBOLIC ARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDY IN ODISHA THROUGH 'ROCK ART PATTERNS'

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ABSTRACT

The present paper seeks to explore a few selected rock art shelters of Odisha, viz. Ulapgarh and Vikramkhole in Jharsuguda district, Ushakothi group in Sundergarh district and Pandava Bakahara in Cuttack district, which illuminate the features of rock art style of Odisha within a network of social cultural context. It specifically focuses on some ethnographic interpretations and possible symbolic meanings of selected intricate patterns within a particular geographical boundary which is so recurrent in marked departure to the human and naturalistic figures underlying the central Indian rock art sites.

In seeking to critically conceptualize such "patterns" in the rock shelters, the study equally intends to engage with certain aspects of post-processual archaeology. It is noteworthy that since 1980s, the fascinating strand of making sense of technical, economic and social functions underlying material culture based on dynamics of symbolic values radically transformed the canonical protocols of archeology till now thought in terms of scientific and archaeological aspects. The post-processual perspective, it merits mention, not only stressed on a complex explanation of material culture but boldly entailed that symbolic values are transitional, culture specific, and varied over time with specific cultures. Though subject to criticism from underlying cross-cultural laws in view of its affiliation to disciplinary orientation in anthropology, it provocatively argued out that intricate patterns, index, symbols, or for that matter "texts" could be comprehended by studying cultural geography, distribution pattern as well as spatio-temporal analysis. The study thus summarizes a modest attempt to understand the semiotic significance of the patterns of rock shelter in the light of insightful interventions made by Ian Hodder and Collin Renfrew to enrich a rather contestatory field of study as symbolic archaeology.

Key words: Processual Archaeology, Contextual, Symbolic Archaeology, Cultural Geography, Rock art pattern

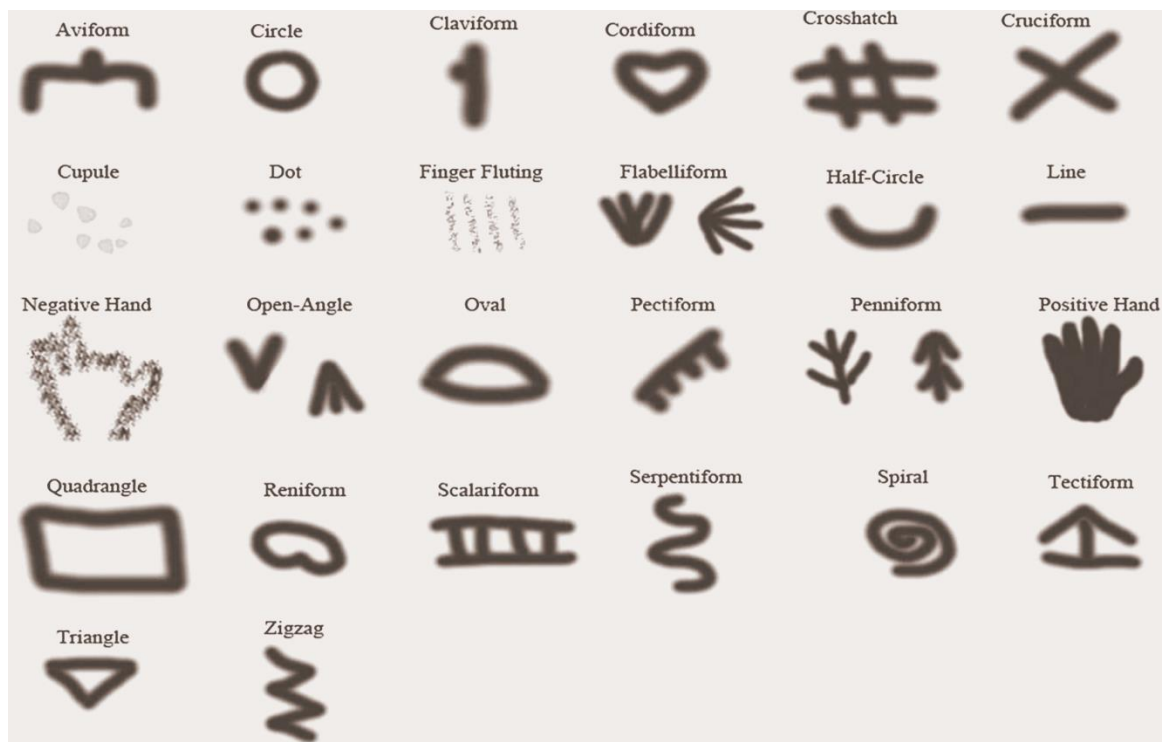
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INTRODUCTION

