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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
rock art, petroglyphs, pictographs, prehistory, Upper Indus, Swat, archaeological interpretation, Pakistan.	Rock art is one of the largest and most challenging archaeological resource in Pakistan in terms of methodology. The petroglyphs, pictographs, cupules, inscriptions, and rock reliefs are found throughout the Upper Indus, Swat, Baluchistan, Sindh, and Pothohar Plateau and cannot be considered a single cultural archive owing to the variation in ages of the materials. The present article critically evaluates the published archaeological documentation to determine the potential and limitations of rock art in reconstructing prehistoric cultures in the current context of Pakistan. Studies, excavation reports, site catalogues and scholarly monographs that could be demonstrated as having a documented provenance, chronology, technique and/or archaeological context were chosen for a structured qualitative review. Analytical dimensions compared: chronology, production technique, motif, landscape setting, and association with independently dated material. The best prehistoric interpretations available in the review are made through the process of contextual convergence such as stratigraphic reuse, superposition, tool and weapon typologies, patination, and comparison with excavated items. Animal imagery, hunting compositions, maskoids, geometric signs, and route-side assemblages highlight shifting human-animal interactions, mobility, ritualized spaces, and interregional encounters. But depictions do not show any particular religious beliefs, political system, ethnic identity, or presence of species. The article offers a framework for interpretation based on the evidence, and suggests that all future research needs to combine high-resolution recording, spatial analysis, archaeometry, excavation, and community-based conservation. Rock art is best used not as a literal account, but as a multi-layered and contextual archaeological record.
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Introduction

Prehistory does not mean the absence of history, it's the history of the human experience prior to or beyond the usual presence of written records. Archaeologists recreate that experience by examining material remains like settlements, tools, burials, ceramics, botanical and faunal remains, and imagery on natural rock surfaces. A valuable aspect of rock art is that it documents intentional visual communication in landscapes where organic materials and short-lived occupations might yield little archaeological trace. Meanwhile, it is very challenging for evidence. Images may be dated, reworked, overlaid, removed from their original context, and/or be understood in the context of modern assumptions. Durable images do not necessarily provide clear insights into the society that created them (Bednarik, 2002; Chippindale & Taçon, 1998; Whitley, 2005).

There are a number of important rock-art sites in Pakistan. Engravings and inscriptions on mountain roads are exceptionally large and diverse in the Upper Indus, prehistoric engravings are found in painted shelters in Swat, historical inscriptions are found in the Potohar-Islamabad region, and Buddhist and Brahmanical reliefs are found in Sindh as well as Baluchistan, with reports of painted shelters in this latter region (Hauptmann, 2024; Jettmar, 1985; Kalhor, 2010–2011, 2018; Olivieri & Vidale, 2004; Sardar, 2011). As a group these materials provide a long history of image-making, but the chronological depth of the prehistoric petroglyphs poses a basic analytical problem. They should not be used to simply add to dated inscriptions, Buddhist stupas, royal names, and medieval graffiti.

The distinction is important because rock art is not a period or a culture, it is a medium and a setting. Non-literate animal figures and geometric patterns are found in parallel with Kharoshthi, Brahmi, Sogdian, Chinese, Tibetan and other inscriptions in the Upper Indus, for instance. Other panels were used repeatedly over the centuries, resulting in overlays of surface changes that reflect successive usage, religious patronage and political presence (Dani, 1983; Hauptmann, 2024; Jettmar, 1989). The relative sequence or the later use of a place can be known from historic inscriptions, but not from adjacent images, to say nothing of later motifs on a boulder.

Previously, the focus of talk about Pakistan's rock art has been to jump from each motif to a social conclusion, ibex imagery interpreted as an indicator of a hunting society, circles as a symbol of political unity, axes as symbols of wisdom or royal authority, and cupules as ritual objects. These may be worth experimenting, but resemblance does not necessarily help to distinguish between utilitarian, mnemonic, territorial, ritual, commemorative, and playful marking. Good archaeological argument should clearly connect observation and inference, consider alternative arguments, and have chronological or contextually independent supporting evidence.

