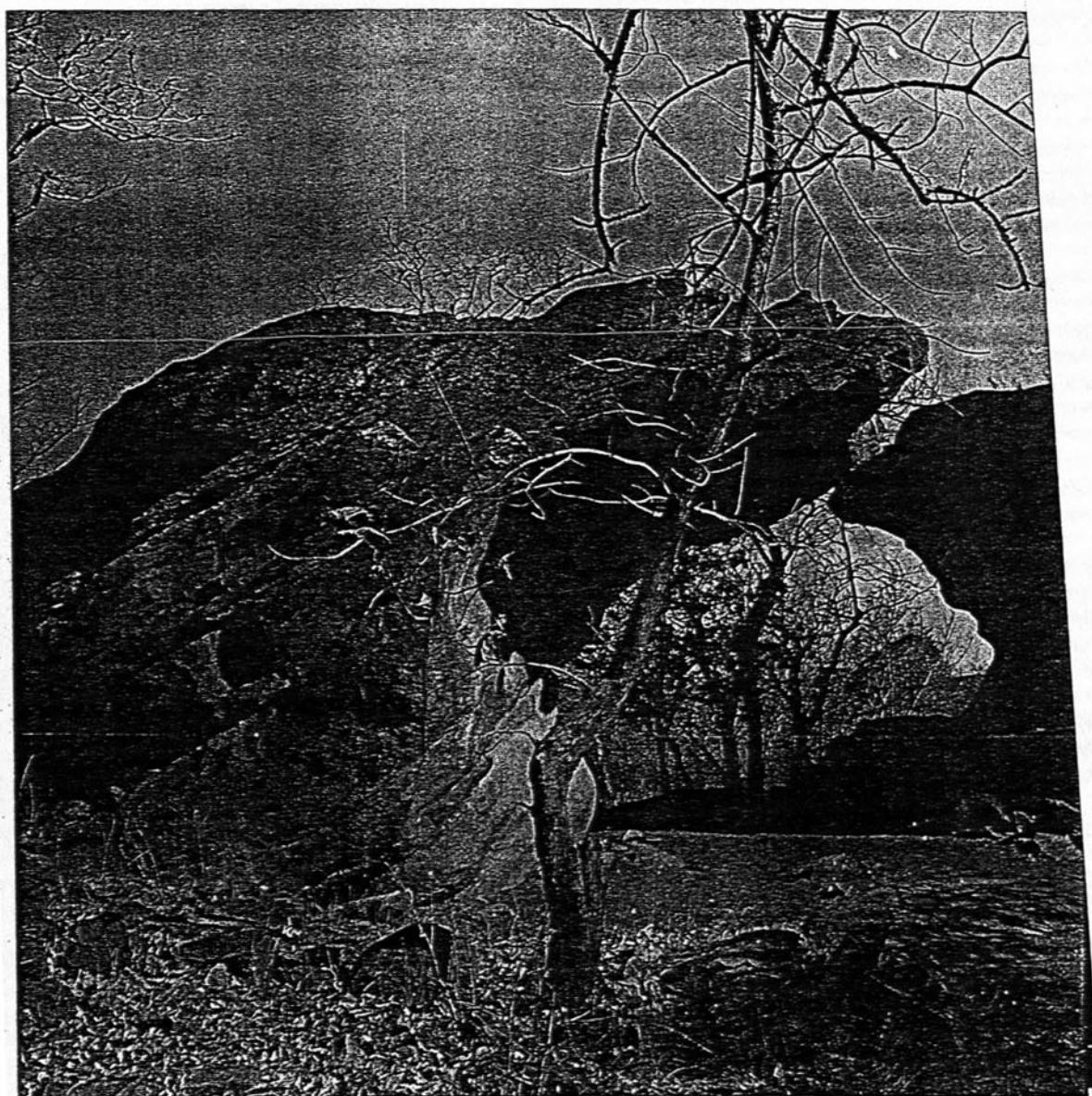


PREHISTORY

Early Images of the Deer



Bhimbethka rock shelters
PHOTOGRAPH BY ADITYA ARYA



In the study of civilisation, the one thing which differentiates homo sapiens from other creatures is their creative impulse. As an artist, early man chose his shelters, the dark secret cave recesses, rocky hollows and exposed rockfaces as the canvas to depict his aesthetic conceptualities. Thus, as **Dr Gautam Chatterjee and Minhazz Majumdar** say, he recorded history as he drew his surroundings and socio-cultural activities

Whose hands fashioned these vibrant images on rock surfaces aeons ago, and why?

