

Rock Art in Thailand: A Legacy of the Past

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to discuss some significant points on rock art of the prehistoric period in Thailand beginning with how local folk tales influence local people's perception of rock art which differs from that proposed by scholars, followed by archaeological visits to rock art sites, artworks on the rock walls of the prehistoric artists, the past information from rock art and the present condition of rock art sites and the challenges of preservation. Though non-scientific learning of local people on rock art prior to academic inventory rock art sites of archaeologists, the results of the archaeological research brought a new perspective to the local people and have made them aware of their value and stimulating them into protecting sites in their community.

Introduction

From the prehistoric period to the historic period members of various ethnic groups in Thailand created material cultures of various forms; some of these have survived until the present while others are only known through archaeological evidence.

Rock art is one form of material culture which has been a product of the people in various times, such as prehistoric cavemen, ancient agriculturists and fishermen, Buddhists and Hindus and even a member of the Royal family.

Archaeological evidence tells us that groups of cavemen who both created and possessed rock art appeared in this country very late, and they were groups of hunter-gatherers who inhabited a mountainous area rather permanently and fishermen who regularly stayed in caves/shelters on islets near the shore during the fishing season. The cavemen's way of life which had gone on for thousands of years continued even in the sedentary community. However, evidence from excavated sites in the Northeast (Ban Chiang in Udon Thani Province, Non Nok Tha in Khon Khaen Province) reveals a new way of life different from that of the hunter-gatherer: about 5,000 BP, heralded the advent of cultivating and herding community in Thailand [Charoenwongsa 1987, Bayard 1971]. The people of the community mainly planted rice using water buffaloes for the ploughing. They raised cattle, pigs, and poultry while dogs were domesticated. During the three-thousand year period of this way of life new techniques which facilitated farming and domestication of animals

were developed by the ancient farmers and herdsmen. Fortunately some of them engaged in rock art, in which they depicted scenes of their great innovation, i.e. rice cultivation and animal domestication.

Their level of technical development also played a role in determining how the artwork was done. The replacement of stone by metal in some agricultural communities led to the production of sophisticated metal tools, some of which were used to carve rock. The so-called *petroglyphs* of the prehistoric period have been identified as being linked with the technological advancement of the agricultural community since the tools to make them seem to belong to the metal age.

The knowledge of how to use sophisticated metal tools and how to create petroglyphs was passed down over thousands of years and adopted by the people of the historic period. Artisans of that time were skilled in carving stone both for rock art and for building.

The existence of moated sites and evidence of early artifacts from overseas such as etched beads and carnelian pendants of the fourth century BCE [Glover 1996: 70-73, 80] and seal bearing a Brahmi script of the first century CE [Srisuchat 1996: 269; 2011: 254-255] indicate historic period in Thailand began several centuries before the emergence of the rock art of the period. The earliest rock art site of the historic period only dates from the seventh century CE [Srisuchat 1992: 13].

Rock art of the historic period still chiefly maintained the role of the ritualistic art as it had in previous times; however, its themes were different from those of the prehistoric period, for instance, the scenes of the people's way of life as well as their rituals were rarely portrayed on rock in the historic period. Thus, the themes present in the rock art provide information indicating the distinctive aspects of rock art during the two periods. In cases where rock art sites contain superimposed works of different styles and/or aesthetic works unrelated to religious concepts, the work may be distinguished through the comparative study of the techniques used in the creation of the rock art of the two categories.

In this paper, the rock art of the prehistoric period will be discussed. The rock art of the time was created to record noteworthy events in the artists' lives, some of which reflected their communal perceptions.