The present article, therefore, raises three questions:

- (1) What kind of reliable information on prehistoric culture could be obtained from the rock art of Pakistan?
- (2) What interpretations are still unclear due to poor chronology and context?

- (3) What research and conservation practices are needed to enhance the evidential value of these sites?

The article adds a critical regional synthesis, as well as an evidence-graded method which will help to avoid historic material and modern analogy being presented as direct evidence for prehistoric belief and social organization.

Conceptual and Analytical Framework

Among the most common forms of rock art are pecked, incised, abraded and engraved petroglyphs, mineral and organic pigment paintings (pictographs), cupules and cup-marks, and rock reliefs and inscriptions in a broader regional context. These categories are not mutually exclusive, but distinct in their analysis. A landscape can fill a slot without any date, maker, or purpose, and without any animal figure, a painted geometric design, an epigraph naming a donor, or a sculpted Buddha, all of which are present.

Chronological control is the first requirement then. It is often hard to directly date rock art. Pigment may be lacking in date-able organic content; surface accretions may pre-date or post-date an engraving; and engravings may have different patination depending on the micro-environment. When the relative position is suggested by a stylistic comparison, it is circular in nature insofar as the date of a style is determined largely from other styles of the same period that are undated (Bednarik, 2002, 2025). Several factors are combined to make up a more defensible sequence: superposition, weathering and patina, production technique, association with excavated deposits, diagnostic object forms, paleography where inscriptions exist, and secure stratigraphic reuse. Even so, conclusions should be written in terms of ranges, and relative rather than in false precision.

The second is the contextual interpretation. There is more to a motif than meaning. The same ibex shape can be used for different purposes at a river crossing, burial landscape, and pilgrimage route or habitation site. The orientation, visibility, access and proximity to water and routes, repeated marking and relationship to archaeological features can be used to identify the role of an image in movement & place-making. The landscape position is therefore not background information, it is a part of the archaeological evidence.

This research is divided into three levels.

Level 1; The observations are those items that can be directly seen and documented, such as the shape, technique, size, superposition, patina, orientation, and spatial association of a motif.

Level 2; interpretations are backed up by converging archaeological evidence: probable relative date, depiction of a weapon type, recurring association with a route or broad evidence of hunting and herding imagery.

Level 3; interpretations involve beliefs, ethnicity, political authority, event and intention. These are only likely if substantiated by inscription, ethnography with historical continuity, excavated

context and/or multiple independent indicators. Whereas the framework does not remove interpretation, it brings the basis of the interpretation into the open.

Methodology

Research design

A structured qualitative review and comparative archaeological synthesis is used in the study. It does not include a new excavation, original inventory or dating program but a field survey of one site. It focuses on the published rock-art assemblage or securely described find, not an assumed “culture” that would be deduced from an isolated image. The reasons for the choice of this design are that the information available is geographically spread and as yet, not all are dated, and that it is collected in catalogues of the sites, in excavation reports, in regional studies and in epigraphic publications.

Source selection



Figure 1. Hunza Haldikeish rock; Picture by Eyaz Rana

The review focused on four types of source: (a) peer reviewed articles reporting on archaeological research; (b) monographs and catalogues from archaeological missions; (c) excavation and/or survey reports including contextual and chronological data; and (d) specialist studies of the method, date and interpretation of rock-art. The bibliographic search took place in November 2024 after the site visit of “Hunza Haldikesh rock,” using the scholarly journal platforms, university repositories, publisher catalogues and citation chaining from the main site reports. The combinations searched were “Pakistan rock art,” “Upper Indus petroglyphs,” “Hunza Haldikesh rock,” “Chilas inscriptions,” “Swat rock paintings,” “Pakistan Hunza,” “Gogdara,” “Balochistan rock