Perhaps we may never fully discover the unknown artist's identity or the impulse behind his art. Perhaps he was a great hunter, a shaman, a chieftain or just the ordinary prehistoric man trying to come to grips with his environment. Rock art reveals not just early man's aesthetic sensibilities, it also presents his concerns and surroundings. Thus in unravelling mankind's evolution from homo erectus to homo sapiens, these early images offer vital but perplexing clues.

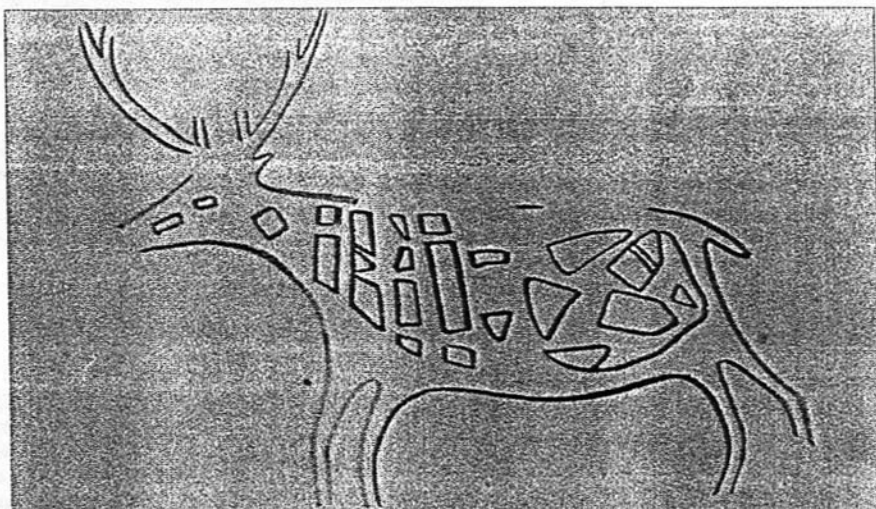
At the first Global Rock Art Conference organised by the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, (IGNCA), an exhibition on the deer motif in rock art was presented. Defining the universal scope of rock art, Professor B Saraswati, Research Professor IGNCA, explained the in-built logical relevancy of this art by a method he calls 'diachronic hermeneutics which is threefold. First, enter into the present context of traditional arts; second, move backward in time to rock art; and third, construct a dialogical frame in which the visual text and the traditional contexts are compared ... all these go for making a pluralistic world view to realise the cosmic dimension of rock art'. Man began drawing on cave walls

during the Upper Palaeolithic era, that is, roughly 30,000 years ago, in the last phase of the Ice Age, Pleistocene Age — when the ancestor of modern man, homo sapiens, first appeared. Nevertheless, the cultural traits perhaps continued even into the following Mesolithic Age (10000 to 8000 BC), when ancient man domesticated animals and expanded his activities. In the Neolithic Age (6000-4000 BC), apart from hunting and gathering, agriculture was introduced. The final prehistoric phase dawned with the discovery of copper during the Chalcolithic era (4000-3000 BC). These are the broad prehistoric periods during which rock arts are found in abundance worldwide.

There are three kinds of rock art—rock paintings, rock engravings and rock brushings. Elaborating on the Indian quartzite canvas, Erwin Neumayer noted 'The tough glass surface of the quartzite, whose colours range from white shades to red, depending on the mineral context, is the best canvas for pictures in the mineral pigments'. The primitive artist primarily used mineral and vegetable colour. Red ochre and white were common while green was rarely used. The most frequently used material was iron oxide or *geru*, according to Neumayer who has redrawn many Mesolithic paintings. Limestone was used for white while terra verta



Above:
Ramchaja, Chalcolithic. A procession with a large number of deer. The bodies are ornamented with a variety of geometrical patterns



Left:
Sanchi, Mesolithic. Deer with ray depiction in a non-naturalistic manner. Perhaps the artist was trying to fathom the space and structure with the body

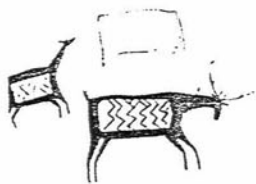
or green pigment was used in the Mesolithic rock art at Bhimbetka.

Animals, hunting scenes and other socio-cultural activities were commonly portrayed by early man. In some rock shelters, varied motifs from different ages or even the same motifs have either been repainted above or juxtaposed with previous paintings. In some shelters, certain areas have been painted again and again while the rest is bare.

