

## An upper palaeolithic shrine in India?

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*A combined team from Allahabad University and the University of California, under the direction of Professors G. R. Sharma and J. Desmond Clark, have completed two seasons' work at the terminal upper palaeolithic site of Baghor I in the Sidhi District of Madhya Pradesh, India. Although Professor Clark, who gave us this account, voiced his doubts about religious interpretations for what he called 'esoteric archaeological finds', nevertheless it is stated in this article that there is a very strong probability that the structure and the stone represent a shrine to the goddess, or female principle, 'Shakti', which was built by the group of final upper palaeolithic hunter/gatherers who were living at the site of Baghor I. The directors were assisted by Jonathan Mark Kenoyer of Berkeley, and J. N. Pal of Allahabad University.*

There is little doubt that a religious belief imparting a sense of law and order and helping to control the relationships between human populations and the other components of their environment, is highly developed among present-day hunter/gatherers. Such beliefs not only help to provide a feeling of unity stretching far beyond the hunting band itself, but they afford an ordered interconnection between the foragers and the spiritual processes which are looked upon as all-powerful forces influencing life and death (Turnbull, 1968, 25). This is well exemplified in the case of the Musahar, a Dravidian tribe of hunter/gatherers who inhabit the jungle regions of the Eastern Vindhyas in Central India. According to Nesfield, quoted by Crooke (1896, Vol. IV:34), 'The great active power in the universe . . . is Bansapatti, Bansatti or Bansuri, the goddess who . . . personifies and presides over the forests. By her command the trees bear fruit, the bulbs grow in the earth, the bees make honey, the *tussar* worm fattens on the *asân* leaf, and lizards, wolves and jackals (useful food to man) multiply their kind. She is a goddess of childbirth. To her the childless wife makes prayers for the grant of offspring. In her name and by her aid the medicine man or sorcerer expels devils from the bodies of the possessed. In her name and to her honour the village man kindles a new fire for lighting a brick kiln. Woe to the man who takes a false oath in the name of Bansatti.'

There is every reason to suppose that, from upper palaeolithic times onwards, the hunting/

gathering populations, being equally dependent on their environment, were in a similar intimate relationship with all its component parts. Such early beginnings of these kinds of beliefs and responses can be seen in the cave art of Franco-Cantabria. They emerge again in the painted rock slabs in the Apollo 11 shelter in southern Namibia (Wendt, 1976, 5-11) and the crude engravings in the Koonalda Cave, Australia (Mulvaney, 1975, 156)—all of comparable age—and, by the early Holocene, such continuity is well represented in many parts of the world.

In Central India there is a rich treasure house of art in the painted rockshelters and caves of the Vindhya Plateau. The shelters themselves have consistently yielded sequences of mesolithic artifact assemblages which reflect the changing patterns of subsistence and the strategies these demanded. This art shows very well the continuity that exists from prehistoric into historic times. The various scenes of everyday life depicted lend credence to the association of this art with the ancestors of the Gonds and other tribal groups still inhabiting this region today (Misra *et al.*, 1977). The earliest styles, which are dated from 2000 BC to possibly as early as 8000 BC, show only aspects of the hunting/gathering way of life. Of particular interest in this present context is a characteristic of these early styles where the bodies of the animals and some of the human figures are often elaborately decorated with geometric or abstract designs in which, among others, concentric triangles are a

