

EXPLORING THE MIND OF ANCIENT MAN

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PORTRAYAL OF RHINOCEROS IN ART: SOME QUESTIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Fossil evidence shows that the antiquity of rhinoceros in India especially the archaic forms pre-dates the earliest known tool making man. Many hundreds of millennia later he became very familiar with this animal and used to hunt it frequently. The Mesolithic paintings and bones of the rhinoceros at Harappan sites bear ample testimony to this fact. Perhaps, some other groups of people across time and space may have worshipped this mighty animal. Further the association of this animal in religious pantheon and art is also not without significance. Later, the representation of rhinoceros in art became rare although the animal did survive in several parts of north India up to at least the early Mughal period. Now this animal is restricted to the Kaziranga and Manas Sanctuaries only.

The presence or absence of evidence regarding rhinoceros in geological and/or archaeological layers, rock paintings, sculptural art and literature is more significant than is readily apparent. This animal is not only indicative of an environment at large but also gives hints regarding the technological levels, subsistence economies and social structure by proxy inferences. Rhinoceros is not only a symbol of the bounteous environment but also an animal that the ancient peoples related themselves with. Curiously, from the later part of the proto-historic period onwards, barring obvious exceptions, the animal was portrayed less frequently.

The frequency of depiction or its absence in the backdrop of physical presence of rhinoceros cannot be without reason. The search for tenable reasons would also provide clues to the social environment across vast expanse of time within the boundaries of space dealt in this article.

ANTIQUITY OF RHINOCEROS

Although rhinoceros had originated in North America (Badam 1985), its existence in India is not recent. Thus, the presence of rhinoceros genera with the species type *Rhinoceros palaeindicus*, has been known to be in existence from the Late Pliocene strata of Sivaliks (Badam 1979). The earliest discoveries of the genera took place in the mid 19th century, when several species were reported for the first time from Sivaliks. Besides the Sivaliks, Lower Pleistocene (Mishra 2001) alluvium of the Yamuna and its tributaries within the confines of Banda district also yielded evidence of rhinoceros. Fossils believed to be contemporary with the above have also been found in other regions. Sometimes, these animals have been identified even up to the species levels. *R. palaeindicus* (Badam 1979, 1985) has also been reported from Karewas of Kashmir. *R. sivalensis* was identified from the Lower Pleistocene strata of the Sivaliks.

Perhaps by the Middle Pleistocene times *Rhinoceros unicornis* had already developed, as understood by the fossil remains observed by Pilgrim in the central Narmada Valley (Badam 1985). Other species were also thriving in different regions and different spans of time. During the Upper Pleistocene, variant form of the genera (Badam 1985) identified as *R. deccanensis* and *R. karnuliensis* were reported from further south, namely the Krishna Valley and Kurnool caves, respectively. Later, during the Late Pleistocene to Holocene, evidence of *R. unicornis* (Badam 1985) have been obtained from Ghod, Manjra, Pravara, Godavari and Krishna valleys.

The evidence of association of man and rhinoceros as cohabitants of the same ecosystems is also of great antiquity. Thus, fossilized bones of rhinoceros have been found within layers containing Middle Palaeolithic tools in the mid Son Valley region (LAR 1981-82). Bones of this animal were found in the lake sediments dated to about 8000 years ago, at Sarai Nahar Rai in Pratapgarh district UP (Jayaswal 1989). Definite evidence of rhinoceros being hunted by man besides the several paintings, is provided by its bones in habitation sites. From the Mesolithic sites of Langhnaj and Kanewal in Gujarat, bones of rhinoceros was found. The hunting of rhinoceros was done during the proto-historic times also. It has been identified from the animal remains from several Harappan sites (Thomas 1996) namely Harappa, Kalibanga, Lothal, Kuntasi, Surkotada and Khanpur. From Inamgaon (Dhavalikar 1993), a Chalcolithic site, also bones have tentatively been identified with that of rhinoceros.

