
Tracing the Development and Evolution of Deur Kothar Based on Rock Art and Archaeological Material of the Site

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Abstract: *The focus of this paper is to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the historical landscape of the Buddhist site of Deur Kothar (24°5552.57 N, 81°3946.21 E) by examining its surroundings that includes the rock art, stupas and associated archaeological materials. Deur Kothar was first excavated by P.K. Mishra from the Archaeological Survey of India, in 2001. Besides the rock paintings, the site has a few Buddhist remains; stupas and a monastery. The nature of these archaeological remains help in understanding the chronology of the site. The pictographs belong to different periods as evident from the style, theme and superimposition. In addition to the rock art, there is a microlithic cluster in the vicinity. The material remains thereby suggest a chronology ranging from Mesolithic to the early centuries of Christian era.*

Keywords: Deur Kothar, Buddhist Stupas, Rock Art, Rewa, Chronology, Microliths, Kaimur

Introduction

The archaeological site of Deur Kothar (24°5552.57 N, 81°3946.21 E), situated on the northern outskirts of the Rewa plateau is primarily known for its Buddhist remains. Deur Kothar was discovered by Ajit Singh, *sarpanch* of the village in 1982 (Mishra, 2001) Excavations were undertaken here in 1999-2000 by P.K. Mishra have unearthed evidence structural remains in the form of a *maha* stupa, two smaller stupas and a monastery. The stupas have been dated back to the 3rd century BCE. In addition, the excavator also mentions the presence of sixty-three rock shelters at Deur Kothar, many of which containing rock art datable to the prehistoric and historic periods (Mishra, 2001). The focus of the Mishra's work here was however mostly restricted to the Buddhist remains, with limited attention paid towards documenting other archaeological remains along with their associated contexts. This paper in the aforesaid lines presents the results of surveys undertaken in September 2023 in order to generate a broader understanding of the historical landscape of the region by documenting the rock art found within the vicinity of the Buddhist remains at Deur Kothar. A total of eleven rock shelters were randomly selected for documentation and detailed study of the rock art.