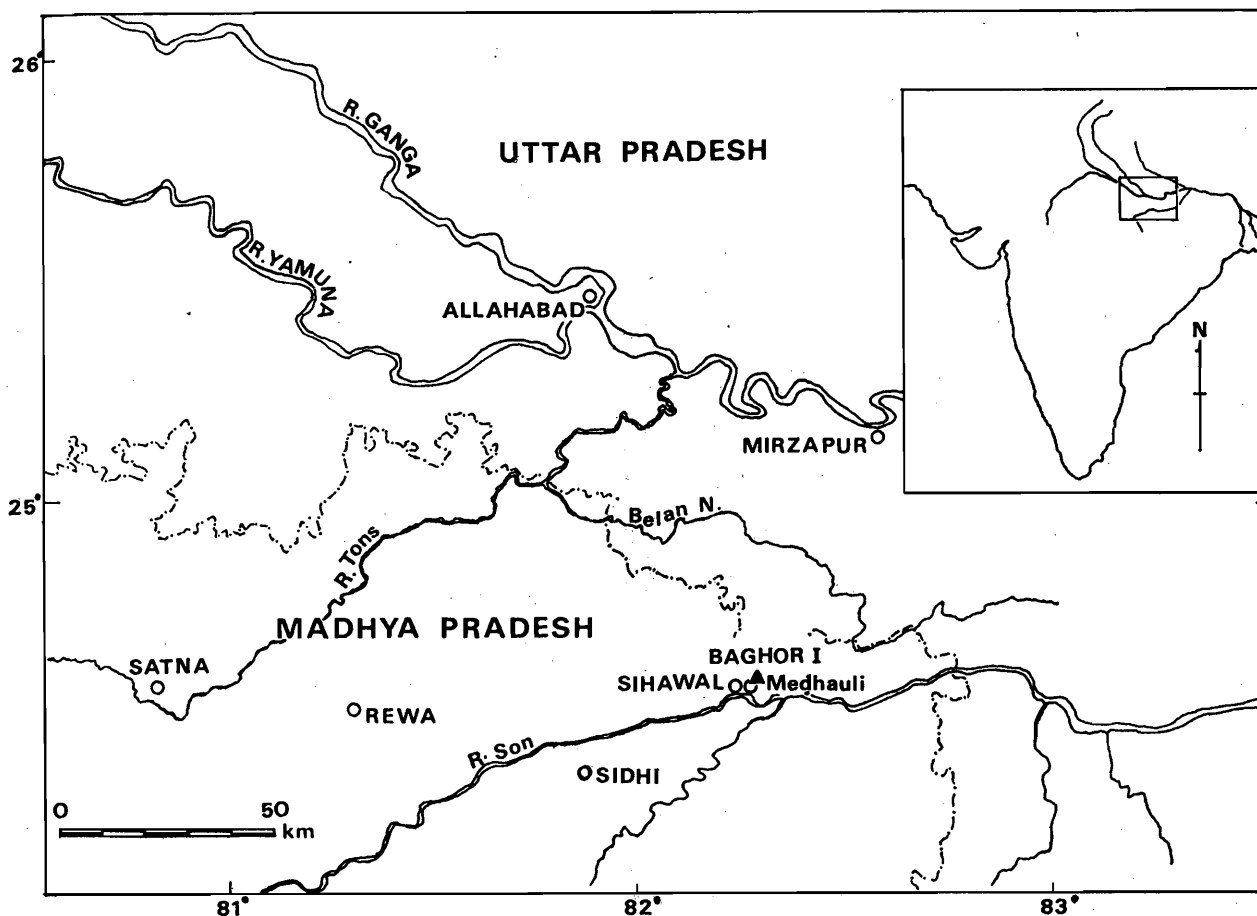


Fig. 1. Map to show location of Baghor I, Madhya Pradesh, India

recurring motif (Misra *et al.*, 1977, 20). Such motifs are a feature of the large and uncommon representations of wild boar, gaur, rhinoceros and deer which are notable because of their proportions, compared to the much smaller scale of the rest of this art (Wakankar, 1978, 16; Misra & Mathpal, 1979, 14). These animals are thought of by those who have studied them as 'deified' animals representing mythological scenes (Misra *et al.*, 1977, 20) and some of the figures possibly represent deities. The infilling of these drawings with concentric, geometric and triangular motifs draws our attention because of the common practice of tribal groups in the Kaimur region of Central India, where concretionary sandstone blocks with concentric geometric and, especially, triangular laminae are set up as shrines for the worship of the female principle in nature, or the goddess.

However, any attempt to use prehistoric rock art to try to identify the religious and ritual practices of the artists is fraught with difficulty. We find that the practice of filling drawings of animals with geometric patterns became a common technique

for pottery design during the Chalcolithic Period throughout the Indus valley and Baluchistan. Even where, as is the case in the Vindhyan region, continuities in both art and related material culture have been established, considerable caution is needed. Aspects of religious beliefs, other than burial customs, are basically unknown for the prehistoric period since much of the *art mobilier* is open to other kinds of interpretation. Fortunately, there are situations when connexions do exist and can be identified, as has been convincingly demonstrated in southern Africa between the beliefs and rituals of aboriginal hunter/gatherers and the rock paintings of the southern San (Vinnicombe, 1976; Lewis-Williams, 1981). Furthermore, the recent discovery in northern Spain of a cave shrine which is associated with a Magdalenian industry and is dated to 14,000 BP, is an indication that some manifestations of religious beliefs can be expected to have become established by this phase in man's history (Freeman & Echegaray, 1981). The discovery described below would seem to confirm this.