Rock art in Local Folk Tales

A rock art site in Thailand that is of particular importance to archaeology was found rather accidentally. It is not an exaggeration to say that the rock art sites were known to local people in this country long before their first reference by scholars. Some local folk tales on everybody's lips which were heard by some scholars led them to discover rock art sites. For instance: L.L Lunet de Lajonquiere, a French

military surveyor, who was in Thailand during the period 1903-1909 to map the country, heard a part of the story of Sang Thong during his visit to Phangnga bay in the South. This is the story: Sang Thong, a prince who was adopted by Yakshini (a female demon) called Phanthurat. After learning that his adoptive mother was not a human being but a Yakshini, he fled, soaring into the air by the aid of magic, to his mother's palace in a place in Phangnga bay. Phanthurat pursued him without success. She finally died of sorrow on a small islet called Khao Khian. Before she died, she drew for him a *yantra* (the visual form of a *mantra*, a saying of great potency) to teach him how to call beasts and fish. A pictograph at Khao Khian is believed by the local people of the Phangnga bay area to be the yantra drawn by Phanthurat; de Lajonquiere described it as an artwork of an unknown primitive group in his report which was published in French bulletin in 1912 [de Lajonquiere 1912]. This pictograph was identified afterwards as rock art of the prehistoric period.

The perspective related to rock art in local folk tales differs from that proposed by scholars. The local people may select parts of a known folk tale or make up a tale themselves to explain the hows and whys of a picture portrayed on the rock. A pictograph from Tham Ta Duang, Kanchanaburi Province, Central Thailand, shows a procession of stick figures carrying something that is referred to as a treasure casket in a story told by the local people in close vicinity to the site. A pictograph of a group of men at Tham Khon, Udon Thani Province, Northeastern Thailand, has been interpreted by the local people as related to a Northeastern folk story, *Usha-Barot*; thus the pictograph is said to be a portrait of princes from various countries which was drawn by a maid-in-waiting to get Princess Usha to point out her lover.

The stories about magic places or haunted places which continue to be told, have in some cases saved rock art sites from damage caused by man, for those who believe have left the site alone. On the other hand, stories related to treasure have enticed people to disturb a site and the rock art can easily be destroyed.

Villagers who live in close vicinity to rock art sites have been influenced more or less by the folk tales. Somehow they have the peculiar belief that rock art is the product of magic – it was executed by spirits. Another belief is that it is a self-created work, not a man-made thing. Such beliefs have caused excessive use of a site for ritual, regardless of its value as cultural heritage.

Archaeological Visits to Rock Art Sites: From Fieldwork to Data Processing

Rock art is widespread throughout Thailand. Note that from the first discovery of rock art site by L.L Lunet de Lajonquiere in 1903 which is called Khao Khian in Phangnga bay, Phangnga Province, Southern Thailand, to the recent discovery of a rock art site in 2013 at Tham Pha Tup in Lampang Province, Northern

Thailand, more than 200 rock art sites of significance have been located. More than 155 are known as unique sites of the prehistoric period, 38 as unique sites of the historic period, and 12 as multiple sites of the two periods. Of the 155 rock art sites of the prehistoric period, the Northeast possesses the most, followed by the South, the Central Thailand, and the North, respectively. What we have called a rock art site can contain artwork visible in one spot or more. Depending upon the way the scholar describes it, the number of rock art sites, therefore, can vary. This point can be exemplified by the following sites:

The pictographs at Khao Plara, Uthai Thani Province, Central Thailand, are on the same wall and indisputably constitute an artwork in one spot.

Rock art sites like those of the Ban Phu Group in Udon Thani Province, Northeastern Thailand, contain artworks large and small, prehistoric and historical, in 70 spots. Each spot has its own place-name, such as the so-called Tham Wua Tham Khon rock art.

Rock art at Pha Taem Khong Chiam or the so-called Pha Taem Rock Art Site in Ubon Ratchathani Province, Northeastern Thailand, contains pictographs not only at a cliff called Pha Taem but also at three other spots called Pha Kham, Pha Mon, and Pha Mon Noi.

Rock art at Pratu Pha in Lamphang Province, Northern Thailand, is considered to be the largest rock art site in Thailand. Even the artworks were placed on the same cliff called Pratu Pha, due to its discontinuous portrayal on the rock wall, each spot has its own place-name denoting the main figure-illustration, such as Pha Liang Pha (cliff of Sumatran serow), Pha Nok Yung (cliff of Peacock), Pha Wua (cliff of bulls), Pha Ten Ram (the dancing cliff), Pha Nok Kang Khen (cliff of white-rumped shama, a kind of bird), Pha La Sat (the hunting cliff). However, they all have been referred to under the name of the Pratu Pha rock art site.