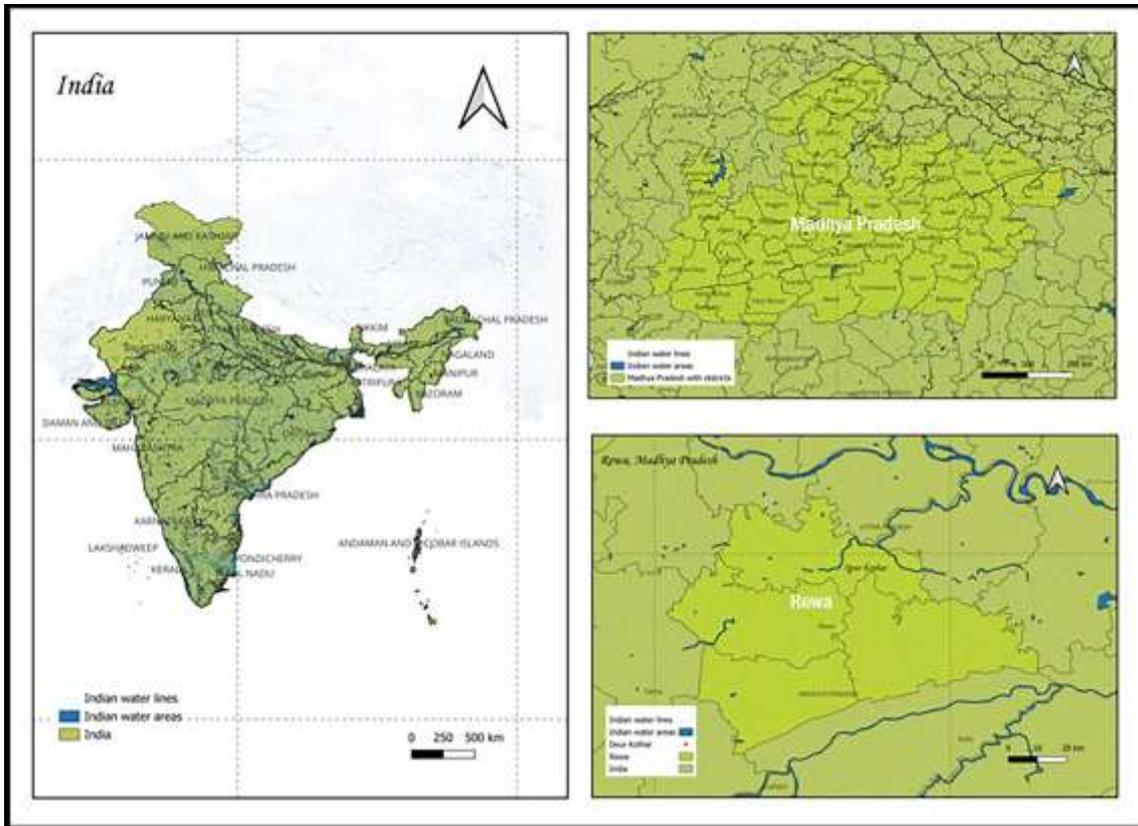


Figure 1: Location of Deur Kothar in Rewa District of Madhya Pradesh

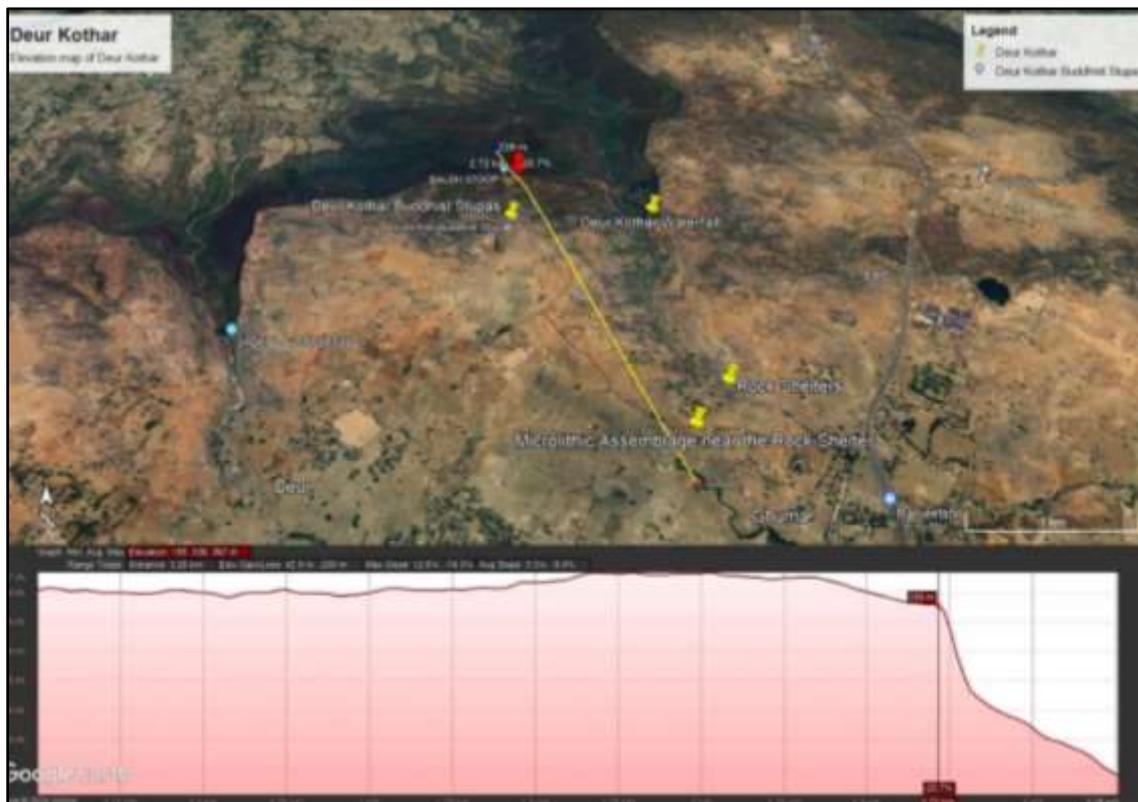


Figure 2: Map showing the elevation of Deur Kothar (courtesy: Google Earth)