RHINOCEROS IN ART

From the Mesolithic times at least, rhinoceros had been depicted in rock paintings. Among the paintings known earlier, those belonging to the Mirzapur region claims the singular honour. Here rhinoceros is shown as being hunted by a single hunter (Tiwari 1992). Mathpal (1992) has enumerated paintings of rhinoceros hunt and other figures of the animal near Roup Village, Ghormanger and Harni Harna. In the rock shelters near Deurkothar Stupa in Rewa district a rock painting of rhinoceros (Fig. 1), although of somewhat later times, shows that the animal was prevalent in an extensive region. In Raisen district also there are several rock paintings of rhinoceros that are dated to the Mesolithic period. These sites include Urden, Gelpur, Jaora, Bhimbetka (Neumayer 1993) and Ramchajja (Neumayer 1983). The Urden rhinoceros apparently shows two horns (Neumayer 1992). The depiction at Jaora shows the man trying to escape from the charging animal. One rhinoceros depiction at Bhimbetka shows it being hunted, with the charging animal having tossed one of the hunters into the air. The other depiction of rhinoceros painted later, is seen in the zoo rock at Bhimbetka (Fig. 2). Paintings of rhinoceros have been reported from several rock shelters of Lakhajuar (Mathpal 1984), a subsite within the general group of rock shelters at Bhimbetka. Two rhinoceros depiction of Ramchajja are dated to the Chalcolithic period. From Kathotia (Neumayer 1983) near Bhopal, two figures of rhinoceros have been reported as part of a single composition. Further south beyond the Narmada also, the rock shelters at Marodeo near Pachmarhi in Hoshangabad district produced a painting that shows an aggressive rhinoceros and a hunter carrying bow and arrow (Dubey 1992). Towards the Western part of the country also, paintings of rhinoceros had been made during the Mesolithic times. Two paintings of two rhinoceros in each belonging to the Mesolithic times have been noticed in the Chaturbhuj Nath Nala area in Mandsaur district. At Kanyadeh in the Chambal Valley also a rhinoceros trapped and aimed at by a hunter, was observed by (Kumar 2001). The significance of this painting is its contextual association with script, suggested as post-Harappan (Kumar 2001). A doubtful figure of the animal has been noticed at Tarsang (Sonawane 2002) near Godhra in Gujarat. Sonawane believes rhinoceros survived in Gujarat up to 16th century AD.

In the proto-historic period this animal was portrayed in three dimensions also across wide expanse of time and space. Thus the terracotta figures and/or seals are reported from almost all Harappan sites. The terracotta figures are reported from Harappa (Dales and Kenoyer 1993) and Lothal (Rao 1985) besides a mask of rhinoceros from Mohenjodaro (Dhavalikar 1984). Recent excavations at Harappa (Dales and Kenoyer 1993) have shown the number of rhinoceros figures (6.3%) to be more than double to those of sheep and goat (2.8%), which shows its popularity as an object for portrayal among the masses. A rhinoceros type animal has been depicted on some copper tablets from Mohenjodaro (Vikrama 2001). Seals depicting rhinoceros are more pervasive, showing that the portrayal of this animal was very much in vogue, approved by the class of Harappan civilization. Perhaps, the most important of such a depiction is in the seal with the ithyphallic seated deity obtained from Mohenjodaro (Agrawal 1993). More than a dozen seals at Mohenjodaro have this animal besides one each reported from Harappa, Kalibangan and Banawali (Vikrama 2001, Bisht 1982). These have been also reported from small Harappan sites, like Allahadino (Fairservis 1982). Evidence regarding this animal was also obtained from rural Harappan sites like Zekda and Kanewal in Gujarat (Mehta 1982). That the Harappan period had the popularity of this animal, is also marked by the present Harappan or Harappan-influenced seals in far off lands like Shortughai (Francfort 1984) and Tell Asmar (Lamberg-Karlovsky 1982). This animal's popularity also transcended time as known from objects found from later cultures carrying on in fragments the tradition of the Harappans. Of particular significance is the mask from Varsus (Dhavalikar 1984), a late Harappan site in Dhulia district, and the bronze figure of rhinoceros on a chariot from

