

Neolithic Hunting Scene on a Stone Slab from Burzahom, Kashmir

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INTRODUCTION

A stone slab depicting a hunting scene (Pl. I and Fig. 1) was exhumed from the excavations at Burzahom, District Srinagar, Kashmir (*IAR* 1965-66). The discovery of the site was first reported in the mid-thirties when limited excavations were conducted there by the Yale-Cambridge Expedition (de Terra and Paterson 1939: 233-234; Gordon 1960: 80-82). Excavations were taken up again in 1960 by the Frontier Circle of the Archaeological Survey of India and are still in progress (*IAR* 1960-61: 11; 1961-62: 17-21, 98; 1962-63: 9-12; Pande 1969: 451-462). This work has brought to light four phases at the site: the first two are Neolithic and the third and the fourth are Megalithic and early historical respectively. On the basis of the Carbon-14 determinations (Agrawal and Kusumgar 1965; Agrawal, Kusumgar, and Unnikrishnan 1966) the neolithic levels have been dated to about the third-second millennium B.C. (Lal 1962 and 1963: 217). The square, rectangular, and circular or oval dwelling-pits of Neolithic phase I and the entire neolithic repertoire, comprising polished bone and stone tools, pottery with mat-impressions at the base, and skeletons with red ocher applied on them (particularly from Neolithic phase II and the Megalithic phase) (Sharma 1967: 239-242) are singularly different in relation to the Indian Neolithic, thereby suggesting extra-Indian affiliations of the site. With the discovery of similar remains in the Kashmir valley (*IAR* 1961-62: 17-18; 1962-63: 9-12; Pande 1969: 459), a new culture-zone is envisaged, designated as the Northwestern Neolithic Culture. The overall economic level at Burzahom seems to be that of the hunters and food-gatherers, with the neolithic folk at Burzahom practicing rudimentary cultivation that is attested by harvesters, round perforated stones used possibly as weights

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for digging sticks, etc., discovered at the site. Mention may also be made here of the evolutionary sequence at Burzahom and the other sites in Kashmir valley, which clearly reveals not only the dovetailing of the Neolithic with the Megalithic but also points to the emergence of megalithism in Neolithic times in the Kashmir valley (Pande 1969: 460-461).

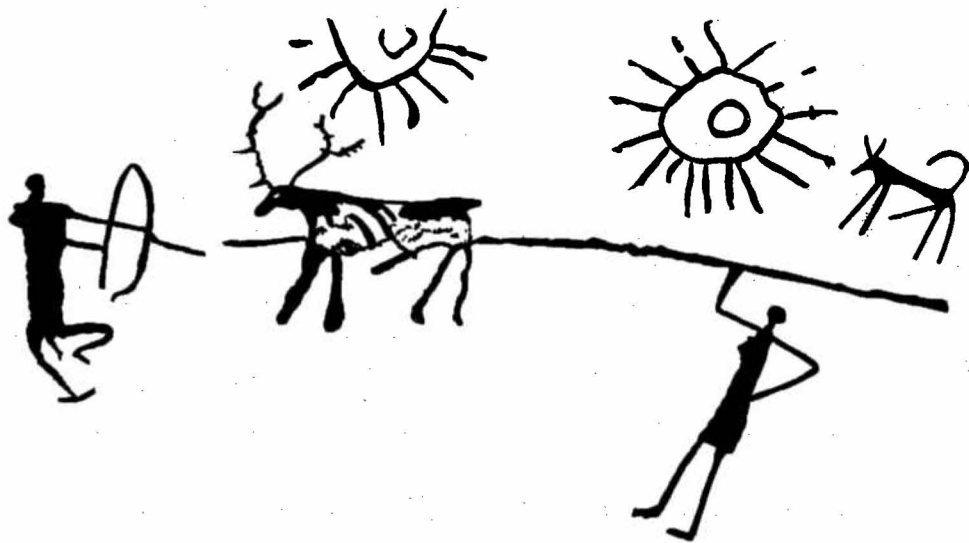


Fig. 1 Drawing of the hunting scene on a stone slab from Burzahom, Kashmir.

The stone slab formed part of a rectangular structure made of stone slabs and rubble belonging to the second phase of the neolithic culture at the site (*IAR* 1962-63: Pl. 24 A). The slab, with engravings, stood on its edge in an inconspicuous place, and seems to have been reutilized. In all probability, the slab was not originally intended to be a part of the structure despite the fact that the engraving had been facing the interior. The structure itself was built on an oblong plan, inside which was found an infilling of fine yellowish sand. The purpose of this extant structure, represented by only one course, is difficult to ascertain, nor is it possible, unless the full report is published, to establish any relationship between the structure and the slab bearing the hunting scene. In this paper an attempt has been made to study the scene, as it appears to be the only authentic evidence of neolithic art in India with a definite chronological horizon. (Mention may also be made here of another slab discovered from the neolithic levels which has a tectiform engraved on it.)