paintings,” “Sindh rock art,” and “rock art dating methodology.” Sources were represented where they identified a site or region within the Republic of Pakistan and offered at least one of the following: documentary evidence of the motif or technique, spatial evidence, a proposed chronology with a stated basis, a proposed chronology based on patination, inscriptional evidence, superposition, association with excavated material. Undated online summaries and popular descriptions were not utilized as evidence to help with the chronology or cultural attribution. In addition to foundational documentation, some sites were first documented many years ago, and additional sites were synthesized. The regional comparison is across the Upper Indus/Gilgit Baltistan, Swat, Balochistan, Sindh and Potwar/Islamabad. The areas selected were those that have been mentioned frequently in the archaeological literature and are various in their environment, technical approaches and documentation history. The article is not comprehensive of all reported rock-art sites of Pakistan.

The extractor and comparison:

The data for each published assemblage was collected within the five dimensions:

- (1) Assemblage proposed chronology and dating basis;
- (2) Assemblage technique and surface condition;
- (3) Assemblage motif class;
- (4) Landscape and archaeological context; and,

Claims were then evaluated with the 3 levels evidential framework m

- (5) Interpretive claim.

mentioned above. Comparative analysis was used to look at recurring theme (human-animal relations, technology, mobility, ritualized place, and interregional contact) with a focus on regional and chronological differences.

Limitations and research ethics

There are some repetitive and mismatching terms, uneven image quality, missing coordinates, dubious dating, publication bias for visually impressive panels, and the narrow scope of excavation around rock-art surfaces. The absence of a reported motif should not be interpreted as the absence of a motif from a region. Neither can contiguous pictures be taken as being contemporary. No unpublished photographs, artefacts, human participants or restricted site data were used. Information on the exact location of sites of vulnerability is not provided if it might lead to an increased risk of such damage to that site. Unless a claim is independently secured, these limitations mandate that care must be taken in the language used, e.g. “suggests,” “is consistent with,” or “may indicate.”

Regional Archaeological Evidence

Upper Indus, Chilas, and Hunza

The Upper Indus is pivotal to any work on rock art in Pakistan. The joint project of Pakistan and Germany, which had been initiated by Karl Jettmar and Ahmad Hasan Dani, systematically recorded and documented the carvings, inscriptions, monuments and routes between Shatial and Raikot, and in adjacent northern valleys. This record indicates that the area is not one 'prehistoric gallery', but a very rich, multi-layered landscape developed over a long period of time by all people inhabiting the area: by travelers, merchants, pilgrims, officials, and religious agents (Dani, 1983, 1995; Hauptmann, 2024; Jettmar, 1989; Zahir et al., 2022).



Figure 2. (<https://www.induscaravan.com/blog/tag/chilas-rock-carving/>) Photo: Mariko SAWADA

The first eight phases suggested are wild caprids, other animals, hunters and weapons, geometric forms, and mask-like designs. For Jettmar (1985) non-Buddhist traditions were not a by-product of later religious imagery, but were an important substrate. In Hauptmann's synthesis (2024), also major stylistic and chronological divisions are isolated, and surface technique, patina and superposition are highlighted. These features can be used to provide a relative date, but they are

not a source of absolute dates. Carefully grooved figures with animal form may be from different phases and later pecked or reworked figures can have a dark patina when compared to similar surface and under similar exposure.

The ibex and the markhor-like caprids, horses, riders, axes, bows and hunting scenes can add to the study of human-animal relations and technology. The mountain fauna features persistent symbolism and imagery that is repeated. Increased evidence of hunting representation is achieved by a clear implication of hunters and projectiles in the composition as compared to isolated animals. Until faunal, environmental, compositional, or ethnographic evidence supports the presence of the animal at the time of engraving, an animal image cannot prove that the species was hunted or worshipped, domesticated, or was present locally at that time.