The number of rock art sites is automatically changed when a new site is found, however, when a new picture is found at a place that has already been designated as a rock art site (e.g. the same cave, the same mountain), it is classified under the name of that known site. For instance, the first rock painting at Khao Khian was discovered in 1903; later in 1987 six other pictures were found. All of them, however, are listed under the Khao Khian Rock Art Site.

According to data collection of rock art sites of the prehistoric period in Thailand, the Northeastern region of the country possesses the most, i.e. more than 140 sites, while other regions possess not more than 20. This inequality of distribution may result simply from the distinctive topographical conditions of the Northeast and other regions. That is to say, the topography characteristic of the Northeast- vast, weathered and eroded sandstone complexes formed into rock massifs, rock shelters and cliffs- provide more suitable bases than any other rocky

forms. Apart from this, granite and limestone outcrops are scattered in western and southern parts of this region and provide in some places a quite useful background for art work. The hill characteristic of the North, the South and Central Thailand are dominated by limestone outcrops which yield a large amount of caves and shelters, the wall and ceilings of which provide a suitable background for portrayal, but the number of the rock art sites in these regions are few in comparison with those of the Northeast. A few sandstone outcrops of these three regions have rock art. Generally speaking, rock art in Thailand appears on rocky outcrops, whether sandstone, limestone or granite.

Considering the whole recorded data of rock art sites in Thailand the majority of rock art is found in rock shelters and not so many sites in caves. A cliff constitutes a steep rock face which is the best place for portrayal the long and large artworks is to be found at the Pha Taem Khong Chiam site in the Northeast and the Pratu Pha site in the North.

An archaeologist regards a rock art site as an archaeological site. When he or she discovers an example of rock art, he or she considers it a place of art of considerable importance where ancient man conducted activity, whether ritualistic or domestic. An archaeologist always tries to find other traces of human activities (e.g. the habitation site) around a rock art site in order to establish a hypothesis concerning the relationship between the rock art site and the community in its vicinity. Generally, rock art sites are undated; however a framework for the chronology of the rock art can be worked out through the comparative study of themes and techniques of the rock art itself and associated archaeological data; for instance, an agricultural scene from Pha Mon Noi, Ubon Ratchathani Province, Northeastern Thailand, which probably depicts rice cultivation, is in harmony with evidence of domesticated rice found at Non Nok Tha in Khon Kaen Province, Northeastern Thailand, dated to 5,000 years ago, so that the date of the rock art should be similar or not before the date.

But occasionally the evidence found indicates that it is unrelated to the rock art. Excavation at a rock art site is a way archaeologists have used to answer questions about how the rock art took place and to whom it is related. In some European countries excavations at rock art sites have been conducted, giving quite satisfactory results. In Thailand only 4 rock art sites have excavation been conducted. The Pha Tam Khong Chiam site in Ubon Ratchathani Province and the Pha Khong site in Loei Province, Northeastern Thailand, have excavation been conducted in 1987 by Dr. Amphan Kitngam. The evidence and the dating of the excavation seem not to be related to the artworks on the wall, for it yields the evidence of the historic period. The significant result of the dating of the rock art site is the excavation conducted at Pratu Pha in Lampang Province, Northern Thailand. The burial site had excavation

conducted by Mr. Chinnawut Winyalai and Ms. Wiwan Saengchan in 1998-1999; the result reveals a number of burials and grave goods. Each corpse wrapped in jute fiber or a wickerwork material like a bamboo mat and a pot with a painted wooden spoon inside was found on one of the legs of the top corpse and the polished stone adzes above the skulls of these deceased and a small wooden container above the top skull. The painting of such a burial rite was illustrated on the rock wall of the cliff. The burial site is dated to 3,200-2,900 BP by means of AMS Radio dating [Department of Fine Arts 2001: 40-45]. Thus it is conjectured that those who belonged to the burial tradition were the ethnic group who created the rock art here. Though the recent excavation at Doi Pha Kan rock art site in Lampang Province, Northern Thailand conducted by Dr. Valery Zeitoun and Dr. Prasit Auetrakulvit reveals the burial and habitation layer of the prehistoric men dated to 11,000 BP (by means of AMS Radio dating), the excavators addressed that the results from the excavation could not prove whether or not the traces of dwellers at the site belonged to those who created the rock art. However, the excavation is an on-going project which is planned to be conducted in the next season with hoping that more analysis of specimens will give new light to the interpretation of the relationship between the artwork on the wall and the trace of the dwellers at the site.