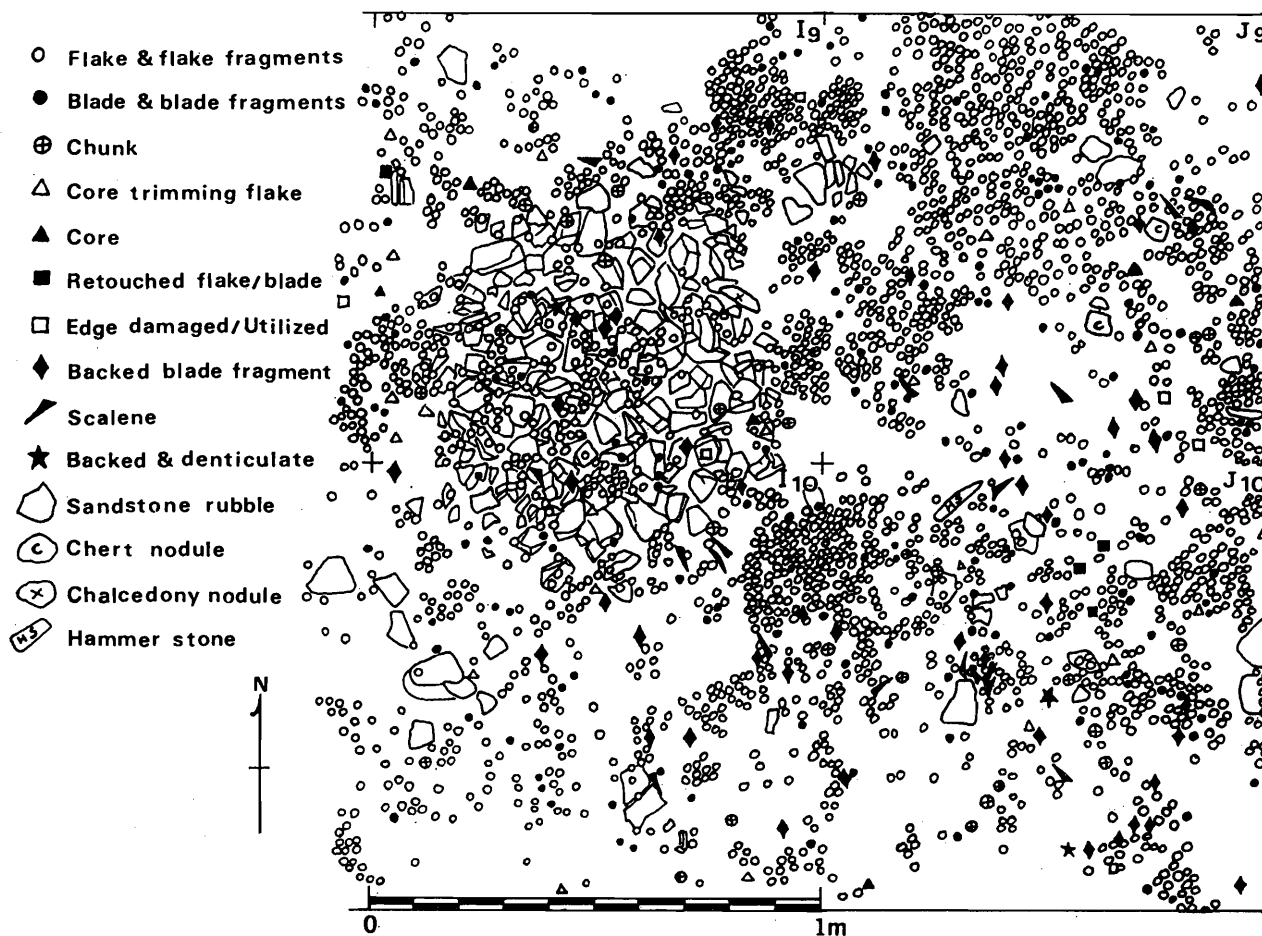


Fig. 2. Baghor I: artifact distribution

The terminal upper palaeolithic site of Baghor I (Lat.  $24^{\circ}35'2''$ N., Long.  $82^{\circ}18'34''$ E.) is located in the Son river valley near the base of the Kaimur Escarpment, some 4km northeast of Medhauili village, Sidhi District, Madhya Pradesh, India (FIG. 1). The site was first excavated in 1980 by a combined team from Allahabad University and the University of California, Berkeley, under the direction of Professors G. R. Sharma and J. Desmond Clark. In January 1982, the site was reopened for further excavation by the same team under the supervision of J. M. Kenoyer and J. N. Pal. During the course of the two seasons, a total of 286 sq. m was excavated, exposing the periphery of the site on three sides, while the western side had been exposed by erosion. Several different activity areas were identified: flaking areas where the rough blank forms were produced; adjacent areas where the chert and chalcedony blades were retouched to make various tools; places where debitage and spent tools had been dumped, forming thick accumulations of waste

flakes; and two distinct areas with rubble features and a possible hearth which can be related to living areas. In the midst of these various features was a rubble platform which will be discussed below. The artifact assemblage is primarily a blade and bladelet industry with backed blades, scalene triangles, drills, *perçoirs* and some scrapers. Numerous hammerstones and pieces of flat stones showing some minimal evidence of grinding were found *in situ*, as well as a partly perforated, broken ringstone. No other primary context sites of this period have been excavated in this manner in south Asia and the only distant affinities to the lithic industry are to be found in the Zarzian from Iraqi Kurdistan and the Epi-Palaeolithic of northeastern Kurdistan, dating between about 10,000 and 8700 BC.

During the final days of the 1982 excavation, while lifting the artifacts, a circular concentration of sandstone rubble forming a low platform was discovered, which had previously been obscured by an accumulation of chert debitage (FIG. 2; PL. Xa).