Figure 3. Hunza rock with animal figures; picture by Eyaz Rana

Inscriptions, named persons, stupas, Buddhist figures and Hindu deities are historically dated items also found in Chilas. This type of evidence is extremely useful for the early historic and historic archaeology of the Upper Indus. It records literacy, patronage, religious transmission, and political or administrative presence and can offer chronological anchors for superimposed or adjacent marks (Dani 1983, 1995). However, it should not be judged to be prehistoric or dated to the same period as every animal nearby by a named ruler or a boulder's Brahmi inscription. Phasing should be done at the panel level.

The animal figures, riders, Buddhist symbols and inscriptions in multiple languages are also combined in other localities such as Hunza's Sacred Rock. The epigraphic diversity features sites

that were part of trans-regional networks that connected South Asia, Central Asia and China. This is a sign of mobility and contact during historic stages, but not a proof of the identity of previous image makers. The strongest long-term conclusion is that meaning was built up through repeated markings along highly visible rock faces along constrained paths. They became conspicuous at crossings and paths and made them a continuous center of communication.

Swat Valley

One of the most helpful pieces of evidence of the integration of rock art and excavated archaeology comes from Swat. The pecked figures, objects and unidentifiable symbols are documented in **Gogdara I**. The work in the Kandak Valley by Olivieri (1998), however, has shifted analysis away from the description of individual motifs to the technology, spatial distribution, and cultural sequence of motifs. While the importance of non-Buddhist elements in the Bronze and Iron Age horizons are not sufficiently dated, it is nonetheless important to note that they are present (Olivieri, 2005; Olivieri & Vidale, 2004).



Figure 4. The ancient rock engraving at Gogdara site, Swat valley, picture Dawn news

One of the most fascinating types of evidence is found in engraved slabs that have been reused for funerary or architectural purposes. A terminus ante quem was found at Udegram by an engraved slab, which was face-down in a tomb and must have been reused before the carving. The radiocarbon dates, from the burial context, date the reuse to the late second or early first millennium BCE, which suggests that the slab is older than the closed context and does not directly date the practice of engraving. This difference is a demonstration of good archaeological reasoning. The date restricts the carving, but does not actually determine its age (Olivieri et al., 2022).

The new Barikot maskoid adds to the comparative field. The technical and iconographic similarities with mask-like images from the Upper Indus, Ladakh and Inner Asia point to an involvement in a broader vocabulary of Bronze Age imagery (Olivieri et al., 2022). Similarity can be caused by common conventions, migration or convergence in the way images are produced, but does not necessarily imply migration or a single ethnic group. The significance of the find is in the archaeological context and a comparison with other regionally contextualized material.

This is supplemented by the painted shelters in Swat-Malakand. Geometric figures, anthropomorphic forms, weapons and animals have been found by Vidale and Olivieri (2002) and Olivieri and Vidale (2004) in tributary valleys. Artificial variations in pigment, superposition, preservation and point of placement indicate more than one use phase. The presence of geometric designs does not automatically imply underlying “mathematical skill” if they do not show evidence of measurement or numerical structure or evidence of operational geometry. They should be treated as formal conventions which have a social meaning that is open to investigation in the context.

In addition to the Buddhist reliefs and Brahmanical figures, Swat has also preserved Kharoshthi and later inscriptions and Islamic-period graffiti (Sardar, 2011). The materials are essential to the later religious history of the area, but need to be discriminatively distinguished from the prehistoric petroglyphs. However, their presence does indicate that certain cliffs, routes and shelters were of continued importance in the face of shifting religious and political circumstances. The meaning is not always continuous with the place.

Balochistan

Painted shelters with anthropomorphic and animal figures, hunting or conflict compositions, and red or black pigment have been reported from Tor Ghar, Loralai and Sulaiman Range, Zhob. Part of this material was thought to be Upper Paleolithic by Kakar (2005) and Sardar (2011) reiterated the significance of the finds. These claims are of interest because painted shelters are not very common in the published record in Pakistan. They are also in need of special care.



