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## A lion figurine with non-Acheulian Lower Palaeolithic implements

The Lower Palaeolithic culture in India has yielded some of the earliest evidences of palaeoart and these are consistent with the rest of the world<sup>1</sup>. Evidences of palaeoart are crucial in considering the cognitive and intellectual status of the early hominins. Earliest palaeoart forms include various types of perforated objects, figurines, petroglyphs, petrographs, manuports, etc.

Among the perforated objects, beads were identified from some of the Acheulian sites in France and England<sup>2</sup> and their characteristics were confirmed with the discovery of disc beads made of ostrich egg shells dated by Th/U to 2 lacks from a Late Acheulian site in Libia, El Greifa<sup>3</sup>. The discovery of a cupule from *Olduvai Gorge*<sup>4</sup>, and a grinding stone from South Africa is attributed to the Lower Palaeolithic.

Lower Palaeolithic sites at Bilzingsleben have yielded engraved bone fragments, ivory and engraving on a quartzite slab along with thousands of non-Acheulian implements<sup>5</sup> roughly of 300 ka (refs 6 and 7). The engraved rectangular pattern on Blombos Cave hematite slab of 77 ka and several engraved bones found with Micoquian industry and Middle Pleistocene fauna from the gravel pit at Thuringia, Germany<sup>8</sup>, a fragment of banded ironstone bearing a set of seven curved, sub-parallel lines incised with stone tools from a late fauresmith context<sup>9</sup> dated between 420 ka and 260 ka

are some of the earliest known palaeoart in those remote times, which suggest that long-lived conventions definable as ‘traditions’ already existed<sup>10</sup>.

The existence of figurines in the Lower Palaeolithic has only recently been seriously considered and till now only two specimens have been designated as proto-figurines. Figurines should resemble another object and must have the indication of modification by human hand in order to emphasize their iconicity. One such find from Berekhat Ram,

Israel<sup>11</sup>, has been considered older than 230 ka. It has been further studied and its artefact nature confirmed by Marshack<sup>12</sup>, and his findings were corroborated by d’Errico and Nowell<sup>13</sup>. The second figurine from Tan-Tan, Morocco, is considered 400 ka old on the basis of the Lithic typology<sup>14</sup>. Here lies the importance of a line figurine discovered from Abhayagiri, Kerala.

The Lower Palaeolithic rock art in India includes the petroglyphs in the Auditorium Cave at Bhimbetka, Madhya



Figure 1. Lion figurine from Abhayagiri.



**Figure 2.** Lower palaeolithic tools from Abhayagiri.



**Figure 3.** Back side of the lion with elongated flake scars.

Pradesh, which have been ascribed to the Acheulian<sup>15</sup>, hundreds of cupules on the quartzite cave walls at Daraki-Chattan<sup>16</sup> and two cupule sites in Rajasthan<sup>17</sup> belonging to the Lower Palaeolithic of the Middle Pleistocene<sup>18</sup>. The uranium series result from a conglomerate travertine in the Hunsgi valley is about 150 ka, which appears to confirm the change from the Lower to Middle Palaeolithic between 200 and 150 ka ago<sup>19</sup>. This may help evaluate the age of certain palaeoart, particularly of the Acheulian in India. Petroglyphs of the Middle Palaeolithic traditions are mostly discovered compared to the Upper Palaeolithic rock art and their incidence is relatively less in the Lower Palaeolithic period<sup>5</sup>. In the face of these evidences, it can be concluded that palaeoart traditions already existed in India during the Lower Palaeolithic.

In this background the present discovery of a figurine from Abhayagiri, near Tenmala, Kollam District, Kerala, South India, is significant (Figure 1). Its occurrence with the non-Acheulian implements in an undisturbed manner leaves no doubt about the relative chronology of the icon (Figure 2). Lower Palaeolithic industry in Kerala is mainly non-Acheulian, has chopper–chopping–scraper assemblages, exclusively made of the locally available quartz raw material<sup>20–23</sup>. Abhayagiri industry has the same lower Palaeolithic characteristics and the association of the figurine with it places the palaeoart to the same culture of the Mid-

dle Pleistocene. The figurine from Abhayagiri is made of a quartz nodule, and on one side the animal features are carved while the back side is steeply flaked vertically down leaving long, shallow flake scars (Figure 3). Incised carvings and small flakings to mark the body parts are excellent and visible. Such markings on quartz definitely must have been done with the same hard quartz implements. Typology of the Stone Age implements and the petroglyphs at various sites in Kerala well demonstrate the most efficient expertise of the Stone Age people of the region. The unique lion figurine not only stands as one of the important testimonies of palaeoart in Kerala, but also of India.

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