For prehistoric man, existence was marked by a struggle for survival in a largely hostile world. During the Ice Age, the animal population was greater and men were forced to live together in small bands. Life, conditioned by the search for food, entailed a daily struggle against the little known and largely uncontrollable aspects of nature. Archaeological findings about prehistoric man, especially in Europe, have revealed the

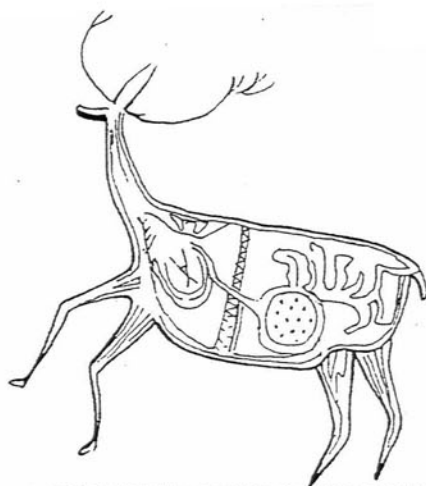
importance of the deer. The first deer appeared around 26 million years ago. A deer without antlers was traced from a fossil of mid-Oligocene (Geological Era) in Europe.

The different types of deer with their magnificent antlers, beautiful skins and graceful movements must have appealed early man. The deer provided meat, its hide was used for clot



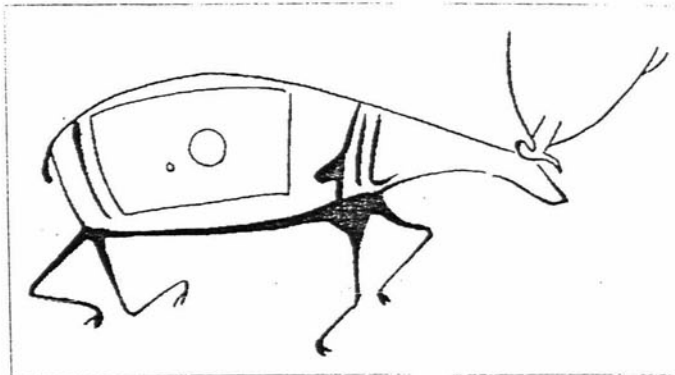
Above:
Ramchajia, Chalcolithic. Animal procession with a large number of deer. The bodies are ornamented with a variety of geometrical patterns

Left:
Sanchi, Mesolithic. Deer with ray depiction in a non-naturalistic manner. Perhaps, the artist was trying to fathom the space and structure within the body



Kathotia, Mesolithic. An accurate depiction of the deer's anatomy in X-ray style. The stomach even contains semi-digested food

Kathotia, Mesolithic. A deer with its heart shown in X-ray style



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fferent types of deer with magnificent antlers, ful skins and graceful ients must have appealed to an. The deer provided ts hide was used for clothes,

moccasins and containers while the antlers were used for weapons, implements and ornamentation. The deer has been presented in rock art both as part of a larger group as in hunting scenes and animal processions and singly as a study in naturalism.

In Indian rock art, the deer has been represented in what is called the X-ray style. Yet, most portrayals did not reveal perfect anatomical positions. However, according to Neumayer, the most accurate X-ray painting is in Kathotia where the deer's digestive tract contains fodder in the stomach. Yet, deer with beautiful geometrical body decorations are also abundant. Perhaps, the early rock artist was trying to understand the space element within the body, that is the vacuum and aesthetically played with that space.

Rock art in Mirzapur, Uttar Pradesh, which belongs to the Mesolithic period, depicts the deer in a non-naturalistic style, in different postures and scenes. One deer has a broken antler as if to indicate the cycle of its annual fall and regrowth. The legs are small, the body rectangular and the tail is prominent. Another deer, in a

sitting posture, has a missing tail with curved ribs drawn from above. Beneath the ribs, is the stomach, composed of zigzag lines either to show some liquid element or as a simple geometrical design to indicate space. In some images, the ribs of a standing deer are drawn from below, whereas for the running deer, the ribs are drawn from above to indicate tension. A grazing deer's neck and mouth have been prominently marked with *geru*, to emphasise feeding activity. A jumping deer has a typical rectangular body with straight hind legs and curved front ones. Another deer, in X-ray style, shows the windpipe and roundish intestines.