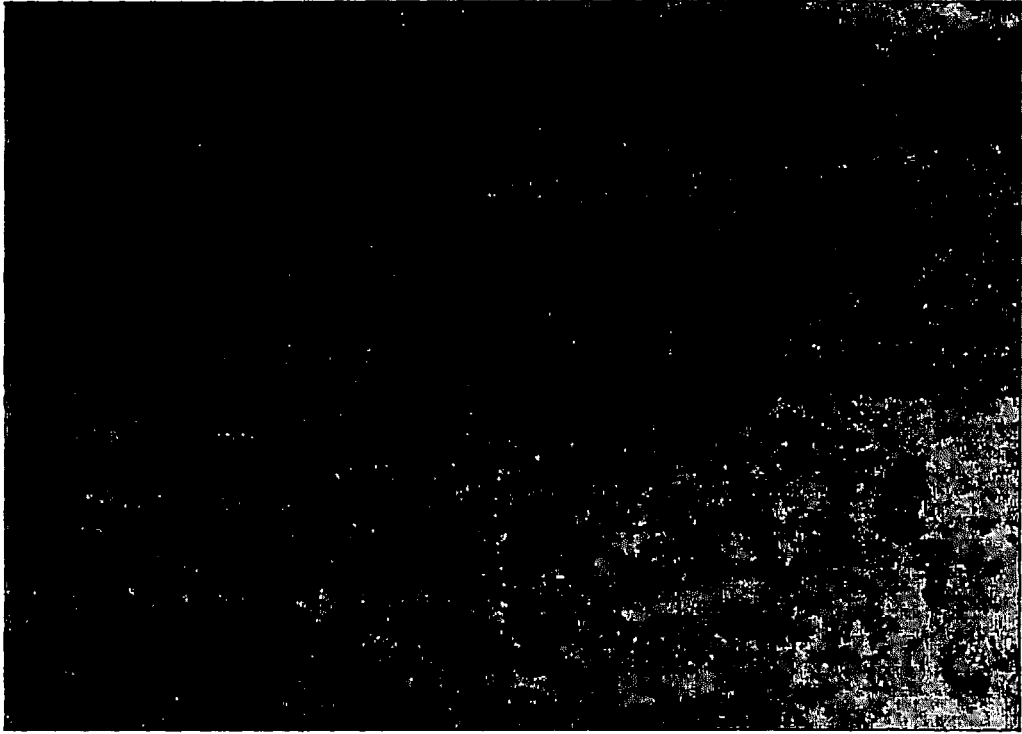


Fig. 1. Rhinoceros painting on a rock shelter near Deurkothar Stupa in Rewa District.

