

The Representation of the Neolithic Rock Art of Bangu-dae, South Korea

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Abstract : The rock engraving of the Korea are dated by a very few direct archaeological contexts by linking their images to objects of known prehistoric date - although many of the figures are 'abstract'. This paper focuses on the rock art of Bangu-dae, located in the south-east of Korea. I try to the date of engravings from their contexts and the ways in which they can be studied.

Key Words : Bangu-dae, rock engraving, the Neolithic era, whale fishing, Korea

I. Introduction

There are now almost 20 known rock art sites in the Korean Peninsula, mostly discovered over the last 30 years. When the geographical distribution of these sites is examined they are seen to be concentrated in the southern part of the peninsula, often coinciding with the distribution of megalithic remains. However no conclusion can yet be drawn from this known correlation of sites, as the survey of petroglyphic sites in all regions of Korea is currently insufficient. In addition there are probably sites from before the megalithic period. Some of the site, such as Bangu-dae, probably relate to an early, pre-agricultural period. Others seem related to a later agricultural period, for example the site linked to megaliths.

The Bangu-dae site(Fig. 1), in the south-east of Korea, presents numerous engraving of animals, in particular cetacean. From the abundant representations or marine fauna the site would seem to be in closely associated with a hunter-

fisher population group. The site also presents whaling scenes, which suggest the prehistoric population of this area were among the first to take advantage of coastal whales. All these engravings give exceptional evidence on the beginning of whaling during prehistory.

II. The site environment

The site of Bangu-dae is on the left bank of the Tae-hwa River, which runs to the east and joins the East Sea(Fig. 2). The engraved wall is in a ravine-like valley, at present flooded because of a dam, apart from in rare periods of drought. The site is on the lower part of cliff, the area measuring approximately 3 meters high by 10 meters wide. Most of the engraved faces, of smooth reddish sandstone, are oriented towards the north.

The site is located approximately 22 km west of the coast. The pale-environment; the Ulsan basin is an alluvial plain formed from recently

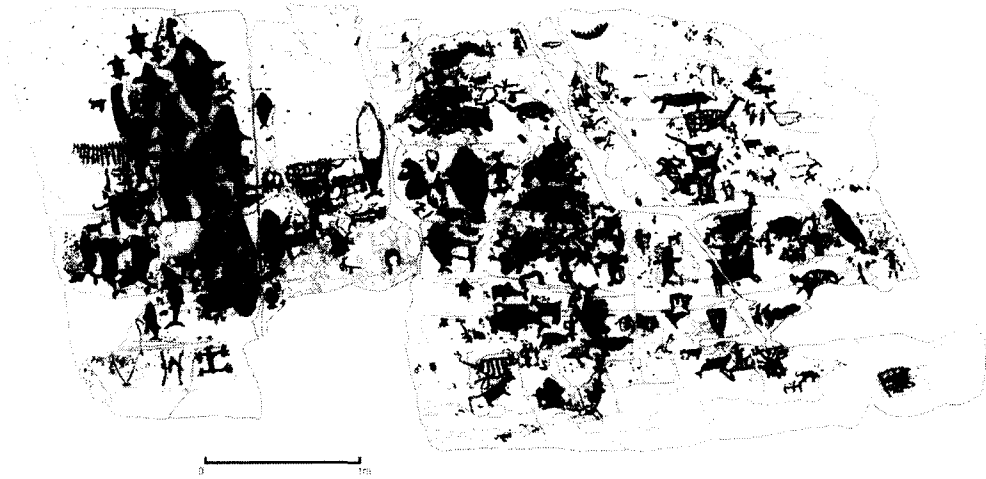


Fig. 1. The site of Bangu-dae.

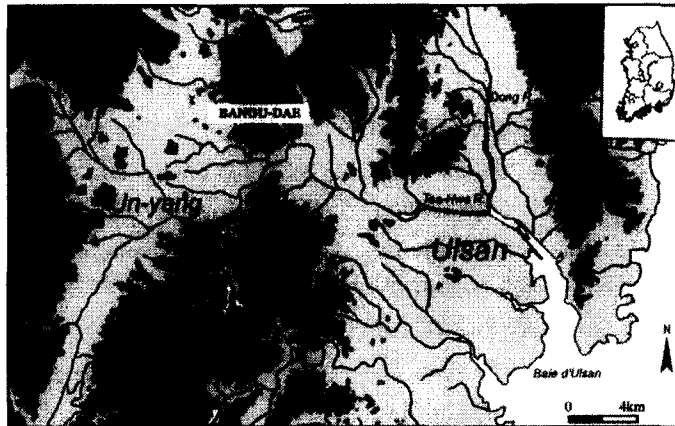


Fig. 2. The site of Bangu-dae is on the left bank of the Tae-hwa River.

deposited Holocene sediments. Hwang & Yoon suggested that around 6,000 - 2,300 BP the Ulsan plain corresponded to a bay which was probably broader than present, for reason of variations in sea level. We can, therefore, suppose that the site of Bangu-dae was closer to the coast at the time of execution of the engravings.