Figure 5. (<https://www.dawn.com/news/1200288>) Picture: Zulfiqar Ali Kalhoro

A rough and ready hunting theme or a similarity to a distant tradition is not sufficient for a Paleolithic attribution. A strong chronology would depend upon stratigraphic association, pigment or accretion dating, occupation deposits excavated, superposition, or a well-dated regional sequence. In the absence of fuller technical documentation and independent dating, the Baluchistan paintings are best regarded as reported prehistoric or perhaps early assemblages of uncertain dates. This approach is not as radical but does enhance their scholarly value by defining the exact evidence that will be required to test them in the future.

The geopolitical significance of Baluchistan is that it is on the border of Iranian Plateau, Afghanistan and the Arabian Sea. Comparative motifs can be used to put forth predictions regarding mobility and interaction, but it is not enough to say that a directional cultural influence is given because of similarity in visual forms. Further investigation of access routes, raw materials and local occupations and pigment analysis would allow for more robust regional models.

Sindh

Rock art is prevalent in the Khirthar and the adjoining hill systems including the valleys which are organized around seasonal water courses. Caprids, cattle, horses, camels, riders, hunters, geometric signs, cup-marks, stupas, inscriptions, and images in older and relatively recent technologies are all published (Kalhoro, 2013, 2018). This blend implies that Sindh has much to offer the study of continuity and change but also cautions against the adoption of a whole site to the Neolithic, Chalcolithic or Iron Age based on motifs alone.



An anthropomorphic male figure at the rock art site Chiti Koh-2. The figure is either a deity or royalty as evidenced from the headdress with suspended tassels. Its ears, nose, arms and legs are clearly depicted. A lance or club lies at its feet. The carving is believed to date to the Bronze Age, approximately 5,000 years ago | Photos from the book

Figure 6, (<https://www.dawn.com/news/1443336>) original picture by Zulfiqar Ali Kalhoro added by Salman Rashid in his article at Dawn

There are multiple corrections that need to be made for several of the claims in the prior art description. If the picture looks like a giraffe or a dinosaur, this is not sufficient for identification of the species, since only diagnostic anatomy and ideally paleontological or zoo archaeological data will allow the identification of the species. Similarly, the use of “unicorn” images to suggest the worship of a named God or direct cultural continuity with the Indus Civilization should not be used without supporting evidence of the chronology, iconographic attributes, and archaeological context. A resemblance in form can create a research question, but does not solve it.



A small figure of a bull with 'joined' legs, a stylised hump and curved horns carved on the Sado Mazo rock. The author believes this carving belongs to the Neolithic period and is about 8,000 years old

Figure 7. (<https://www.dawn.com/news/1443336>)
picture; Salman Rashid

In his best performance, Sindh might be dia-chronic. The sequence of panels with bows, swords, riders, guns, names and recent shepherd markings illustrates the preservation of image-making into ethnographic times when panels. Modern and historical carvings can help to interpret production technique, route use and pastoral marking, but must be employed in an 'ethnographic' way, not blindly transferred into the past. This recent shepherd's mark provides the meaning based on the context of the mark; it doesn't automatically interpret an ancient caprid.

Potwar plateau and Islamabad region.

The rock shelters, cup-marks, geometric engravations, standing stones, and historic and modern ritual sites in the Potwar–Islamabad area are part of the site. The site includes rock shelters, cup-marks, geometric engraving, standing stones, and sites of historic and contemporary ritual activities. Kalhoro (2010–2011) reported the levels at Pharwala, Bobri, Phulgran, Bagh Jogian, Peja, Gumbat and other locations. The observations extend the spatial coverage of rock marking in Pakistan and highlight the importance of systematic documentation of rock marking around rapidly urbanizing landscapes.