The symbols have been handed down to us from generation to generation. Over time, as religions and beliefs have undergone shifts and tensions, symbols may equally have been transformed in terms of their names, meanings and implications. However, with assumed undermining of the old beliefs induced by modernity, much has simply been forgotten. It needs no reiteration to note here that some of these symbols have truly ancient roots, originating in the Neolithic era or even Paleolithic times. The names and meanings of the symbols do indeed vary from region to region, and even from village to village. Similar motifs can have totally different interpretations in different places and can even be called by very different names (Picture 1).



Picture 1: typology of non-figurative signs (*Courtesy: Genevieve von Petzinger 2010*)

Previous work:

K.P. Jayaswal for the first time reported the earliest evidence of rock engraving in Odisha from Vikramkhole rock shelter in the Jharsuguda district in 1933 (Jayaswal 1933). Many scholars like N. P. Chakravarty (1936) and G. C. Mohapatra (1982) have given thoughtful debates over the engravings of the Vikramkhole, whether those are belonging to script or symbols (Chakravarty 1936). S.N. Rajguru (1950) and J.P. Singh Deo (1976) have also reported two important rock art sites namely Gudahandi and Jogimath from the Kalahandi district. Rock art at Pakhnathar near Jamada in Mayurbhanj district was also described in 1965 (IAR 1969-70). Behera reported rock art sites in Sundergarh and Jharsuguda in the District Gazetteers of Sambalpur (Senapati 1971). Behera's investigation during 1987-88 resulted in the discovery of six rock shelters out of which, two were located in the Ushakothi reserved forest, one in Sukhabandh forest and three in the Chhenga Pahar reserved forest (Behera 1992). Subsequently, Behera also studied the Deluga rock shelters in Sambalpur district (Behera 2001). Neumayer (1993) reported the discovery of five painted rock shelters at Chhenga Pahar in Sundergarh districts. For the first time prehistoric and early historic cultural contexts of the rock art in Odisha was revealed by P.K. Behera and E. Neumayer (Neumayer 1992 & 1993). S. Pradhan (2001) published a book for the first time on rock art of Odisha, which gave a general and systematic idea about the topic. He is credited to have document 106 rock shelters in collaboration with IGNCA (Acharya & Sharma 2018).

Present Study:

The present paper deals with few major signs like - vulva, triangles, circles and some rare figures as have been located in rock shelters of Odisha which are something similar to those as

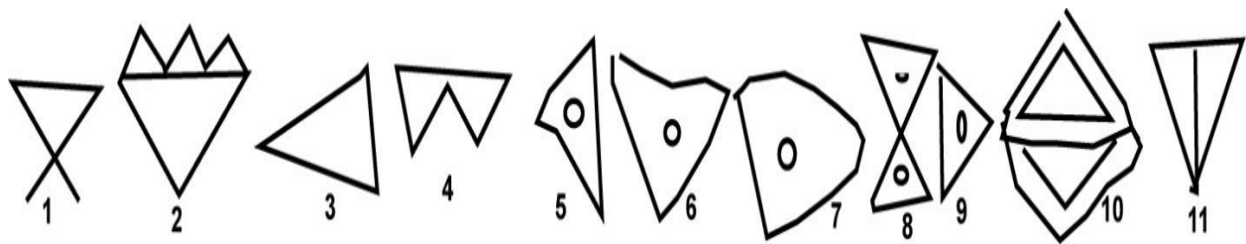
seen in France and Spain in upper Paleolithic context. Other such major sign like serpentine whose occurrences are also very frequent. Such signs qualify into faunal list in view of their larger occurrence all over the world which point to some symbolic behavior (Genevieve von Petzinger 2010). Such signs have been found in Debrigarh in Bargarh district, Ulapgarh in Jharsuguda district, Guptaganga in Keunjhar, Hatigumpha in Khordha, Rail Ushkaothi, Landimal Ushakothi, Bhimamandali Ushakothi, Ambakhola, Kundapitha in Sambalpur district and, Rajbahal, Tongo, Manikmoda, Lekhmoda in Sundergarh district and Chandali in Suvarnapur district. Like this in Odishan rock shelter we have seen Zigzags, Curvilinear, Diamond chain pattern, Honeycomb, Rhomboid etc. in large number with different associated symbols and signs. These signs do in fact merit critical engagement in terms of nuanced conceptual reflections.