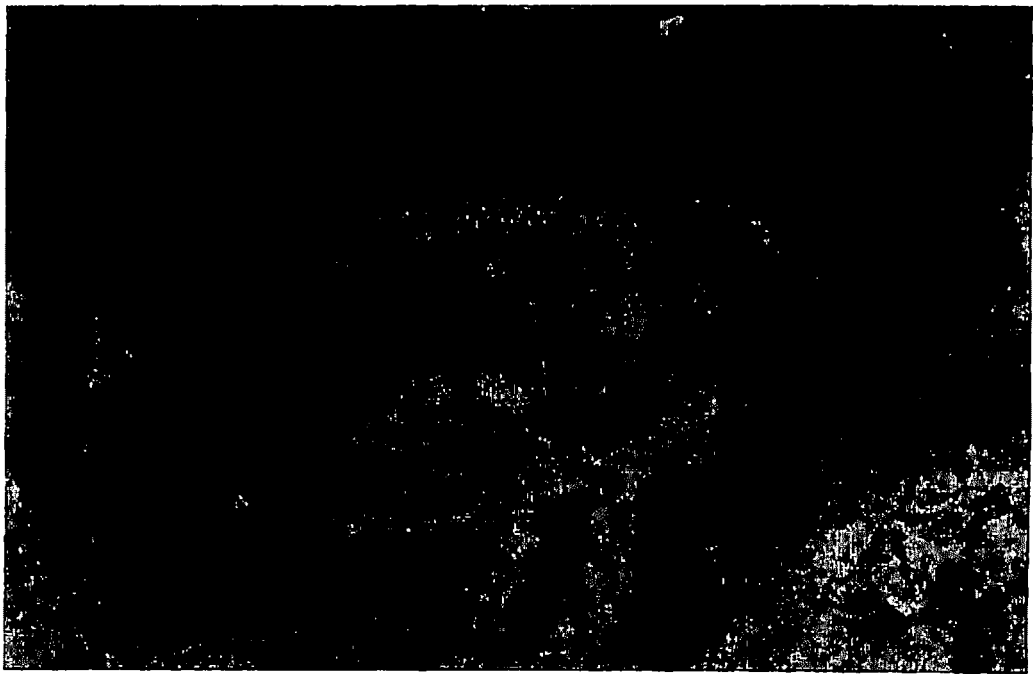


Fig. 2. Rhinoceros painting in Zoo rock, Bhimbetka, Raisen District.

Daimabad (Dhavalikar 1982) in Ahmednagar district. Kuntasi has also yielded evidence of rhinoceros in the late Harappan levels (Thomas et al. 1996). A terracotta figure of the animal is known from Dangwada from Chalcolithic levels (Chakravarti et al. 1989). Inamgaon also has yielded the evidence of rhinoceros in the Chalcolithic levels. Although the object has not been positively identified, yet the presence is obvious, in view of the large number of remains noticed up to this period in the surrounding region.

However, in spite of the strong tradition of portrayal of rhinoceros across numerous cultures in north India, the absence of any evidence whatsoever in relation to OCP and PGW cultures is enigmatic. Later, it is with the continuity of traditions provided by the ubiquitous BRW cultures that the earlier traditions resurface feebly in PGW times, significantly during NBPW times and with full vigour during the reign of Mauryas. It is at this time that rhinoceros resurfaces as in the disc of Murtaziganj (Gupta 1980) and seal of Bhita (Chandra 1970). The Jains and Buddhists in line with the tradition of the Harappans have represented the figure of rhinoceros near the image of the deity. Rhinoceros is depicted as the cognizance of Tirthankar Sreyamsnatha (Mohapatra 1981). The earliest of such depiction is known from the Jain Stupa at Mathura and is dated to about 1st century BC/AD. One depiction of rhinoceros is known from the Buddhist Stupa no. 2 at Sanchi dated to about the middle of 2nd century BC (Fig. 3). Besides the religious depiction as cognizance of the Tirthankara, the animal is not known much in art after the Mauryan period. According to Dhavalikar (1982), Chandragupta II coins show the rhinoceros but, as he says, only as signifying the conquest of eastern India. Again the hunting scene (Vanaja 1983) represented in the gold coins of Kumaragupta symbolises the depreciation of rhinoceros or what it stood for symbolically. The paucity of representation of rhinoceros cannot be without its social reasons. The Mughals unaffected by the social ambience incidentally have portrayed the animal both in art (Randhawa 1983) and literature (Das 1978).