The Mesolithic rock art from Chiklod, Madhya Pradesh, presents a uniquely designed near-naturalistic deer whose body is divided into eight portions, each with different designs. The upper part of the body and the tail are dotted. The back has angular inward curves and straight lines. A rudimentary form of the swastika, as has been found in ancient European pots, is visible on the upper back. One section has a pentagon pattern while the frontal portion is designed in a square within square format. Yet another portion has a hexagon design which begins from one dot and moves outwards in an angular movement.



The Mesolithic rock art in Bhimbetka, Madhya Pradesh, abounds in hunting scenes. One painting shows the hunter hiding behind a bush, aiming an arrow at a geometrically designed deer, drawn in X-ray style. In the same frame, a deer with flamboyant, crescent-shaped antlers is shown attacking a man. It is interesting to note that the offensive deer is portrayed by a white rectangular body devoid of decoration. In another scene, which is perhaps a rare example of rock art, the hunter is poised with bow and arrow in hand, while the fleeing deer's tail is raised to show tension.

been depicted with hind legs stretched and heads facing downwards to indicate loss of control and to simulate the movement of tumbling down the Vindhyas. All the falling deer are female and fawns.

The prehistoric artist at Bhimbetka used mature and confident strokes to realistically represent galloping legs. Another indication of speed is the angle of the neck which has a downward tilt. In another example, the deer jumps in a rhythmic manner to show speed while its flattened face adds to the force of the image.

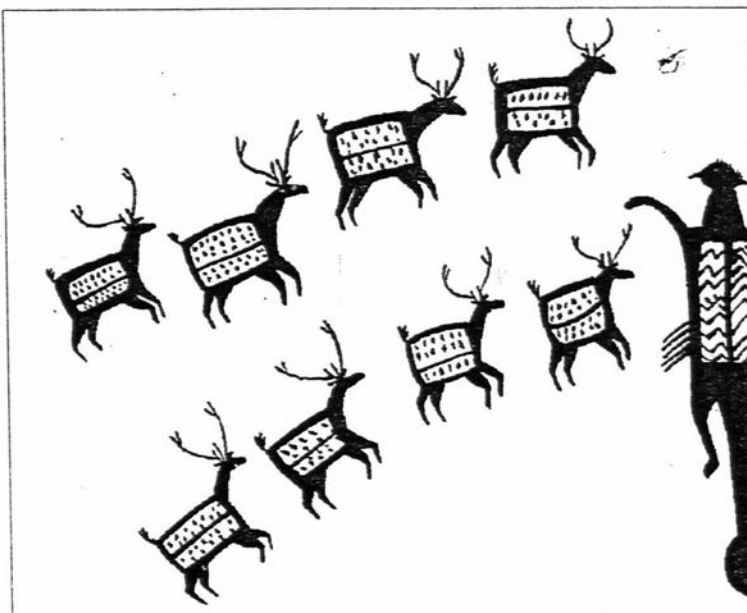
Above:
Satkunda, Historic/Kushana.
Procession of deer with a doe
and a naturalistic fetus in the
centre. The use of geru is liber
in this painting

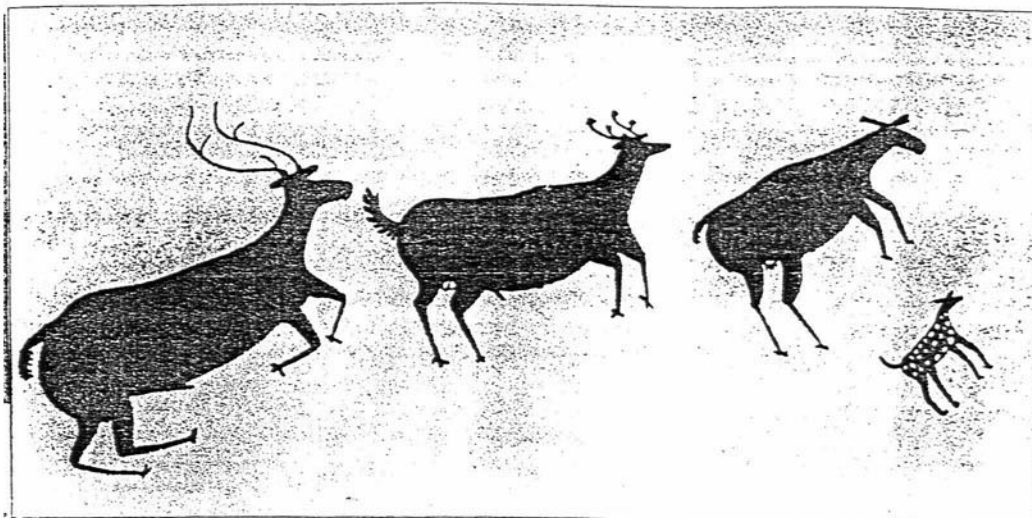
Right:
Satkunda, Historic/Kushana.
group of spotted deer with
graceful limbs and antlers

Below:
Satkunda, Chalcolithic.
Procession of deer heading
towards a giant ithyphallic h
or god

From the rock art at Bhopal, it is evident that deer and dogs were now domesticated. In one composition, a stag and a small calf are walking by the side of a man. The stag is glancing backwards and its half-turned posture is drawn with smooth and powerful strokes. The dog who is playing the role of an escort, is drawn in a single-curved line.