Vulva sign is the largest in number which are found all over Odisha (Pradhan 2017), predominantly shaped in pigmented engravings. This sign is mostly found in Vikaramkhole (Jayaswal 1933) and Ulapgarh in Jharsuguda district; Guptaganga in Keonjhar district; Chhatagarh, Rail Ushkaothi, Landimal Ushakothi, Bhimamandali Ushakothi, Ambakhola, Kundapitha in Sambalpur district; and Rajbahal, Ushakupa, Baurikupa, Jhinkamoda, Jodabilmoda, Imlimoda, Tongo, Manikmoda, Lekhmoda, Petenmoda, Rajamachan, Gastimoda, Bhalupani in Sundergarh district. It is remarkable that 34 signs have also been found in Pandava Bakhara which is located in Cuttack district in the coastal belt of Odisha, where it has different contextual presence.

The following section undertakes a discussion of signs like triangle and circle along with a few rarest signs -

Triangles:

These signs have been found in Debrigarh Uahkothi of Bargarh district; Vikramkhole and Ulapgarh in Jharsuguda district; Landimal of Sambalpur district; Pandava Bakhara in Cuttack district (figure number 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9); Baurikupa (figure number 3) and Lekhamoda (figure number 10) of Sundergarh district. Few other triangle symbols also have been found and classified according to their variations in Rajbahal Ushakothi (figure number 1, 2, 11). The following figures represent the variations of triangle pattern. These are different than each other so far as context, pattern, colour and associated symbols and size are concern.



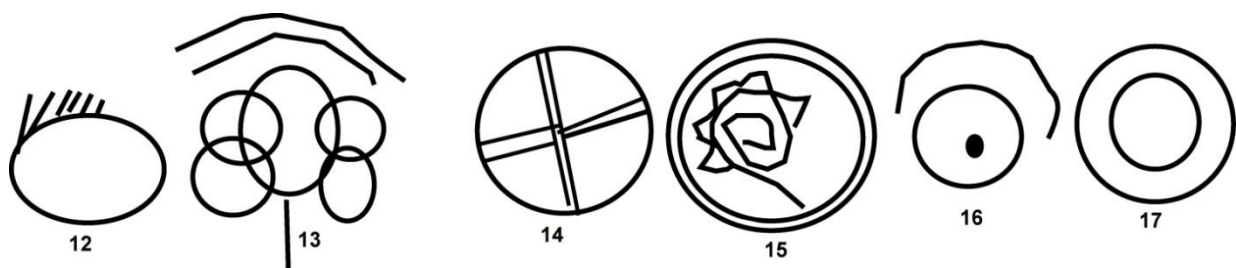
(Figure number 1-11)

Some of the illuminating terms associated with triangle include conceptions of gender, creativity, harmony, proportion, ascension, manifestation, illumination, integration, subjectivity, and culmination. The upward moving triangle sometimes is referred to as blade (the chalice and blade figure used ceremonially in many ritual magic operations). It is representative of the symbol of aspiration or an inspirational idea in terms of rising up while embodying principles of male force, and fire. It basically denotes a phallic origin. The downward pointing triangle sometimes referred to as chalice signifies an entity of water mass with its elemental characteristic of downward flow. It also further conjures up sublime notions the grace of heaven, and the womb. Womb, as one of the most ancient symbols of female

divinity, has been widely perceived to be the representation of the genitalia of the goddess (Deacon 2011).

Concentric / Half / full Circle:

The symbol of triangle is found in various rock shelters of Odisha and widely distributed in Jogimath in Nuapada (figure number 17), Landimal in Sambalpur district, Debrigarh in Bargarh district (figure number 17), Pakhnathar in Mayurbhanj district (figure number 12,13, 16, 17) and Lekhamoda of Sundergarh district. Ulapgarh (figure number 14) offers a unique one where biochromes of red and white used for a circle and criss-cross inside. In yet another case in Adhayi Akhara Naraz, Cuttack (figure number 15) a conch type design stands engraved inside of circle.