Artworks on the rock walls of the prehistoric artists

When man first discovered his ability to draw, only a single coloured line was repeated. His desire to express a meaning through art started from that single line, but he learned later that a few lines carry more meaning than merely a single line and many lines carry much more meaning than a few lines. He then composed picture using lines; whether figure or non-figure, it conveyed the meaning he wanted to express. What the anonymous artists portrayed on rock walls, of course, tells us what they wanted to express and how they achieved it by using primitive techniques.

The naturalistic forms they created can be termed realistic. They can generally be recognized as such and even illiterate persons can tell what they are intended to represent. Some artworks express unnatural figures that suggest poor technique and lack of skill. On the other hand, these artworks may have been intentionally created in this manner to show an idealized form. Such idealized paintings are hard to identify and their real function is still unresolved. It seems that the attitude of scholars towards the terms and divisions used to describe the forms of rock art depends upon their individual visions. However, two categories of figures and non-figures are accepted in general to describe identified and unidentified objects respectively appearing in rock art.

A person who has no experience in rock art may regard a stick figure as a non-figure, whereas a geometric form, which was regarded as a non-figure by others, can be identified as a tool or a tree by an experienced scholar. The real non-figures are hard to interpret; therefore, figures portrayed on the rock walls have been given more attention than non-figures. Furthermore, a group of figures which comprise a distinct scene provides decipherable information to the modern observer.

As far as the data available from rock art sites in Thailand are concerned, figures portrayed on the wall of the rock art sites consist of the following:

a) **Human figures:** The representation of human forms is varied. Stylized naturalistic human figures are found but they are in silhouettes, as if their shadows were drawn on the rock wall. Some human figures were drawn in outline and some were further schematized into stick-like figures (the so-called stickman). However, these human figures, even if small, show significant characteristics, such as portrayed in animated action (e.g. dancing), wearing various headdresses depicting distinctive status, holding a kind of weapon, exposing their genitals, etc. The human figure, in some cases, shows a characteristic which can be identified as male, female, or even of a child. There are very few pictures of men whose faces are shown, except in the rock art of Phi Hua To Cave, Krabi Province, Southern Thailand. Human figures are depicted in three distinct views: frontally, in profile, and in a twisted perspective. The use of twisted perspective in the rock art was employed to emphasize a meaningful form and to add dynamism to the painting. For instance, a large figure in the pictograph from Khao Plara, Uthai Thani Province, Central Thailand, is depicted in twisted perspective in order to show a body pattern on his frontal side cum his movement forwards in the ritual parade.

b) **Animal figures:** The majority of animals were drawn in profile, for more of their body could be depicted. Except for some species like the turtle, whose frontal view is their outstanding characteristic, they were portrayed frontally. The twisted perspective representations in animal form are few. Pictographs of animal figures are mainly silhouettes or partial silhouettes. Not many figures are drawn in outline, exemplified by a pictograph of bulls at Pratu Pha in Lampang Province, Northern Thailand. The so-called partial silhouette is sometimes known as the X-ray style. There are numerous depictions of animals with body patterns more or less reminiscent of X-ray images. It is difficult to distinguish a depiction in the X-ray style from decorative designs or depictions in partial silhouette. Both stylized and schematic forms were used in depictions of animals in pictographs; therefore, there are a number of animal figures the species of which are not recognizable and can only be tentatively identified as four legged, long-tailed, etc. A number of zoomorphic figures (for sometimes anthropomorphic) were placed at well-selected corners of

the rock walls at some sites. For instance, a painting of an imaginary figure, probably a man disguised as a horned animal was placed on the ceiling of the entrance to the Phi Hua To Cave in Krabi Province, Southern Thailand. The figures in this form probably expressed ritual symbolism.