Figure 8. (<https://www.thefridaytimes.com/15-May-2020/ancient-rock-art-of-islamabad>) Geomatic figures

Cupules and grid-like forms are among the most difficult to interpret elements in rock-art studies. Some can refer to repeated percussion, grinding, games, offering, counting and other activities, and these activities do not necessarily serve a function. A later use of a locality (as evidenced by place names, modern pottery, oral traditions, or a recent use for worship) cannot be used to determine the original use or prehistoric date of the marks in and of itself. Microscopic use-wear analysis, experimental replication, spatial mapping and excavation of nearby deposits, if ethically and legally possible, is the next step.



Figure 9. Rock Shelter at Islamabad G-13 Sector, Picture and description; <https://doam.gov.pk/public/sites/6342>

What Rock Art Reveals about Prehistoric Cultures

The rock shelter, measuring 80mx50mx10m in length, width and height respectively. It is situated in sector G-13 and about 100m on the left side of Srinagar highway, entering Islamabad. It is flat terraced space of exposed lime stone boulder with a slight over hang. It faces the south overlooking the plains of Islamabad. Similar rock shelters in the Soan valley have been already reported by the team of the Institute of Anthropology, USA in 1964. Rock shelter at G13

Human-animal relations

Animal imagery is the most ubiquitous area of comparison throughout Pakistan's rock-art sites. Caprids are represented in many assemblages from the north, whereas cattle, horses, camels, dogs and wild animals are represented in other areas and phases. At least these images demonstrate that animals played a pivotal role in the world of visual communication. Animals in explicit hunting compositions with human figures and weapons assist with inferences of the hunting practices represented. They can, when isolated, refer to identity, memory, prestige, ritual concern, environmental knowledge or aesthetic convention.

Faunal interpretation should be held to the test of zoo archaeology. Rock art can be used to extend queries to bones and settlement evidence, such as changes in the type of weapon or changes in herd composition and relate them to changes in subsistence; however, it does not replace them. When caprids reappear in mountain corridors, this may be a sign of a familiarity with the environment and a value of the social component. It is better to argue for a plural interpretation than for everyone to become a food or God.

Technology and practice

Whether bows, axes, blades, chariots or wheeled forms, or mounted figures, can make a contribution to technological history depends on the formality of these attributes; they must be diagnostic and controlled by the chronological parameters. The production marks illustrate technical decisions: pecking, incision, abrasion, application of pigment, and reworking of the pigment later, all involve different gestures, investment of labor and tools. A sequence of manufacture is more clearly determined by experimental archaeology and microscopic examination than by impressionistic description.

Technology is not synonymous with "literal" illustration. A fan-shaped engraved object can look like a metal axe, but it will be important to provide typological comparison and identify which features are similar to or different from the axe, as well as indicate if similar objects are known from dated contexts. Under these conditions, rock art may shed light on the social significance of artifacts that may not be visible in excavated collections.

Mobility, routes and cultural contact

The Upper Indus record shows the strength of landscape context analysis. Rock surfaces were involved in long-distance movement and communication; for example, concentrations near routes, crossings and stopping places (Hauptmann, 2024; Neelis, 2011). Prehistoric images cannot be

attributed to historically known travelers, but with the repeated use of the same corridors it is clear that people were mobile and therefore used to shaping images before and after the era of writing.

Chronological and geographically patterned cross-regional similarities (such as maskoids and some weapon or animal shapes) can help with modelling contact. They should be analyzed with exchange goods, settlement data, mortuary practices and environmental routes. Rock art is best used as one component of a multi-proxy argument.

Ritualized landscapes and social memory

The repeated marking of significant features such as river approaches, cliffs, and shelters indicates the presence of social memory in some areas. Super imposition is particularly important as it is a record of previous mark making, which might encourage, discourage, imitate, conceal or over-write previous images. These actions can be signs of shifting allegiances regardless of the symbolism.