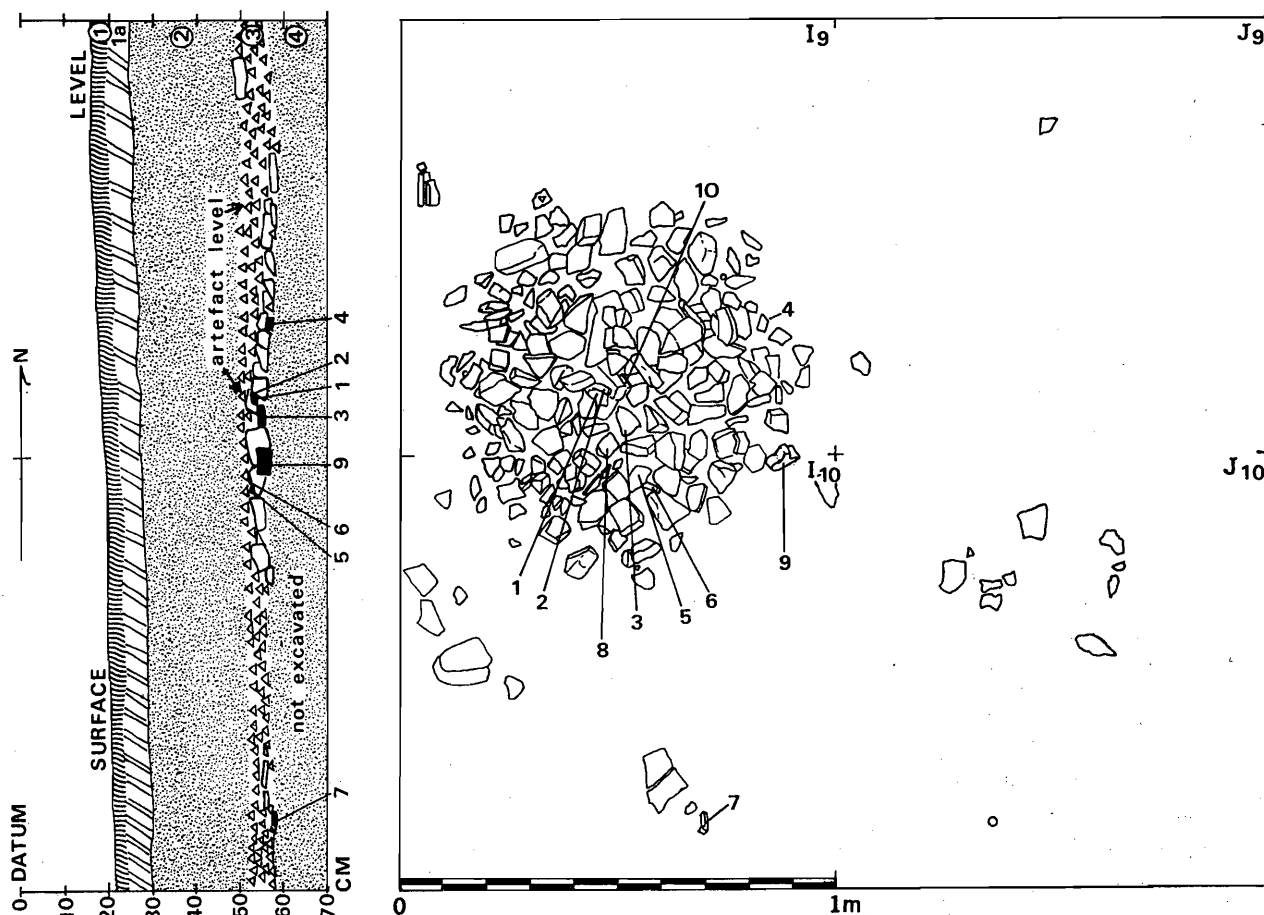


Fig. 3. Section and plan of stone platform, Baghor I

The artifact distribution in the area of the platform consists of a widespread accumulation of manufacturing waste together with some shaped tools and sandstone rubble. These artifacts had been discarded in such a manner that they formed numerous small concentrations which suggest that they represent individual dumping places for debitage cleared from the working areas. The areas between these concentrations contain relatively fewer artifacts and give the appearance of shallow depressions. One such heaped concentration was exposed in grid squares 1-9 and 1-10 (2 sq. m) at a depth of 35-40cm below the surface while, in the area immediately to the south of this and at a slightly lower level (-5cm), the occupation horizon produced relatively fewer pieces of flaked stone. The artifacts in both these areas comprise unmodified waste flakes, blades, cores and nodules, together with a small number of shaped tools and some sandstone rubble. After lifting the exposed artifacts it was revealed that the artifact concentrations were in some places up to 10cm thick, while in the lower area numerous pieces of sandstone

rubble interspersed with chert debitage were uncovered (FIG. 3: section). Upon lifting the chert artifacts we discovered that the sandstone rubble formed a roughly circular platform about 85cm in diameter (FIG. 3: plan). In the centre of this platform was a fragment of a natural ferruginous sandstone concretion, the weathering of which had accentuated a pattern of concentric triangular laminations, the colours ranging from a light yellowish red to a dark reddish brown (FIG. 3: fragment 3). The alternating light and dark colours present a very striking pattern and we were able to locate several fragments of the same stone which had spalled off from the central piece. Two additional joining pieces were found on the periphery of the platform while one fragment was displaced some 90cm to the south of the centre of the platform (FIG. 3: plan). So far, ten fragments have been found, all of which join together to form a triangular-shaped natural stone which is 15cm high, 6.5cm wide and about 6.5cm thick (PL. xb).