Most rock artists did not draw the deer's eyes. Usually, its antlers and posture were given detailed treatment. But in Sanchi and the Neolithic rock art of Burzhom, Kashmir, a deer with a natural, decorative eye has been portrayed.





Procreation was commonly depicted in Indian rock art and various animals, including the doe, with the foetus inside the womb have been drawn in X-ray style. Interestingly, the foetus is drawn in a standing position, though a natural foetus within the womb circle is found in Satkunda. Here, a pregnant doe is being led by a stag, followed by another doe.

Across the Karakorum highway, along the Silk Route, there are deer images belonging to the pre-Buddhist era. One example, a gold figurine of a stag found in north Pakistan, reflects a mature and authentic anatomical knowledge.

In European rock art, the deer is generally represented in a natural style, highlighting its characteristic agility. In the Mediterranean region, especially southern Italy, the naturalistic deer images have turning heads. In Norway, reindeer are found in rock art, the body though depicted in X-ray style, is divided with straight lines as if to show the ribs. In India, a similar deer is found in Mirzapur.

According to Michel Lorblonnet, two-footed deer with volute patterns on the body have also

been recorded in many sites in the Yinshans, Inner Mongolia. In Levantine rock art in the Iberian Peninsula, the stag and doe are virtually always portrayed separately, the stags often as the hunter's prey while the females are shown with fawns.

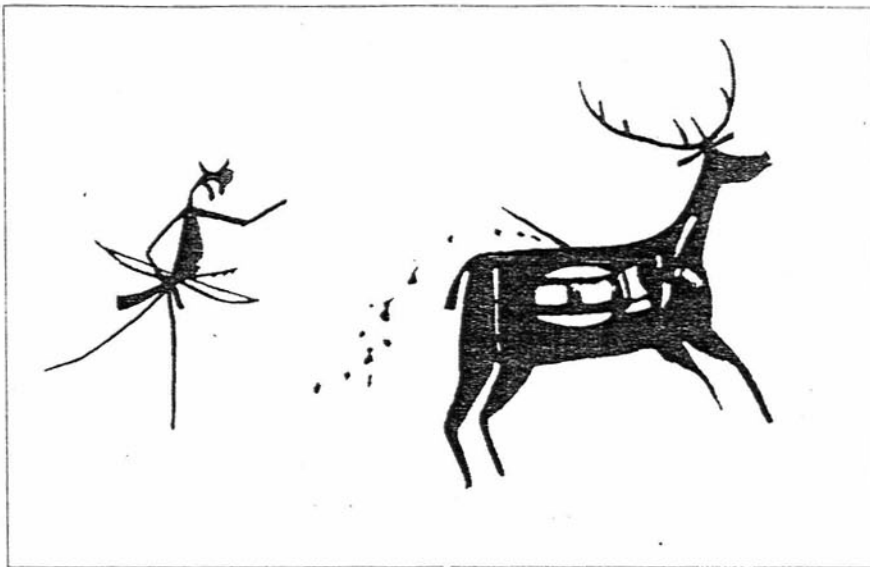
In Scandinavian and Karelian Mesolithic and Neolithic rock art one finds near-naturalistic portrayals of the deer with detailed antlers and realistic facial and leg movements. Some reindeer and elks are drawn in silhouette and in X-ray style.

In the Renedellian period, the style becomes more realistic. Initially, there was a certain schematisation, both in the context of composition and style, which later became more realistic as the artist focused on the depiction of branched antlers, the neck and the power and size of the stag. The doe is a slim creature of grace and beauty. In this period, posture is important and to show speed, the stress is on the hoof. Stags are drawn in their prime with flamboyant antlers. Females are mostly never accompanied by stags.