c) Human hands and feet: Generally fingers and toes are not included in the depiction of human figures of the rock art of the prehistoric period, but these details were emphasized in the separate portrayal of hands and feet on the walls of rock shelters/ cliffs/ caves. In the rock art sites in Thailand handprints were usually made by placing the hand into a glutinous pigment then pressing it against the rock surface. Other techniques are to place the bare hand against the rock surface and then blow the pigment into the spaces between the fingers or to draw the outline of the hand with pigment. There are also hands executed by freehand painting such as a pictograph on the ceiling of Phi Hua To Cave in Krabi Province, Southern Thailand, of the two hands of which one has six fingers. A variety of sizes and shapes of handprints such as a large hand of an adult, a tiny hand of a child, a left hand, a right hand, etc. have been discovered in many sites. Sometime handprints have been found superimposed upon each other or placed near other figures on the same wall of a rock shelter/cave/cliff. The handprint or footprint design as seen in the rock art of the prehistoric period was not adopted by people of the historic period.

d) Objects: It is difficult to recognize the function of an object which was placed alone on the rock wall. Identifiable objects are those placed with another object or objects so that they compose a significant scene, such as an arrow-like weapon in the hand of a human in hunting scene (e.g. The Khao Chan Ngam rock art site in Nakhon Ratchasima Province), and a row of objects like fish traps placed near handprints, fish and wavy lines depicting a fishing scene (e.g. The Pha Taem Khong Chiam rock art site in Ubon Ratchathani Province).

e) Flora: Human and animal figures and well-composed lines (designs) placed side by side on the rock walls of the cave/shelter/cliff may constitute a significant scene. Quite often such a scene includes what may be a tree or else a field of grain. In some cases the depiction of plants adds meaning to a scene; for example, an agricultural scene at Pha Mon Noi or Mon Noi Cliff (in the Pha Taem Khong Chiam site, Ubon Ratchathani Province, Northeastern Thailand) could not have been identified as such if there had not been designs like a paddy-field in the picture. A pictograph at Khao Plara in Uthai Thani Province, Central Thailand, depicting a fertility ritual in which two dancers hold what looks like a kind of cereal plant is another conspicuous example of the significant appearance of a plant in a rock painting.

Both figures and non-figures depicted in the rock art of the prehistoric period of Thailand display each of two techniques of production: pictographs and petroglyphs.

The designation pictographs are used for drawings made with dry pigments, painting, stenciling, paint splattering and imprinting. Drawings made with dry pigments and paintings were commonly used to portray figures of humans, animals, objects and flora, whereas stenciling and imprinting were employed to make handprints. Pictographs of the prehistoric period generally were made with only a few pigments, all of which were extracted from natural sources, such as red from red ochre (haematite) or the seeds of certain kinds of tree (e.g. *Bixa orellana* Linn.), black from wood charcoal and white from kaolin or chalk. Each of these was mixed with natural glue (resin or animal tallow). The application of natural pigments by the prehistoric artists in Thailand by a primitive technique is evidenced by a stone mortar stained with red ochre which was discovered by the author and the Rock Art Expedition Team at Tham Pha Daeng rock art site in Kanchanaburi Province, Central Thailand, in 1989 [Srisuchat & Khunthong 1989: 65]. The mortar stained with red ochre was recently found from the excavation at Doi Pha Kan rock art site in Lampang Province by Dr. Valery Zeitoun and Dr. Prasit Auetrakulvit in 2011.

Petroglyphs or carvings in rock were executed by means of abrading, engraving, scratching and pecking. Evidence of the latter technique is rare. In Thailand the pecking technique can be seen only at the site called Pha Kradan Lek in Phitsanulok Province, Central Thailand. It is more difficult to describe the subjects of petroglyphs than of pictographs because the technique used limited the prehistoric artists to executing rough figures (not to mention non-figures, which require a much more subtle technique) in geometric forms which are much less detailed.

Rock Art: Messages from the Prehistoric Past

To interpret the subject of rock art through modern eyes unavoidably results in error, the older the rock art site the more obscure its subject. We may not be able to know the real objective of the portrayal of a single figure on the wall of a prehistoric cave, but we can more or less understand why a reclining Buddha image carved on the rock wall of a cave in the historic period. The reason behind this might be that our present concepts have been influenced by a historic cult which survives up to the present, whereas the chain of the prehistoric cult was broken and has no direct connection with our present culture.