Geographical Background

Deur Kothar (24°5552.57 N, 81°3946.21 E) is situated in the Tyonthar Tehsil within the Rewa district (Figure 1). It is positioned approximately 67 km north of the Rewa city (Figure 1) and 5 km north of the village of Katra (Mishra, 2001). The Tyonthar Tehsil region is encompassed within the Rewa plateau also called Uprihar (District Census Handbook: Rewa, 2011). The topography of this area can be described as a combination of flatland and elevated regions (Figure 2). As Rewa is a plateau, its elevation gradually decreases from the southern part towards the northern part (Figure 2) (District Census Handbook: Rewa, 2011). The terrain consists of alternating layers of sturdy sandstone and relatively softer flags and shales (The Imperial Gazetteer of India, 1908). The climate in this region is characterized by scorching summers and overall aridity, with temperatures soaring up to 45.7 °C between the months of March and June. Conversely, during the winter season, temperatures drop to as low as 1°C in January (District Census Handbook: Rewa, 2011). The primary stupa is situated at an elevation of 351 m, while the rock shelters are scattered throughout the entire region.

Historical Background

Deur Kothar, was previously known as Barhat, a village panchayat, as mentioned by Mishra (2001). This region forms a part of the ancient *Madhyadesa*, with early references to *Madhyadesa* found in Pali and Sanskrit Buddhist texts (Law, 1934). The *Divyāvadāna*, dating back to the 3rd to 4th century BCE, provides a description of the geographical extent of this region (Law, 1934). According to these texts, *Madhyadesa* is regarded as a land of great significance for Buddhism (Law, 1934). Deur Kothar is situated along a major trade route that once connected Rewa to Kaushambi and Prayag.



Figure 3: Decorative alpana motifs (enhanced using D Stretch software)

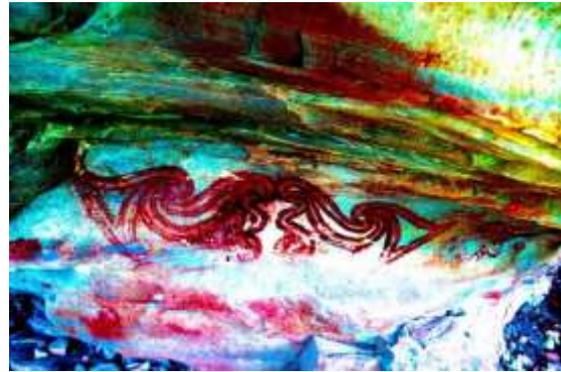


Figure 4: Decorative Alpana motifs (enhanced using D Stretch software)

Rock Art of Deur Kothar

Rock art and engravings serve as visual evidence, acting as a means of communication, documentation, and narration of human events, thus illustrating the progression of human history (Tacon and Chippindale, 1998). However, the interpretation of rock art remains highly speculative, and there are hardly any living traditions that are similar in nature. The rock art found in Deur Kothar also exhibits a diverse range of motifs of

both the prehistoric and historic period. Thematically, the dominant motifs include human figures, handprints, animal figures, geometric patterns, (decorative patterns (*alpanas*), horse riders, stupa paintings, inscriptions (painted and incised) *et cetera*. The pictographs are all executed in red except one with brahmi writings which is in black. The red pigments used are derived from haematite nodules of iron oxide locally known as *geru*. The paintings employ both the flat wash technique and line drawings. The decorative motifs resembling present day floor design executed in traditional homes called *alpana* (Figures 3 and 4). These are executed in different shades of ochre and are categorized as bi-chrome paintings.



Figure 5: Type 1 human figure
(enhanced using D Stretch software)



Figure 6: Type 2 human figure
(enhanced using D Stretch software)

In terms of style, the rock art investigated as a part of this study exhibit variations. The most recurring motif is that of the human figure which exhibit significant stylistic changes (five styles have been categorized) suggesting different cultural associations. Initially human figures are represented with triangular shapes. This is done by combining one inverted triangle and one regular triangle forming an hourglass-like figure. Some of these figures are depicted with weapons like bow and arrows (Figure 5). The second style of human figures represent an inverted triangle for the upper torso and a while the lower body is depicted with garments (Figure 6). The third type simply portrays stick figures with circular heads (Figure 7). The fourth type employs flat wash technique and depicts figures with bow and arrows in both hands (Figure 8). The fifth type of human figure has a box-shaped torso with hatching infilling (Figure 9).