For early man, the hunt was of

great significance and it was necessary to be psychologically as well as physically prepared for it. To capture a deer, hunting rites demanded that one become deer, so as to enter its being and become part of its community. Only then could a hunter successfully capture the deer. Perhaps, it was to embody a similar thought that prehistoric man painted so many deer images, both naturalistic and symbolic. In the secluded cave, away from the rigours of ordinary existence, the hunter's retention of the deer's characteristic features and behaviour could be recalled and his powers of observation sharpened by transferring the mental image onto the rock surfaces. The images could sometimes be a replay of the hunt in art or a record of a successful expedition.

Some credit the shaman, the sorcerer - priest, with executing or at least directing the painting/engraving. This rock art was part of the hunting magic wherein the shaman practised sympathetic magic — in hurting, and killing the animal images — to ensure the success of the hunt. In Europe and India, there are various

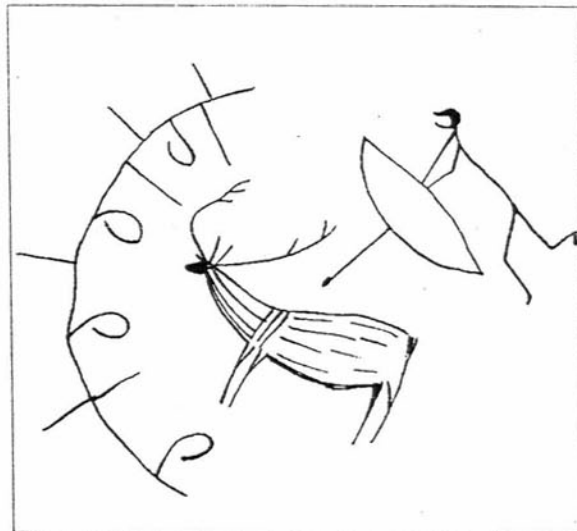


Left:
Lakhajoor, Mesolithic. A solitary hunter chasing a deer with an arrow embedded in its back. The hunter is wearing a mask and a head-dress and is carrying an arrow tipped with microliths

Below:
Putli Karar, Mesolithic. Early man's development of his hunting skills is evident here. hunter is chasing a deer towards traps placed on poles and has already shot an arrow at it

images of deer with blood spurting from the injuries. Hunting for man was always in competition with other carnivores like wolves, lions and tigers and hence the images may have been drawn to magically control situations that were difficult to do so normally. Even today, in traditional societies, there is always the figure of the shaman to propitiate spirits to ensure the success of difficult and dangerous missions.

In Europe, as man moved from being hunter-gatherers to an agrarian, semi-nomadic society, the iconography of the deer developed. From being a symbol of food, the deer began to be associated with divinity, the sun and water and thus came to mean many more things. The deer began to appear in initiation rites — the rites of passage from youth to adulthood. The trials of initiation included duelling, horse riding, balancing feats, racing and deer hunting. The deer is frequently featured along with a labyrinth which is connected to the initiation rites. To hunt a deer is not an easy task, thus this hunt significantly marks the passage into adulthood. The group of young stags portrayed in the rockface at Bessans, Haute



Maurienne, France, symbolise a group of young initiates. Like young boys coming of age, young deer compete with each other during the mating season in bloodless duels. Again in the Val Camonica rock art, two young deer are duelling while a third waits (in the wings) to engage the victor just like young boys in a joust.

A major recurring image in the stelae and menhirs of Val Camonica, northern Italy, is a circle with radiating spikes, crescent-shaped like the antlers of the deer.

Perhaps the various links between the deer and the sun as perceived by copper age man led to the zoomorphisation of the sun. Like the leaves of a tree, antlers of the deer annually fall and grow, again dependant on the sun and echo its rising and setting. The deer thus became associated with solar energy and fecundity, a link between the sky and earth.

Slowly, the cult of the deer grew and in Cammunian rock art, we get the most ancient version of the god, Cernunnos, a divinity which i

*akhaioar, early Mesolithic. A
man with a deer mask holding a
bow or staff. Is it a shaman
engaged in magic or is it a
hunter in camouflage?*



a cross between the deer and a bird. Though this kind of ornithomorphic form was not unknown in rock art, it became prominent with the image of Cernunnos. He is shown standing, in a long tunic with two antlers on his head, clasping torques and knives. Like the throat of a swan, a boat with an ornithomorphic head emerges from his chest, a vehicle for the sun. Cernunnos is associated with wild and domestic

Was it a shaman practising sympathetic magic? Or was it simply a hunter trying to approximate as far as possible his prey, practising camouflage techniques that the modern hunter has perfected?