(Figure number 12-17)

Circles are one of the oldest sign types found in rock arts traced to a timeline stretching back to 30,000 years. This sign type has been found to be present at 29 sites out of 146 sites in Europe occurring in all periods with highest frequency credited to Aurignacian where the sign type is present in 43% of the sites from this period. The sign type enjoys a broad spatial range in the Aurignacian, with sites in the SW of France (Abri Castanet and Abri Cellier), on the Mediterranean, and in the SE part of the country. It is noteworthy that circles as symbols do bring to relief a cluster of ideas underlying life, motion, female, beginning, potential and cosmos. The specificity as well as legitimacy of each of these ideas though however more

subtly are dependent upon era, culture, region and the individual perspective. Circles sometimes are also identified as being a vulva, or an incomplete vulva in a site inventory (Bahn and Vertut 1997).

Orthology, music and dance evidently are parts of the thriving cultural fabric of the society yet each individually in itself constitutes an “enigmatic thread”. These specific enigmatic threads perhaps rhyme in unison and to weave out a meaning for the fascinating cultural fabric of the society they collectively produce, though on their own remains inescapably incomplete. The perspective gets insightfully acknowledged with Lewis-Williams famous observation on prehistoric art that “Meaning Orthology is always culturally bound” (Lewis-Williams and Dowson,1988).

Given these considerations, the problematic that strikes is about the possibility of understanding the meaning of the whole when one gets to witness and make sense of a slice of the Upper Paleolithic “life world” in which the cave paintings played their role. The problematic of inadequacy and a sense of lack of whole stand starkly vivid when one sees and thinks through about the ancient images today which are at best fragments of an ancient story. Despite one’s unfathomable urge to know the exactitude of the meaning, the probable limits of our understanding get perceptibly revealed through the metaphoric symbolism of “ancient images” (Leakey 1994).

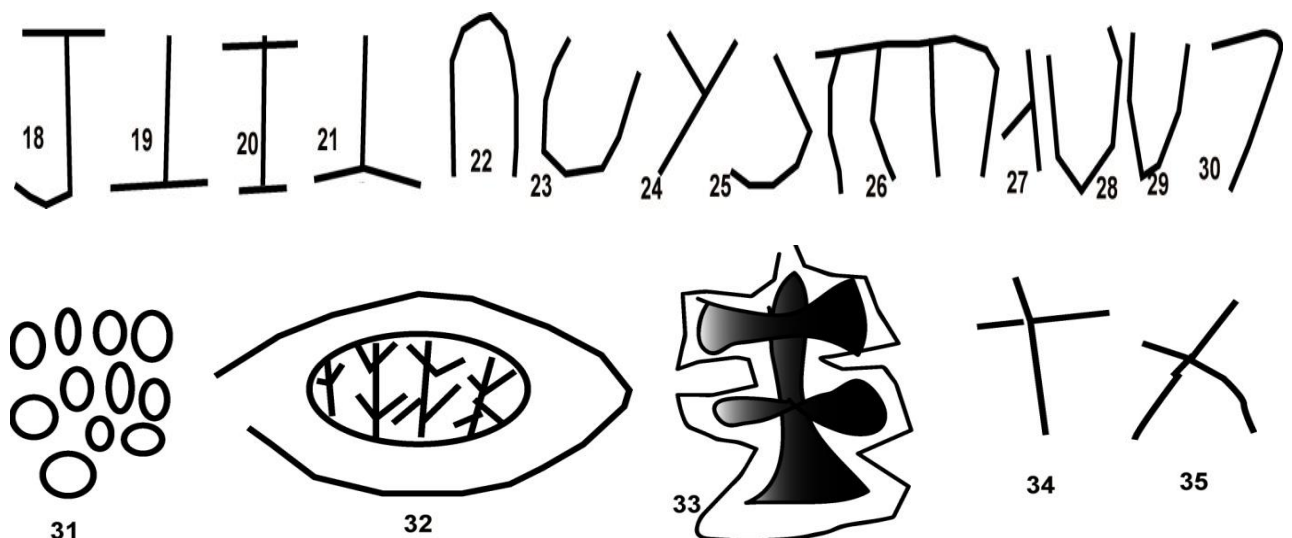
Some rare signs:

Some rare signs have also been noticed like Pectiformat (8) Lekhamoda-IV (figure number 26) and Ulapgarh. The term comes from the Latin word “comb shape” (Bahn and Vertut 1997). Other patterns like, “U” patterns in Rail UKT- X, LMD- IV, Rajbahal UKT –V, Imlimoda-I (figure number 29) are also rare. Patterns like “Y” in Tongo and Vikramkhol, Rajbahal UKT-

V (figure number 24) can also be discerned. A rare sign called “Unciform” in Rajbahal UKT- V (figure number 25) as well as Imlimoda-I have also been found. Similarly, one unciform is reported in Firengi by Erwin Neumayer in Central India and could be many more.

Other signs like “Criss-cross” (x pattern) in Tongo, Imlimoda I (figure number 35) and Jogimath rock shelter (figure number 34); “Open Angles” at Ulap and T pattern (figure number 18, 19, 20, 21, 27) in Tongo and Rajbahal UKT- V and oval sign in Lekhmaoda- IV (figure number 31) in a series are indeed very crucial and all are found in engraved form (Pradhan 2017).

What has also distinctly struck me in the course of our work is the sign called “Penniform” distinctly not as an independent object but as typically engraved inside of engraved fish (figure number 32), painted in red ochre in X-ray pattern in Ulapgarh. Yet also in another one in Lekhamaoda IV (figure number 33) which is similar to Lascux in France (Petzinger 2010) and interesting fact is that both are made of red ochre.



(Figure number 18-35)

CONCLUSION:

The functionalist and processual emphasis in archaeology entails a robust attempt to objectively identify relationships between variables in cultural systems with its concomitant and natural relationship with the concept of both empirical and positivist notion of science. 'This fundamentally implies that a meaning which any explanation provides within a scientific frame of reference basically demonstrates a constant articulation of variables within a system and the measurement of the concomitant variability among the variables within the very system. Processual change in one variable can thus be shown to relate in a predictable and quantifiable way to changes in other variables, the latter changing in turn relative to changes in the structure of the system as a whole' (Binford 1972).

This strand of perspective seeks to privilege the link between functionalism and a conception of explanation as the prediction of relationships between variables. It is thought that the relationships can be observed empirically, and quantification can be used as an aid to assess the significance of associations. Such understanding indeed opens up ways to map the trajectories of the "laws of cultural processes" thereby both recovering and validating the thematic of cross-cultural generalization.

Binford went on to stress on the element of "universality of rule" holding that individuals appear bound by universal rules concerned with what individuals would do "if other things are equal" (Hodder 1986). He minimized the possibilities where the creativity of the individuals within an active social process (Brown 1952) created their own culture. We need to develop multidimensional surfaces of variability on which type can be seen to vary with contexts. The sign and symbol's study should be interpreted simultaneously and exclusively with their present context and time. Every art holds a story conveyed in an elaborate fashion

that only the collective meanings can assign some meaning. These symbols and signs sometime appear a like to each other but actual cause of the making could differ from locality to locality and eve tribes to tribes. But they passed those tradition from generation passed to next generation.

In fact, Binford maintained that the different components of culture could function independently of each other. Functional relationships could thus be studied without reference to cultural contexts, and that regular, stable and predictable relationships could be sought between variables within social systems.

In our attempts to record rock art, we sometime fail to note what really exists, particularly the relationships of various elements that compose an entire panel, and the context surrounding the panel's situation. The researcher's attempt at carefully photographing, sketching and tracing elements may remain counterproductive if the iconographer remains only trapped in the inexorable logic of treating his accumulation of elements and the setting as a whole in place of thinking through the specificities of relationships (Warner 1982).

By obtaining a basic understanding of the symbols of the cultures with which we are concerned, we begin to see repetitions of the context in which these occur. With a fair percentage of these occurrences determined, we may have identified a cultural tradition (Hodder 1986). Like in case of variations of triangles and circles in rock art of Odisha. It's wide occurrence in engraving as well as painting form in the natural rock shelters of Bargarh, Sambalpur, Jahrsugusda, Sundergarh, Mayurbhanj, Keunjhar, Khordha and Cuttack and this spread over a wider ecological zone proved some kind of cultural tradition which evolved as well as interact and then developed its own tradition in another time and space.

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