Since seven of these fragments were found in or near the centre of the platform, it would appear

that the complete stone had originally been placed in that position. The physical structure of the sandstone concretion is quite weak, tending to fracture along the laminations and, since there is no evidence that the stone was deliberately broken, it is probable that it became cracked and broke apart in the normal process of weathering, and that the fragments later became scattered naturally in the rubble platform. Concretionary blocks of this type of stone occur in the sandstone member of the Upper Vindhyan Series on top of the Kaimur Escarpment, and the nearest source is some 2-3km northwest of the site.

The significance of this rubble platform with its peculiar natural stone becomes apparent only when it is considered in the light of both the archaeological and the ethnographic contexts. The archaeological context shows that the platform is an artificial construction, the sandstone rubble for which was carried on to the site, and in the centre of it was placed a unique and colourful stone. Sometime later, probably after the structure had been abandoned, the stone became broken and the platform was partially covered by flaking waste from tool manufacture. This might have come about due to the dumping of debitage adjacent to the platform and then, as a result of taphonomic processes after the site was abandoned, this debitage came to be mixed with and partially to cover the platform. The time interval between when the platform fell into disuse, and when it became partly covered by the chert artifacts, is not likely to have been of any great length, and could probably be reckoned in terms of seasons if the site was reoccupied before the final departure of the inhabitants. However, there is absolutely no doubt that the rubble platform with its unique stone, and the chert artifacts throughout the rest of the site, are contemporaneous and were made by a group of final upper palaeolithic hunter/gatherers.

The significance of the central triangular stone became apparent in the light of current practices among the present inhabitants of the area, especially the tribal groups such as the Kol and Baiga, whose primary subsistence used to be from hunting and gathering and who have Dravidian affinities. These groups use this same type of colourful natural stone with concentric geometric laminations, often in the form of triangles, as a symbol for the female principle or the Mother Goddess, *Mai*. If it had not been for the fact that we had occasion to visit the shrine of *Kerai ki Devi*, the Goddess of

*Kerai*, about one km northeast of the site, the significance of the archaeological stone would certainly have been overlooked. The *Kerai ki Devi* shrine is situated on a low spur of shale at the foot of the Kaimur Escarpment. It consists of a roughly circular platform composed of sandstone and limestone rubble blocks on which six natural pieces of concretionary sandstone have been set up (PL. xia). In addition to these natural stones there is a headless figurine of what one informant called *Angari Devi* (the Goddess of Burning Coals) who is probably the same as *Angar Mati*, a goddess worshipped by the Agaria (Elwin, 1942, 88). The six stones in the centre of the shrine all have triangular or ellipsoidal laminations ranging in colour from yellowish red to reddish brown and are identical in nature to the one found in the excavations. These stones are said to represent the goddess and are smeared with vermilion, while the area around the shrine is littered with broken coconut shells, shorn locks of hair, potsherds and fragments of clay figurines. According to one informant who happened to be a Muslim, the goddess protects and bestows health and prosperity on those who worship her and the surrounding villagers bring offerings of coconuts and shave their heads to honour the goddess. The people who worship at this shrine include the Kol and Baiga tribals, caste Hindus and even local Muslim converts.

Once we began looking for such shrines to the goddess we found them scattered here and there over the countryside or in the villages. Our site watchman, who is of the Kol tribe, has set up near his house a shrine dedicated to the goddess *Kalika Mai*. This shrine consists of one large, tabular stone with geometric laminations and three smaller stones with various shaped concentric laminations and is marked by a long bamboo pole with a red flag (PL. xib). In the village of Medhauri is a more impressive shrine which has been constructed at the base of an enormous nim tree (*Melia azadirachta*) (PL. xiiia). The platform is made up of an earthen plinth capped by a stone slab upon which numerous oddly shaped blocks of limestone and sandstone have been placed. These stones represent various manifestations of the goddess and, here again, we find the use of triangular and ellipsoidal sandstone concretions with concentric laminations (PL. xiiib). This last shrine is very similar to the Kol shrines described by Crooke. He reports that the Kols of the Mirzapur

region, which is just to the northeast of Sidhi District, worship a deity called *Bara Deo* (the great god) otherwise known as *Gansam*. He is worshipped at a small plain platform, often marked by a red flag, outside the village. He is the protector of the crops and is propitiated by the sacrifice of a fowl, a goat or a young pig and a libation of liquor. 'He often too resides in a nim tree and near his shrine is generally a rude stone representing Devi, some vague manifestation of the female principle in nature' (Crooke, 1896, Vol, III: 312).