From the archaeologist's viewpoint, a group of figures on the rock wall which composes a scene may provide him some of the missing part of human history that he cannot obtain from excavation. On the other hand, he or she expects that some unknown issues of rock art (e.g. dating of the artwork on the rock wall) may be

solved by means of excavation at the rock art site. However, the information that archaeologists gather from the rock pictures in Thailand deal with the following aspects of culture: landscape scenes related to the human community, hunting scenes, scenes of food gathering, scenes of fighting between man and man or between man and beast, agricultural scenes, scene of sexual intercourse, dancing scenes, ritual scenes, funeral scenes, scenes of meeting. All mentioned scenes indisputably reflect some parts of the history of communities and the way of life of ethnic groups in Thailand's past.

The rock pictures sometimes provide detailed representations of fauna and flora, which give us an idea of which species remain merely as fossils and which have survived up to the present day. Through rock art we may see representations of the following animals: wild elephants, rhinoceroses, wild oxen, bulls, antelopes, deers, Sumatran serows, wild dogs, domestic dogs, goats, cattle, fowls, peacocks, birds, crocodiles, water monitors, lizards, frogs, turtles, giant catfish, fish, dolphins, prawns, bees and beehives, etc. that enable us to understand animals which existed in the distant past. We also see depictions of the relationship of our ancestors with animals, some of which were domesticated. Quite often floral objects are not recognizable and the rock art does not give any clue to what species the flora belonged; nevertheless, we are able to realize how dense the forest was in the past from the complicated floral lines depicted in the pictures.

Rock art reflects the story of how the people in the past earned their living at a certain site in various ways depending upon space and time. Hunting scenes were often portrayed in rock art of the prehistoric period. For instance, a pictograph from Pha Khan Thong in Khon Kaen Province, Northeastern Thailand, depicts men with weapons and animals; a pictograph at Silp Cave in Yala Province, Southern Thailand, depicts a group of hunters with various weapons such as blow pipes and bow and arrows designed to kill prey from a distance. Fishing, also constituting a kind of hunting, is exemplified by a fishing scene at Pha Taem Khong Chiam in Ubon Ratchathani Province, Northeastern Thailand, in which figures of primitive fishing traps with hand prints over them representing the fishermen were placed alongside wavy lines, symbolizing of water, a turtle and a giant catfish. There is a depiction of a fisherman's way of life: a man is depicted in what looks like a boat at Phi Hua To Cave which is a part of limestone outcrop surrounded by water, located between a mangrove-shore and sea in Krabi Province, Southern Thailand. Besides, there are men and animals portrayed in a particular hunter-pray relation, such as the scene of a man fighting with a wild bull at Khao Plara in Uthai Thani Province, Central Thailand.

In the prehistoric period food-gathering was a common activity but paintings of such activity are rare. However, there is a depiction of food-gathering in the rock

art at Tham Rup in Kanchanaburi Province, Central Thailand: a man climbs up a tree to collect a beehive and pass it down to his friends waiting on the ground. Unfortunately for one of them, he is attacked by the bees.

The pictures of the period clearly illustrate a society of hunters and gatherers as well as of agriculturists and herdsman. The presence of food production activities of early agriculturists in Northeastern Thailand evidenced from excavation is further documented by cultivating and herding scenes in rock art of the region, such as those in the pictograph at Pha Mon Noi in Ubon Ratchathani Province, and a petroglyph at Phu Pha Yon in Sakon Nakhon Province.

The life scenes also furnish us with information about the technological innovations of the people in the past. But there also can be no depiction of the life's activities in a scene which contains only a group of figures; it just expresses a sense of unity. The most distinctive human-figure representation among many figures on the wall at Tham Rup, Kanchanaburi Province, Central Thailand, for example, constitutes a group of stick figures consisting of 68 diminutive human figures hand in hand forming a row. In some rock art scholars have presumed that the few handprints on the wall served as the signature of the owner of the place, but the depiction of a number of handprints of various sizes on the wall of a site more likely served as signatures of the people who participated in a communal activity at the place.

