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# Archaeological investigations in the human occupied painted rock shelter of Brahmagiri residual hill: Prospecting for its context in South India late prehistory and early history

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## ABSTRACT

Recent investigations in the granitic landscapes of late prehistoric sites in southern Deccan are increasingly identifying rock shelters in and near open air settlement sites, suggesting regular use and reuse of shelters by the occupants. These shelters are either associated with cultural materials or rock art, or both, as in the case of newly found shelter at Brahmagiri, and this research attempts to contextualise it within the south Indian late prehistory and early history, through the study of its deposited cultural materials and the pictographs found within. Classification, sequencing and chronology of the panel motifs are proposed based on its stratigraphy (differential pigment colours and image superpositioning) and image morphology (form and technique). The approach taken here is less common than the subject matter based classification usually applied in Indian rock art studies and was selected because the panel has poor thematic and diagnostic elements, except for the motifs of two horse riders and two objects. Based on my analysis, I propose an Iron Age date for the images and the primary use of the rock shelter.

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## 1. Introduction

Rock art evidences executed over the rock shelters and boulders are located across the sandstone, quartzite and granitic landscapes of South India (e.g., Neumayer, 1993, 2011). Late Pleistocene to modern times is the chronological bracket drawn through art stylistic studies, relative and absolute dating of both cultural materials as well as the art (see Tacon et al., 2010). Compiled from the rock (art) shelter sites of Cuddapah (Clarkson et al., 2009; Korisettar and Janardhana, 2014; Tacon et al., 2010), Thungabhadra and Krishna valleys (Sinopoli, 2011; Robinson et al., 2008; Korisettar and Prasanna, 2014; Boivin et al., 2007; Johansen and Bauer, 2015). The sites include but not limited to Katavani Kunta (Blinkhorn et al., 2010), Jwalapuram locality 9 (Clarkson et al., 2009), Birappa shelter (Robinson and Koshy, 2004), Hirebenekal (Bauer and Trivedi, 2013; Bauer 2014), Maski (Johansen and Bauer, 2015), Kadebakele (Morrison et al., 2009, 2015), Sidlaphadi (IAR, 1957) and Brahmagiri on which this paper is concerned supposed to be an added crucial example.

The multicomponent and multiperiod type-site of Brahmagiri is a well-known archaeological location since eight decades, reported with huge occupational and burial localities excavated at the foothill and foothill plains (Krishna, 1934, 1941; Wheeler, 1948), and but with no

reporting of any occupational evidences in 'rock shelter context'. Recent non-sampling and site locating systematic survey through transects being a part of author's doctoral program has located a number of natural rock shelters in Brahmagiri inselberg, and one among them is in association with the rock art pictographs and occupational debris of potsherds, crafted stone fragments and faunal remains.

## 2. Site history

The site of Brahmagiri (Fig. 1) is a pocket at the north and northeast foot a granitic residual inselberg (670 m MSL/elevating about 100 m from the surrounding plains) covering an area of 4 km<sup>2</sup> of the south bank of tributary stream Hagari in a semi-arid climatic condition (in Molakalmuru taluka, Chitradurga District, Karnataka). Foothill and surrounding plains are presently covered by tropical dry thorny vegetation and red loamy soil with a modified landscape due to agriculture, canal trenching and sediment bunding that has resulted in dislocation and modification of cultural materials.

For a number of reasons Brahmagiri has received significant attention of both archaeologists and historians. Including for the presence of typical megalithic type, popularly known as 'Brahmagiri cist burials', Asokan rock edicts, medieval temples and inscriptions, and for an historical event in Indian Archaeology for Wheeler's (1948) first systematic and stratified excavations to establish South Indian megaliths (Iron Age) chronology. The archaeological potential of Brahmagiri is been assessed

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Fig. 1. Transect survey area of 16 km<sup>2</sup> (4 × 4 km), centring Brahmagiri hill and covering riverbanks of Hagari, plains and clusters of small granitic hillocks. The transect lines each are 4 km in stretch spaced at 200 m intervals. The drawn transect lines indicate area so far covered.

since 1903 through excavations and explorations, and it can be better understood from the works of Krishna (1934, 1941), Wheeler (1948), Sheshadri (1959), Dhavalikar (1968), Sundara (1970, 1989), Morrison (2005), Keshava et al. (2015) and Mallinathpur (2016).

Excavations at the northern tip of the foothill by Krishna (1934) established cultural levels of Haneya (ca. 12–13th century CE)–Early History (300 BCE–500 CE)–Iron Age (1200–300 BCE)–Microliths. Wheeler's (1948) excavations at 500 m south of Khrishna's location at

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