A search of the ethnographic literature on the tribal groups in the Vindhyan Kaimur and adjacent regions produced numerous references to the use of stones to represent the goddess or the female principle, *Shakti*. Unfortunately, the informants rarely give any detailed description of the stones used. The Gonds of Andhra Pradesh use 'rounded stones' to represent the Village Mother, *Nat Auwal* (Fürer-Haimendorf, 1979, 433) and the Oraon tribes worship 'roundish stones' which represent the goddess *Chandi*, who brings success in war and hunting (Roy, 1928, 60). The use of our particular type of stone has not been referred to in any of the ethnographic studies done in the Vindhyan Kaimur region or in adjacent areas, but this is not unexpected since the researchers were not particularly concerned with or aware of the historical and archaeological significance of these types of rocks.

Although we have numerous ethnographic analogies, there is very little comparative material from the archaeological record. The discovery of two flat, engraved stones from the neolithic levels at Burzahom, Kashmir, may be examples of memorial stones associated with some form of shrine. Both of these were found in association with a rectangular structure made of stone slabs and rubble with an infilling of fine sand, suggesting that they had been placed on some type of platform. The larger stone (70cm long) is engraved with a hunting scene and is roughly rectangular in shape (Pande, 1971). The second stone is smaller, triangular in shape and bears a schematic, linear design described as a 'tectiform' (Pande, 1972). The first stone was found fixed upright in the structure and brings to mind the practice of raising memorial stones which is still carried out by the Gonds and other tribal groups throughout south Asia.

Given the evidence that particular stones are used to represent deities or spiritual forces, we are

confronted with a situation where some stones are used to symbolize the female principle, and some the male principle, while other, it would seem identical, stones are regarded as just ordinary rocks. How are these stones differentiated and selected for worship? The site watchman at Baghor I informed us that when he decided to set up a shrine to the goddess, he went to the top of the Kaimur Escarpment where these particular stones are found and searched until he discovered the 'right' stones for his shrine. His decision was determined by the shape of the stones and the various colours of the laminations but he could not be specific as to the precise shape or colours that were required. According to him and all of the other local people who examined the archaeological stone, this too was the 'right' stone to represent the goddess. In fact, one indignant observer asked why we had broken this stone which was holy! When we had explained that the stone had been buried for thousands of years and that we had only just recovered it, he immediately paid his respects to the goddess by touching his forehead to the ground in front of the platform. On the other hand, not all rocks with concentric laminations were treated with the same reverence since a similar quadrangular block of concretionary sandstone which was found on the slope west of the site, was dismissed as being just another rock and not suitable for representing the goddess. The use of this particular type of stone with concentric laminations appears to be limited to the Kaimur area and is probably only as widespread as the geological formation which produces this form of concretionary sandstone.

While it is not impossible that this laminated stone could have been collected fortuitously with the rest of the rubble when the platform was constructed, this seems improbable. Its central position on the platform, its striking similarity to the stones on the present-day shrines to the goddess, the immediate and spontaneous recognition of its significance by the local inhabitants, and its origin on the top of the Kaimur Escarpment, provide strong circumstantial evidence that it had a special significance for the group that brought it to the site. We believe that there is a very strong probability that this structure and the stone represent a shrine to the goddess, or female principle, *Shakti*, which was built by the group of final upper palaeolithic hunter/gatherers who were living at the site of Baghor I.

The site did not contain any radiometrically datable materials but it is bracketed between sediments that are being dated. One already dated sample from the early mesolithic site of Baghor II, which is stratigraphically younger and lies about 1 km southeast of Baghor I, dates to  $8330 \pm 220$  BP (PRL-715). Other samples come from the coarse member of the Baghor Formation with a late Upper or Epi-Palaeolithic small blade industry which is dated, by associated shells to  $11,870 \pm$

120 BP (Beta-4792). The age of the Baghor I site, which is in the overlying fine member of the Baghor Formation, probably, therefore, lies between 9000 and 8000 BC. If this interpretation and dating prove correct and our identification of the shrine is substantiated, then this ante-dates by several thousand years the next oldest religious structure of this kind in south Asia, and is evidence of the remarkable continuity of religious beliefs and motifs in the Indian sub-continent.