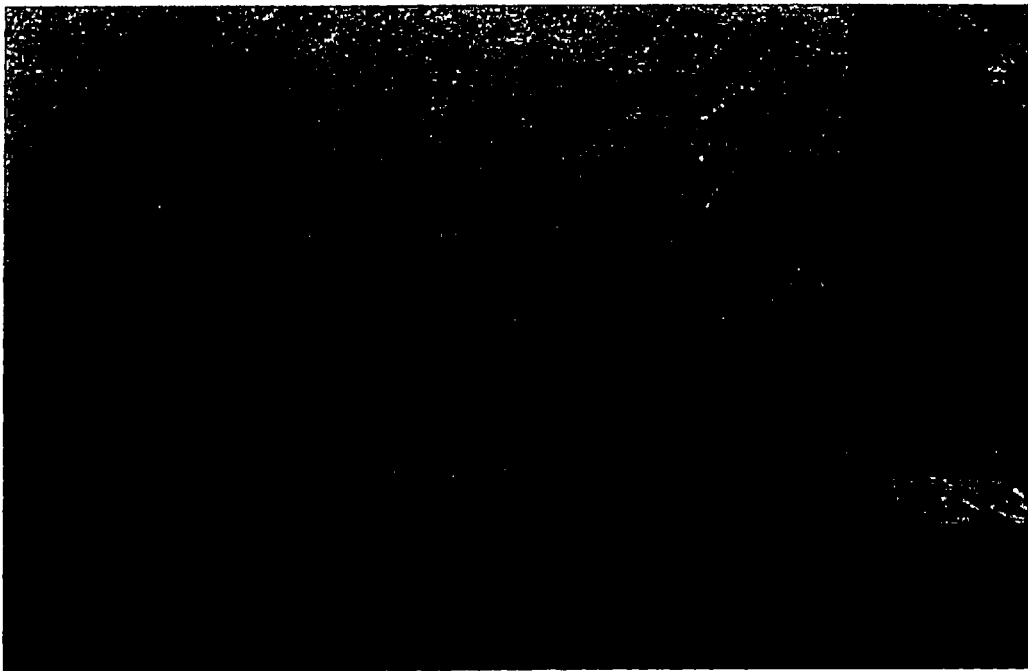


Fig. 3. Rhinoceros sculpted in the Stupa no. 2, Sanchi, Raisen District.

In retrospective if one looks at the numerous materials, cultures, and themes that rhinoceros has been associated with in India the fading out of popularity becomes all the more curious. Besides fossils, bones, rock paintings, terracotta images, terracotta seals, copper plates, bronze image, terracotta disc, gold coins, stone relief carvings, Mughal paintings, it has also been found represented on glazed cylindrical seal (Lamberg-Karlovsky 1982) and the

common material steatite (Pande 1984). The north Indian cultures include the Mesolithic, Harappan, late Harappan, Chalcolithic besides NBPW culture. The themes include general depictions, hunting, fleeing from rhinoceros, etc on rock paintings. Besides, this animal was used in religious themes, and entertainment as in toys and masks, besides in commerce as in seals and coins.

In spite of the numerous examples of this animal from hoary antiquity including the proto-historic period especially the Harappan, the absence of rhinoceros in the earliest literature is strangely the least said. It becomes all the more mysterious with increasing number of scholars asserting the coeval and co-terminus overlap of the Harappans and the Vedic people. Singh (1995) in his scholarly work, the Vedic Harappans did not cite a single evidence of rhinoceros in the Rigveda. Although agreeing to his words - albeit in another context - that "absence of evidence is not evidence of absence", yet the absence here is enigmatic. To the present author, it appears that the Harappans and Vedic people may have been either coeval or co-terminus but not both together. However, to speak on one single bit of evidence on so large a subject would be fallacious. Moreover, there is always a possibility that whereas the artists were enamoured by the rhinoceros, the literary authors consciously negated the existence of rhinoceros. However, this reasoning would be falling in the realm of another enigma: as to why the authors did negate the existence of an impressive animal and whether there is any antecedent reasons for such negations. Perhaps then, such negations might have carried forward as depreciatory portrayal in the literature that followed, which in turn caused the diminishing popularity of the animal. However this, would require a marathon statistical analysis of available literature.

SOME QUESTIONS

In the meanwhile, however the presence or absence of portrayals in art and literature raises few questions that could be useful for further researches.

1. Why has Rigveda paucity of reference to this animal?
2. Why did rhinoceros steadily fall out of popularity almost coinciding with the advent of OCP culture, barring exceptions?
3. Was this animal's existence negated and later disparaged in literature? If so, why?
4. Can similar instances of presence or absence of other symbols of mankind in art and/or literature be of use in providing clues to the thinking of man across time and space?

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Fig. 3. Rhinoceros sculpted in the Stupa no. 2, Sanchi, Raisen District.