III. Identification of the figures

There are 231 observable figures, of which 170 figures are identifiable and 61 motifs are unidentifiable. Some of the animals, we can classify according to species or to a precise family by their morphological characteristics. For example, three profiles of cetacean on Face A constitute an impressive sequence showing a

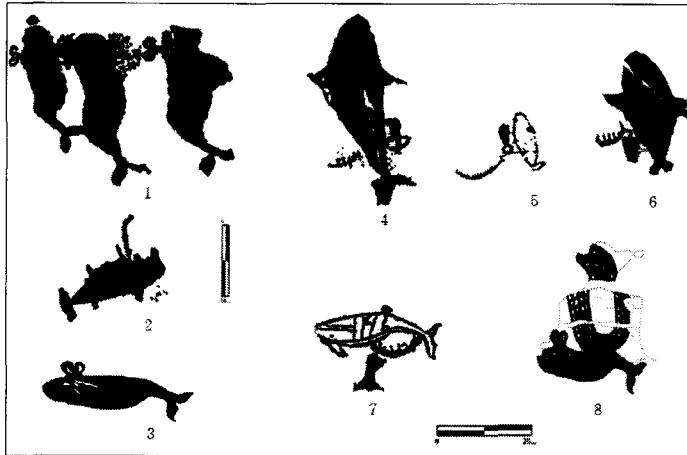


Fig. 3. The representations of the cetaceans and whaling scenes.

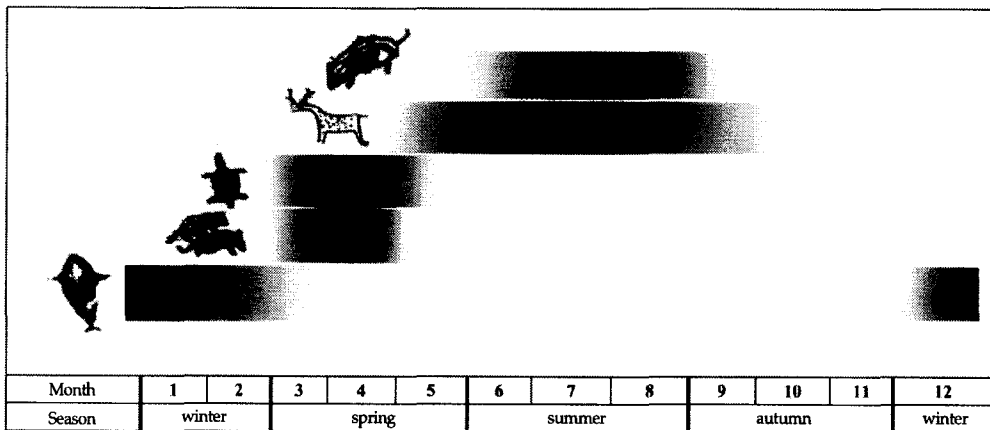


Fig. 4. The representations of the animals give clues to the season depicted

blow scene (Fig. 3. n°1). On Face J, a figure of a whale radiates two curves (Fig. 3. n°3), which is certainly an indication of its breath. This phenomenon is probably in closely related to the size of the species, as it is impossible to visually distinguish the larger from the smaller cetacean.

There are also 25 artiodactyls, 23 carnivores, 6 tortoises, 3 birds, 2 pinniped, 2 fish, etc. Representations of cetaceans are the most frequent, being 19.9% of the total figures. Among these are two families of baleen whales (*Balaenidae* and

Balaenopteridae) and the sperm whale.

The figures show evidence that humans used harpoons (Fig. 3. n°4), floats and lines to catch their prey (Fig. 3. n°5), which included sperm whales, right whales and humpbacks. Again the site also presents whaling scenes, suggesting that the coastal population of Korea were among the first to take advantage of coast whales. We can find two figures of whales reversed, with their bodies showing segmented features (Fig. 3. n°7). Some of the depictions of whales also bear what appear to

be fleshing lines, where the hunters divided up the meat after capturing and killing the mammal. We can suggest that whaling played an important role in social cohesion in the lives of the people who made the engraving. The representation of the site, sometime, give clues to the season depicted. It was possible to correlate zoological and ethological data with some prehistoric iconographical representations. Data relating to activities of certain animal species depicted provided information on the seasonal presence or passage through our latitudes. Those configurations, for the most part, indicate the

change of season or a breeding season (Fig. 4).