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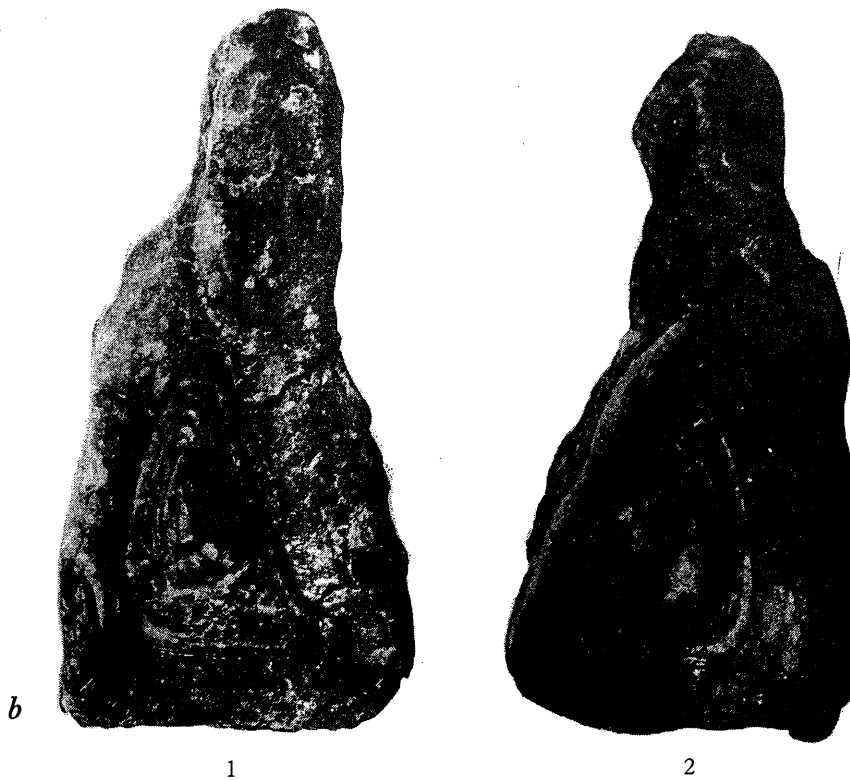


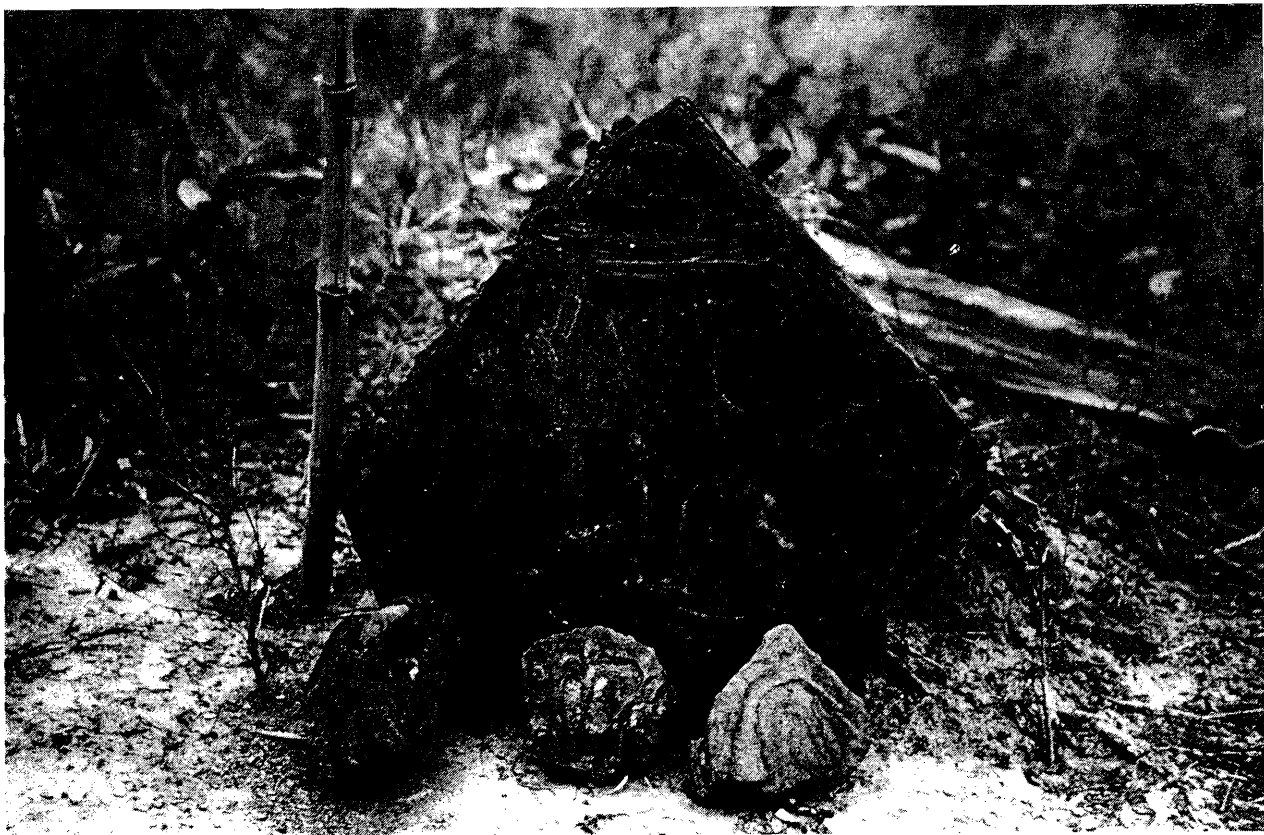
PLATE X: AN UPPER PALAEOLITHIC SHRINE IN INDIA?