The family is regarded as the smallest unit of community. There are scenes in rock painting depicting domesticity, such as the scene at Khao Chan Ngam in Nakhon Ratchasima Province, Northeastern Thailand, depicting a hunter's family in which a hunter with bow and arrows stands near his dog while a pregnant woman and a child, probably his wife and his son (or daughter), sit on the floor. A couple of figures express an intimate relationship: brothers, partners, or husband and wife, appear in some rock art; for instance, in the pictograph at Phi Hua To Cave, Krabi Province, Southern Thailand, there are a number of couples each showing a particular characteristic.

It has to be kept in mind that as a communal art, the depiction of many activities on a scene as mentioned above was an integral part of a ritual scene; that is to say, what was portrayed was most dedicated to this purpose. However, we should not overlook the concept of people in the past recording their important events through rock art and this furnishes us with information about the past. Dancing scenes, for example, frequently appear in rock art, giving a clue as the purpose of dance as a part of a ritual; however, the depictions of dancing also may provide us a glimpse of what might have been an example of the performing art. We learn from the rock art how prehistoric people danced and what kind of musical instruments they used. A drum beaten with sticks is an example of a musical

instrument of a prehistoric tribe; it is depicted on the rock wall of Ta Duang Cave in Kanchanaburi Province, Central Thailand. Such artifacts of the performing art have rarely been found in archaeological excavation.

The Present Condition of Rock Art Sites and the Challenges of Preservation

From what we have seen, the anonymous artists in the past of Thailand expressed their faith cum power of creation through rock art and regarded it as an essential part of their lives.

Most of rock art sites of the prehistoric period are situated in remote areas far from present-day settlements. They were unavoidably damaged by natural surroundings throughout the passage of time. Some rock art sites which have no public function were abandoned and deteriorated. After they were discovered and became of public interest, some sites were reactivated as learning visit to the sites or as tourist points.

Sites like Khao Chan Ngam in Nakhon Ratchasima Province, Phu Pha Yon in Sakon Nakhon Province, Northeastern Thailand, have been occupied by present-day monks and have become a part of the forest monastery and are being maintained by the monks and the villagers nearby who support the monks. To allow the monks to manage the sites is not wrong, for many sites in hands of monks have been rescued from the damage caused by man and nature. However, some sites are excessively used for ritual and art on the rock is then unintentionally destroyed. In some cases, local people and monks who have wanted to prolong the existence of rock art, but lacked scientific knowledge about conservation, have conducted incorrect treatment in an effort to preserve rock art, which detracts from its value.

The registration of a rock art site as a national monument is a fundamental management technique to protect a site. Not more than 10 rock art sites in Thailand have been so registered. Other efforts to preserve the sites being undertaken by archaeologists of the Fine Arts Department consist of mapping the rock art sites, conservation of rock painting, projects for development the rock art sites into natural heritage park (such as the Pha Taem Khong Chiam site) or the world heritage site (such as Tham Wua Tham Khon site at Phu Phra Bat Historical Park), and public awareness campaigns. It is necessary that the work should be undertaken continuously and follow the results of archaeological research. The best way, however, to preserve rock art sites is to educate the public, making people aware of their value and stimulating them into protecting sites in their communities. The best practices on the issue are exemplified by two cases of rock art sites at Pratu Pha and Doi Pha Kan, respectively; both are in Lampang Province. After being discovered and a long-term archaeological excavation conducted at the sites in which some local people participated, local people have learned what the rock art is and how

important it is and do not regard it as a mere artistic product of a supernatural being as before. However, some local people still think of a rock art site in their community as a treasure that they gain some benefits from tourism.

Nowadays some rock art sites have become of interest to the public and have been developed as tourist spots by both central government and local government. The development in such a way alters the real atmosphere of the rock art site. This raises the question of how to make people aware of the real value of rock art, and how to protect rock art from the destruction caused by man and nature. We should not overlook the fact that our society has both selfish and ignorant persons and also persons who believe in the necessity of conserving their communal property. Therefore the most effective way to protect rock art sites is to make the latter aware of the real value of rock art and to educate them in the correct method of preserving rock art sites.

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