It is not for every unfamiliar sign to be the 'Ritual'. It may be strengthened by imagery that is regularly linked to burial, offering, restricted areas, access to places for processions or historically documented sacred practice. Otherwise the more common term is "socially significant place". Such a distinction helps prevent the analysis from becoming a religious story that is not backed up by evidence.

Discussion

The comparative evidence establishes the rock art as an essential element of Pak-archaeology, not in the sense of telling a "complete story," but because it gives inestimable evidence of the past. It is important because it helps to represent some actions in landscapes and time frames which are inadequately captured by settlement and text. It records presence and movement, bodies and weapons, animals and material assemblages that are not necessarily conveyed by the material assemblage. But all images are chosen ones and survival depends on geology, exposure, discovery and contemporary documentation.

The three corrections significantly enhance the interpretive rigor of this field. Chronology needs to be broken down first. The term "ancient" is not enough and historic inscriptions or Buddhist reliefs cannot be used as prehistoric evidence. Second, identification of the motif has to be divorced from its cultural significance. Some of these claims are merely observation; some are an interpretation; and some are a higher order claim that must be backed up by independent evidence. Next, difference must be maintained in regional comparison. The upper Indus route-side palimpsests, Swat's contextualized Bronze-Iron Age finds, the reported paintings in Baluchistan and the long-lived pastoral traditions of the country of Sindh have all raised various kinds of questions in the archaeological realm.

A new evidence-graded framework is also clearer on where new research could make the greatest impact. Coordinates should be recorded with appropriate access controls, orientation of

panel, scale, technique, patina, superposition, damage and landscape features should be recorded and a comprehensive inventory should be established. Improved documentation can be achieved by reflectance transformation imaging, calibrated photo grammetry, 3D modelling, multi-spectral imaging, and microscopic analysis but the digital reproduction cannot replace the preservation of the material surface and setting. Sampling for direct dating should be kept to an absolute minimum, be legal, scientifically sound, and only be done after a non-invasive study.

Conservation is urgent. Road construction, quarrying, vandalism, weathering, urbanization, tourism, and reservoir development pose threats to the sites in several regions. The Diamer-Basha project is especially significant due to the fact that inundation will impact or submerge large portions of the cultural landscape of the Upper Indus region (Hauptmann, 2024; World Monuments Fund, n.d.). Rescue documentation should, therefore, not just focus on iconic photographs, but on full panels, relationships of the routes, oral history and archives. Local communities are not just “informants” or sources of labor, but stakeholders whose knowledge and access is vital to sustainable stewardship, as is their long-term participation.

Conclusion

While rock art offers a unique source of information for the reconstruction of prehistoric cultures in Pakistan, it can only be seen as a material record, and thus cannot be interpreted as a literal narrative. The most certain information is about the production process, repeated patterns, sequences, landscape context and dating to archaeological contexts. These data can lead to a critical analysis of human-animal relationships, the practice of technology, movements, inter-regional contacts and the formation of socially meaningful locations.

There is not a uniform picture across the region. The paintings in Swat provide valuable cross-montane connections to the excavated Bronze–Iron Age sites; in the Upper Indus, a long-duration palimpsest of use-wear and contexts exist along trans-montane routes; the paintings in Baluchistan are promising and need more chronological testing; and the paintings in Sindh show examples of long-duration marking traditions, while the use-wear and contexts in Potohar show examples of geometric features that require further investigation. These phases involve the use of historic Buddhist, Brahmanical, epigraphic and Islamic materials, which cannot be confused with prehistory.

Combining standardized documentation, spatial analysis, archaeometry, selective excavation, zoo archaeology, and community-based conservation should be combined in future research. The methodological thought is straight forward, the interpretation should not be greater than the evidence. With its consistent application, that idea can shed light on prehistoric life, without having to strip away the mystery that constitutes the archaeological record.

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