(a) General view of the stone platform. (b) The natural triangular stone from the centre of the platform:  
1. obverse view; 2. reverse view. Ht. 15 cm





a



b

PLATE XI: AN UPPER PALAEOOLITHIC SHRINE IN INDIA?

(a) *The Kerai ki Devi shrine.* (b) *The shrine to Kalika Mai*

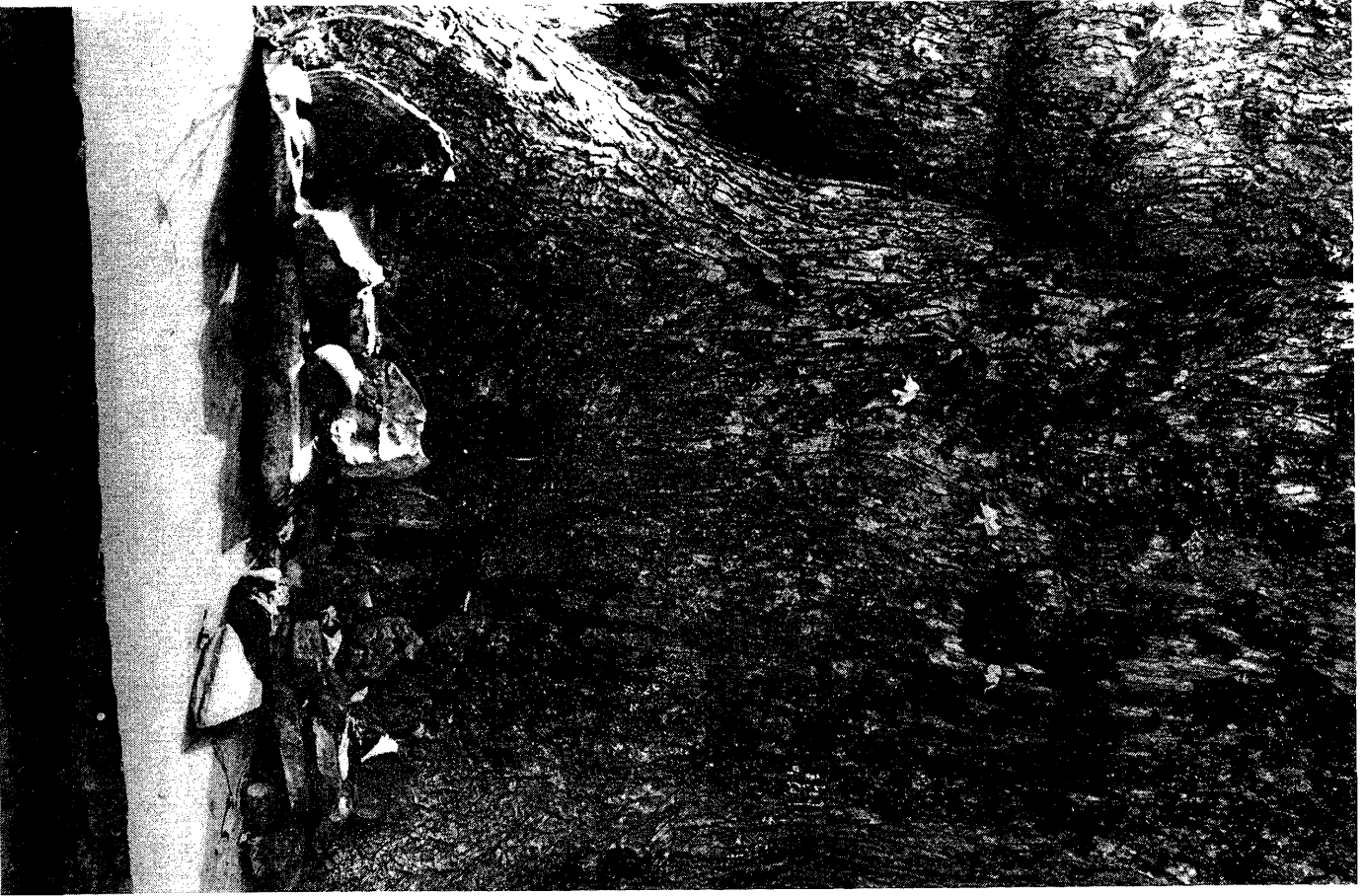


PLATE XIII: AN UPPER PALAEOLITHIC SHRINE  
IN INDIA?

(a) *The Medhauli village shrine. (b) The natural triangular stone from the Medhauli village shrine*

See pp. 88-94

Photos: Mark Kenoyer