The stone slab is flat on both faces, the carved side being smooth compared to the uncarved one. It is irregularly cut, with a maximum width of 70 cm. Toward the top it is partially damaged, as a result of which the uppermost part of the scene is lost to a small extent. However, the break is certainly not a fresh one, and perhaps this very break might have resulted in its subsequent reuse as an ordinary slab in the structure.

The hunting scene is incised on the upper half of the stone, and has a maximum height of 45 cm; the engraving itself covers an area of 48×27 cm and is divided into two registers.

Briefly, the scene depicts two human figures hunting a stag, one of them attacking it from the front with a bow and an arrow—an arrow having already pierced through the chest of the animal. This figure is shown in an unusual posture for an archer, that is, with the right knee placed on the ground while drawing the bowstring with his right hand and releasing the arrow with the left. The bow appears to be of the simple segment type so commonly used in Neolithic times (Rausing 1967: 35–51). The figure has a height of 12 cm.

The other figure is attacking the animal from behind with a long spear which has almost pierced through the body of the animal. This figure stands akimbo, thrusting the spear with its upraised right hand, and measures to a height of 14 cm from top to toe.

The principal figure in the scene is that of the stag, which occupies the central position. The animal is shown with a spotted or striped body and many-branched antler. It measures 14 cm in length and 13 cm in height.

In the upper register are shown a dog and two symbols. The height and length of the dog, which evidently is a member of the hunting party, are both 6 cm, and it has distinctly long, straight ears, long legs, and a curved tail.

The symbols, which are alike, comprise two concentric circles, with sixteen radiating lines all around. One of these, on the right, is partially damaged.

IDENTIFICATION OF INDIVIDUAL FIGURES AND SYMBOLS

All the human and the animal figures depicted in the scene can be identified because of the distinct delineation. For instance, of the two human figures, the one facing the stag is a male and the other behind the stag is a female; the male figure (facing the stag) has been shown with exaggerated genitals between the legs, while the other figure (behind the stag) can be identified as a female on the basis of the breasts seen clearly in her contour-profile and the skirted dress she is wearing. The identification of the latter as female is further attested by her attacking posture, in which she has been shown standing akimbo—so characteristic of a female—while thrusting the spear into the animal. (It is rather unusual to have the representation of a female with a spear; Solheim, personal communication.) Further, this figure is also shown without the representation of the genitals, which are depicted quite clearly in the case of her male companion. (The small chip between the legs of the female figure is a natural break and does not represent the genitalia.)

The figure of the central animal is of the stag (*Cervus elaphus*); the excavation itself yielded the skeletal remains of the animal. That it is a male is proved by the antler and the representation of the genitals, again of an exaggerated size.

The dog seems to be a domesticated one and trained in accompanying the hunting party. Representation of the genitals of this animal also shows that it is a male.

The two symbols on the topmost part possibly represent the sun, one of which perhaps represents the day of the hunt and the other the day of successful return (Campbell 1960: 296–297). This interpretation is based on the primitive concept of the Deathless Animal and the ritual of the Returned Blood, wherein the sun plays the vital role; an account of the ritual and the cognate concept among the African Pygmies has been narrated by Leo Frobenius (Campbell 1960). Significant in the context of the Burzahom hunting scene is Campbell's (1960: 297) interpretation,