IV. Style of engravings

Observation of the engravings makes it possible to highlight reference marks to different styles of engraving. We can find at the site 4 different styles: style A would be oldest, then style B, followed by style C, with style D being the most recent. The relative proportions of the various topics are different according to style:

1. Among engravings of C style figures of

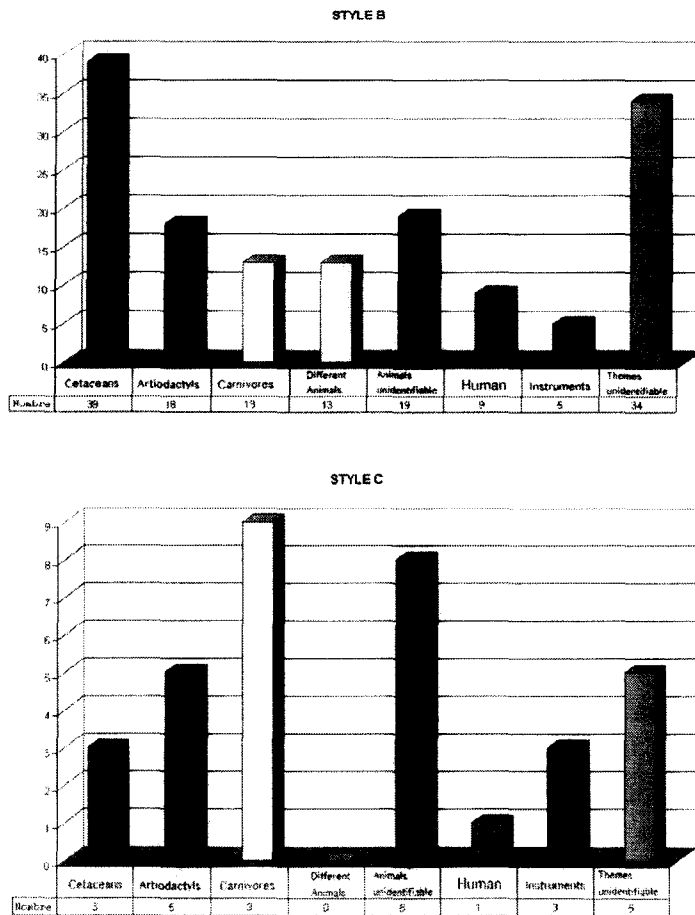


Fig. 5. The relative proportions of the various topics between different types.

terrestrial animals are more numerous than those of marine animals. Conversely, among engravings of the B style, figures of marine animals are more numerous than those of the terrestrial animals.

2. Among engravings of the C style the figures of carnivores outnumber those of artiodactyls, but in the B style the reverse is true.

Therefore, we can presume that the cetaceans and artiodactyls had a more important role than other animal species in the community of the B style period. In the C style period, with the passage of time, the carnivores have a more important role than the other animal species. In other terms, this aspect is probably related to the socio-cultural value of the period.

V. Archaeological context

In the IVth and IIIrd millennia agriculture was still unknown in the southern part region of Korea. Humans lived mainly from hunting and fishing as shown by the remains from this period, mainly shell middens. These "Neolithic" sites have yielded pottery with a flat or rounded base, decorated with dots or incised lines, dated between 6000 and 1000BC. The men of this era hunted marine and land mammals. They thus had a mode of life reminiscent of the Northern Pacific population known from ethno-historical sources. Rice appeared towards 1000BC in the Ulsan region(ex. the site Okhun). The lack of chronological study in detail obviates any exact distinguishing of the sites. Some of them, like the site of Bangu-dae, probably relate to an early, pre-agricultural way of life. Others seem later, agricultural, as, for example, the site linked to megaliths.

VI. Approaches to dating and conclusion

1. I suggest here three aspects of dating.

1. I try to the date of engravings from their geographic positions, which provides a firm limit. This aspect of research can probably make it possible to determine a minimum age by compared to the relationship between climatic change and eustatic movement.

2. Engravings themselves can provide elements contributing to their dating. In general, we will analyze the animals bones exhumed from the sites.

3. By comparison of the topical figures with other petroglyph sites in Korea we make it possible to arrange in chronological order. This approach imposes regional identification of the chronological and cultural contexts.

Finally, the rock engravings seem to have been made at a range of different times between 6,000 and 1,000 BC. That is to say, the site seems to be in closely related with a hunter-fisher, pre-agricultural way of life, attributed to the Neolithic era.

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