Deer images also provide clues to the social changes in the early history of mankind. Initially hunts were portrayed as group activity. However, gradually, this cooperative hunting was replaced by the solitary hunter. There are many rock art images worldwide of an individual hunter and his dog attacking a deer. This reveals that man had domesticated the dog to suit his purpose. Identical images were found on pottery and belt buckles, ensuring the solitary hero as a cultural principle. Images of a deer hunt also reveal the technological level and innovations of the age.

Perhaps it will not be presumptuous to say that through the ages, the image of deer was transformed from a vulnerable, hunted animal to a vision of revelation and divinity that has permeated the culture of different people in varying degrees. For the Vikings, the deer's antlers were the source of eternal water that fed the rivers of the world, their form alluding to the rays of the sun and, therefore, symbolic of the perennial renewal of life.

animals, snakes and the sun. The cult of Cernunnos grew after the Celts adopted him as the Sun God.

The deer is often portrayed along with weapons. Many rock art specialists feel that this confers on the deer, the warrior and the weapon, a symbolic role difficult to explain. Various images of a masked man wearing a large ceremonial head-dress made of antlers found both in Indian and European rock art is intriguing.

The deer make their first appearance in Greek mythology when they come to the aid of Artemis. Soon, they were associated with the goddess and were emblematic of her virginity, majestic beauty and power. When Agamemnon is guilty of slaying a deer, Artemis imprisons the winds and confines ships to the port forcing him to sacrifice his daughter, Iphigenia. However, at the moment of sacrifice, Artemis wraps her in a cloud and carries her away, substituting a deer in her

place. And when Acteon out on a hunting trip with his dogs violates Artemis' chastity by gazing at her bathing, she transforms him into a deer who is torn to pieces by his own dogs.

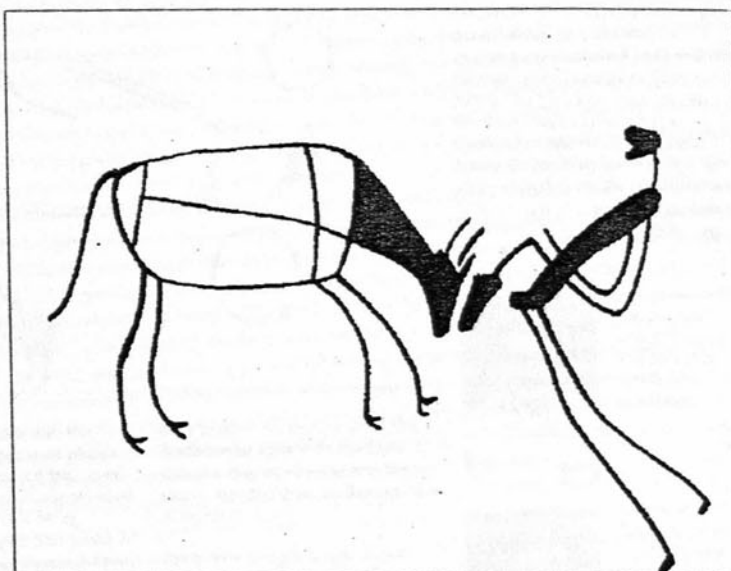
According to Mongolian legend, Genghis Kaghan is the son of Borte Tchino, the Blue Wolf, and Ko ai Maral, the Wild Deer. The Blue Wolf is born from the heavens and represents the sky while the Wild Deer is tawny, the colour of the earth. Thus we have the marriage of the Earth and the Sky, the fertile and the divine. The deer guarantees the renewal of the race of heroes while the link with the heavens ensures a divine protection.

The deer has a significant symbolic role in Christianity as well. As Christianity spread, the deer became emblematic of the spirit that redeems itself, of resurrected Christ who offered himself as the sacrificial victim. The deer also becomes the mouthpiece of Christ in gathering the various saints to the fold.

In India, the deer was used for ceremonial and cultic purposes as testified by a painting in Jaora which shows a carriage with the deer as a draught-animal. In Greece, deer were similarly used for the festival of Artemis. However, till now, there are no images in Indian rock art, of divinity associated with the deer nor are there any indications, as in Europe, of deer figuring in initiation rites. In tropical areas, traditional societies are not fully dependant on meat for food as the vegetation provides many edible items. Perhaps due to these factors, the deer never assumed such a great economic and spiritual significance in India as in colder climes and has been unable to transcend its association with food.