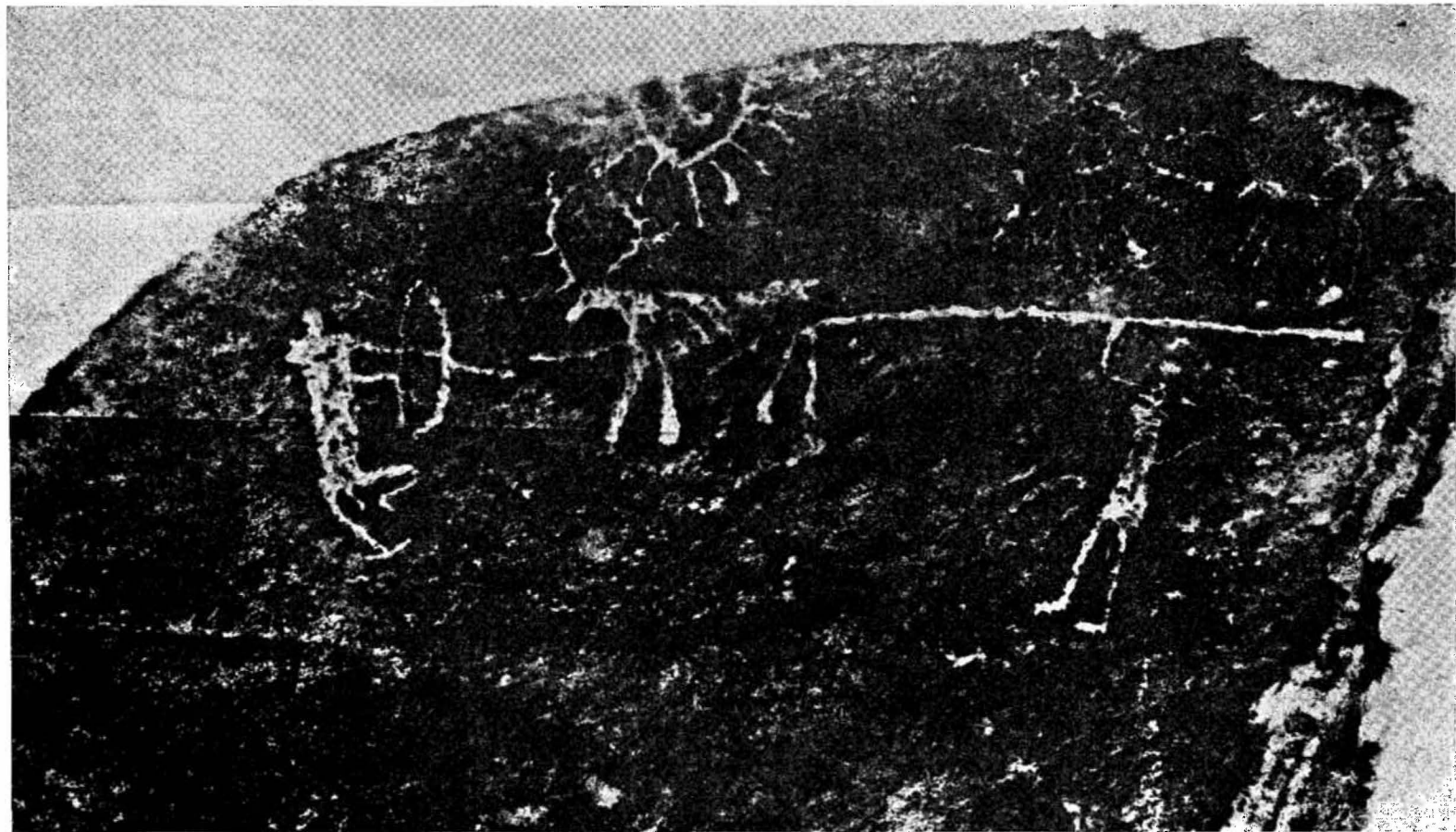


Plate I Estampage of the stone from Burzahom, Kashmir, bearing an engraved hunting scene.

which is as follows: "The crucial point of the Pygmy ceremony was that the rite should take place at dawn, the arrow flying into the antelope precisely when it was struck by a ray of the sun. For the sun is in all hunting mythologies a great hunter. . . . The sun is the hunter, the sun's ray is the arrow, the antelope is one of the herd of the stars: ergo, as tomorrow night will see the star return, so will tomorrow the antelope. Nor has the hunter killed the beast as a personal wilful act, but according to the provisions of the Great Spirit. And in this way 'nothing is lost'" (Campbell 1960: 298). We also know of the belief among the neolithic peoples elsewhere that the sun has the power to multiply the game (Anati 1964: 163), and that the cults of the sun and of fertility merge notably with that of the stag (Anati 1964: 164). Solar symbolism is fairly common in Neolithic times (Maringer 1960: 169-173 and 197-200) and heliolatric religion grew with the adoption of a near-settled life and agriculture, which the remains from Burzahom substantially attest.

CONCLUSION

In spite of the clear delineation of the human and animal figures, the tenor of the hunting scene is marked by stylization and elongation of the limbs of the human and the animal figures. While the human figures have been shown in part profile, the animal figures are in full profile and the contours are not rounded but angular.

The scene is the first find of a graphic representation of neolithic life recovered from regular stratified excavations in India. Also, it is the first indubitable example of neolithic art in India, for the other examples of prehistoric art from the various parts of the country have been dated variously by scholars. The scene possibly portrays one of the principal occupations of the Burzahom people in the Kashmir valley during the second millennium B.C. There are glimpses of the weapons and also of the dress; the use of bow and spear is proved beyond doubt, and this is also attested to by the recovery of hundreds of bone arrow- and spear-heads from the excavations.

The scene is, no doubt, a realistic representation of the hunt; at the same time it is not merely an example of *l'art pour l'art* but might have been intended to fulfill a magical function—possibly sympathetic magic, so common with the primitive communities in the different parts of the world (Adam 1949: 146). Similarly, the exaggerated genitals in the human male and both animal figures, coupled with the symbolic representation of the sun, convey the prevalence of some sort of phallicism or fertility concept among the neolithic community at Burzahom.*

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