

Cave painting: Demons and depictions

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Painting in Lahuat Rock Shelter

From time to time rock paintings have been discovered in different regions of Pakistan such as the Musa Khel region of Loralai District in Balochistan, the Buner, Swat and Mansehra Districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhawa and Khaplu and Astor in Gilgit-Baltistan. The earliest specimen of rock paintings is located at Malvi in the Musa Khel Tehsil of Lora Lai District, Balochistan. There are nine rock shelters at this site which depict pre-historic and pre-Buddhist paintings.

But what may be surprising is that both petroglyphs and pictographs have been found in the Gadap Tehsil of Karachi while rock carvings have been found at Lahaut

(Nain Mol), Rahim Bakhsh Gabol and Maher in Gadap Tehsil.

The rock carvings at Rahim Bakhsh Village are engraved on bedrock and include carvings of geometric designs, shoe prints and arrows. Apart from the petroglyphs at the Rahim Bakhsh rock-art site, one also finds both petroglyphs and pictograms in the Maher Valley. Petroglyphs are found at Baithi Lak (pass) near the Lahaut rock shelter. This is the main Lak through which people enter into the valley of Maher. There are many petroglyphs on the sandstone rock wall with the majority of these engravings being geometric designs.



Painting of the so-called Maher Deity

Rock paintings are located in a rock shelter at Lahaut in Maher Valley, situated about 60 km north of Karachi. The Maher Hill rises 1,100ft and it gives rise to the Maher Hill stream in the the northern hill of Maher Valley. The stream moves south, east and then west, passing by Tarari, Wankhand and Kand Jhang and finally runs into the Hub River.

Could a treasure of rock art found near Gadap possibly become a tourist attraction?

The Kanara tribe inhabits the Maher Valley which has seven villages that include Maher Kanaro, Bakhar Kanar, Palendo Kanaro, Mitho Kanaro and Jabal Kanaro. The rock shelter at Lahaut overlooks Lahaut Kumb. In fact, there are two kumbs (natural ponds) at this site — a two-foot deep groove that cuts into the rock, connects the two kumbs. Alligators are found in the upper kumb which is deep while the lower one is shallow. This groove, locally called ‘Lahaut

Atari' brings drainage to the lower kumb. It is believed that the Hindus would come to worship these alligators.

To the west of these kumbs is a rock shelter with paintings, most of which are human and geometric representations painted in black, red and orange hues; animal depictions are not found here. The most interesting anthropomorphic figure that occupies the centre appears to be a female figure giving birth. This figure can be called the 'Deity of the Maher Valley' as there are other figures around it indicating some kind of ritual being performed. It could be a cult deity of a certain tribe that once inhabited the Maher Valley.

Interestingly, the locals do not visit the rock shelter because they believe that all of these images were made by demons that once inhabited the Maher Valley. This is an apparent reference to what they believe were a race of giants who could easily scale such heights to make these images. Indeed some of these images are painted on the ceiling where, even today, one cannot reach — another reason why people believe that the rock art was made by demons and giants.



Maher Valley

There are some schematic signs that are painted in the rock shelter which might have been of symbolic value for those who once inhabited the Maher Valley. It is likely that these symbols represent the control over the resources of the Valley or else, these could be territorial markers. One of the signs is painted on the left side of the depiction of the 'Maher Deity'. Three anthropomorphic figures are shown oriented to the schematic sign which apparently indicate the resources of the valley such as water, animals, forests, etc. It is likely this sign might represent the Mesolithic or Neolithic people who inhabited the Valley since the remains of the Mesolithic Period site are not more than one and a half km south of the rock shelter at Lahaut.

The figure of the 'deity' is surrounded by three anthropomorphic figures in black. On both the left and right sides of the 'deity' are representations of several three-pronged signs which resemble with a trident. There are two types of three-pronged signs: one with an appended staff and the other without a staff. The sign with the appended staff has two dots in between the prongs which resembles the trishul of the Hindu goddess, Durga. The three-pronged sign without a staff may represent a fertility cult as the number of such signs suggests that they were associated with fertility and it is likely that people in the ancient times painted several of these to appease the mother goddess.

There are 15 three-pronged signs, painted in black and red; some of the three-pronged symbols are painted above and to the left side of the 'deity'. Those which are painted above this figure appear to be tridents. Above these tridents is an anthropomorphic figure. On the left side of the 'deity' pictogram are several finger dots and two trident-shaped signs. One appears to be a trident because a staff is clearly attached to it whereas the other is without a staff. The second representation is likely to be either an anthropomorph or a 'fertility symbol'. Traces of white over black colour are visible on this 'fertility symbol'. Close to it is a depiction of a circle with two dots inside. This may either represent a megalithic burial or some other sacred symbol associated with the 'deity'.

Broadly speaking, the cave paintings of Lahaut belong to different periods, from the Mesolithic to the historic period. Some stick figures appear to belong to the Mesolithic period. Some dots are also associated with these stick figures. The figures of deities appear to be of the Bronze Age. Likewise, the figure of a shaman and a few associated dots were also painted in the Bronze Age. A few abstract symbols belong to this Age as well. The trident-shaped sign or symbol appears to be of the historic period.

A few signs are most probably related to the Nath Jogis who were the followers of Shiva. It is likely that these symbols were painted by the Nath Jogis since

this rock shelter is located on the ancient route that led to Hinglaj in Lasbela, Balochistan and it is known that some groups of jogis used to halt at the rock shelter at Lahaut and the symbols

might be religious symbols related to them. Similar symbols have also been found in the Pir Khudi cave at Tak Makan which also appear to be related to the Nath Jogis.

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