Indian languages, *mriga* literally means 'death-goers' and deer were considered natural prey in the scheme of life, to be hunted and killed by most predatory animals. *Mriga* is therefore related to the verb 'to hunt'. In Indian thought, the opposition between *mriga* which originally meant any wild animal, and *pashu*, sacrificial and domestic animal, began quite early. *Pashus* were owned by man while *mriga* were the animals he hunted. In time, *mriga* stood for deer just as deer in English comes from the

Kathotia, Mesolithic. A man playing with an antelope. The painting reveals that deer may have been domesticated or adopted as mascots



German *tier* meaning wild animal. The deer became the quintessential *mriga*, the wild animal par excellence, while the cow/bull became the paradigmatic *pashu*.

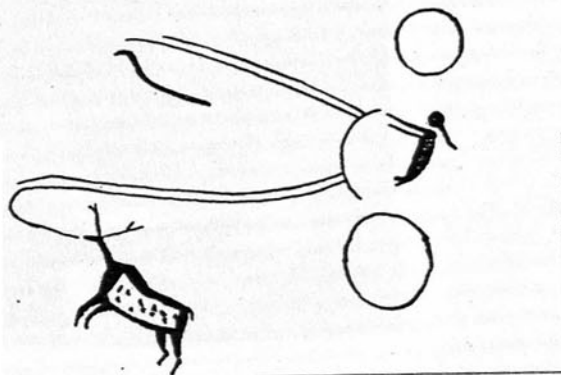
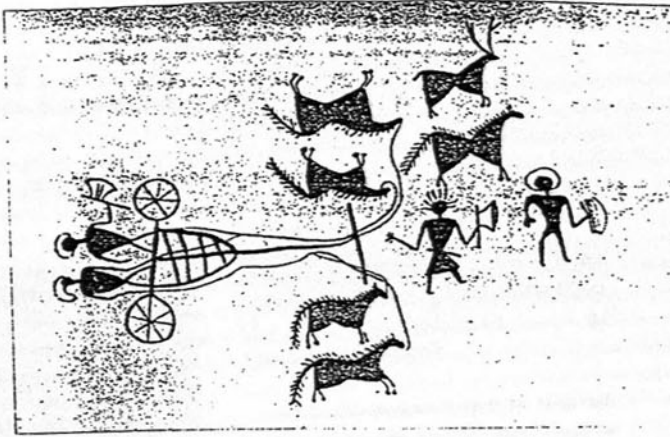
The *Brahmanas* relate the origin of Rudra, the god of the *pashus*, in a tale that portrays the deer in an ambiguous manner. Rudra was created when the gods assembled all the fearful forms in one place to stop Prajapati from doing what is not done — namely the act of incest with his daughter. Prajapati assumed the form of a stag to approach his daughter who had become a red doe. In return for hunting down Prajapati, Rudra

asked to be made lord of the *pashus*. He aimed at Prajapati who flew up to become the *mrigashira* constellation that resembles a deer.

Attitudes to the deer are ambivalent in India. In the *Ramayana*, Ravana uses the golden deer to lure Rama away from Sita. He commands Maricha, the rakshasa, to become a golden deer with silver spots and jewel-encrusted antlers. While Rama is away, trying to capture the deer, Ravana abducts Sita. Interestingly, Manu, the ancient lawgiver, declared that only those places where the black antelope roamed fearlessly were fit for a sacrifice ceremony. Similarly, as

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alcolithic. An elaborate
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images serve as clues not only to decipher his past but also to evaluate the skewed path human development has taken. They refute the 'primitiveness' of our forebears and challenge the facileness with which we assign labels today. That such images are still painted, both for ritualistic and ornamental reasons, conclusively proves their everlasting value

varamamurti points out, the *povana* of the sages were places where the deer roamed free, even nibbling the sacred *kusa* grass used in the rituals without being rebuked by the sages. The peace of a hermitage is represented time and again in literature and sculpture by juxtaposing images of harmless deer with venomous snakes and fearful tigers. *Trignayani* or doe-eyed, is an ideal tribute for a beautiful woman. *Ashturi* or musk from the musk deer, is highly valued for its medicinal and aphrodisiacal uses. In Buddhist Jatakas abound with

deer images. In many stories, the Bodhisattvas appear in the form of either a stag or an antelope. Some stories use the deer to illustrate the dangers of desire.

Early deer images testify to prehistoric man's close relationship with nature, his understanding and appreciation of her bounty. Man lived not divorced from his surroundings but in rhythm with his environment. Today, he has moved far from such a harmonious existence and is engaged in a struggle to save the world, for himself. For modern man, these



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