Figure 7: Type 3 human figure
(enhanced using D Stretch software)

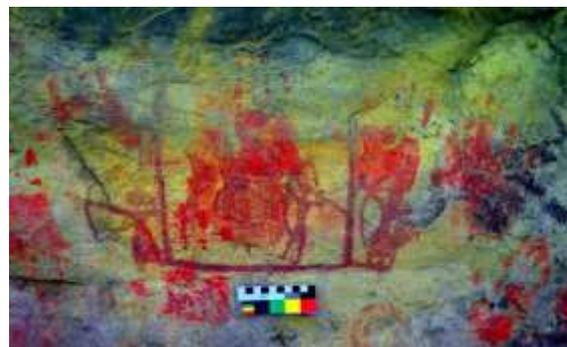


Figure 8: Type 4 human figure
(enhanced using D Stretch software)



Figure 9: Type 5 human figure (enhanced using D Stretch software)



Figure 10: Handprints on wall of the shelter (enhanced using D Stretch software)

The next most commonly occurring motifs are the handprints (Figure 10). Interestingly all of them are positive handprints for both left and right hands. These were executed

by applying colour on the palm and placing it directly on the cave walls. The handprints are of different sizes, which denotes that some were also made by children. In one of the shelters there is a solitary footprint not in a good state of conservation (Figure 11). The footprint was likely created using the same method as the handprints as the foot mark is just a short distance above the shelter floor.



Figure 11: Footprint highlighted using a circle (enhanced using D Stretch software)



Figure 12: depiction of animals in flat wash technique and in line drawings (enhanced using D Stretch software)



Figure 13: depiction of humped animal probably cattle (enhanced using D Stretch software)

Paintings featuring animals are also common in the shelters. They are painted either using flat wash or line drawing techniques (Figure 12). Minimal stylistic variation is observed in the motifs, with elephants, tigers, cattle *et cetera* are depicted in the paintings. Animals are also depicted using box shaped body with hatching infilling (Figure 13).

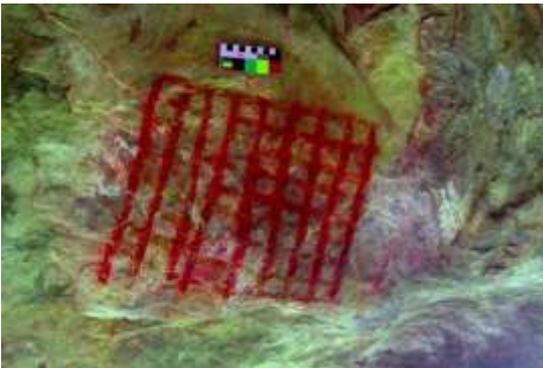


Figure 14: Geometric pattern: the designs are depicting grid pattern with 9 horizontal lines and 9 vertical lines (enhanced using D Stretch software)

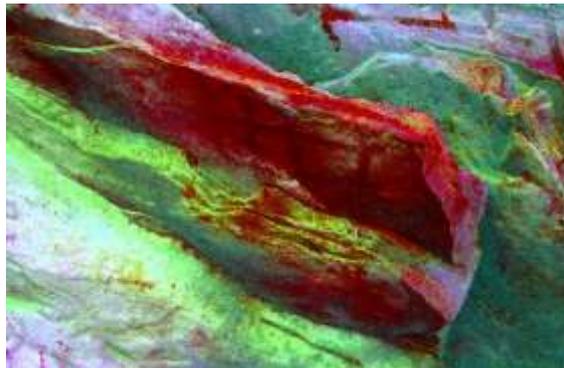


Figure 15: Geometric pattern: grid pattern shown with 4 vertical lines and 2 horizontal lines (enhanced using D Stretch software)

Geometric patterns reoccur in different shelters. It is considered per-figurative. Pre-figurative art is suggestive of the Upper Palaeolithic or Mesolithic period. The geometric pattern is depicted in the form of grids (Figures 14 and 15). These geometric

patterns constitute of 11.5% of the total painting documented. The geometric patterns are painted towards the ceiling of the shelters. The decorative patterns similar to *alpana* motifs have been limited to one shelter. There are a total of 12 decorative (*alpana*) motifs (Figures 16 and 17). The designs are elaborate and are placed on the wall as well as on the ceiling. The shelter with the decorative patterns is located in close proximity to the site and might hold ritualistic importance.



Figure 16: Decorative pattern (*alpana* motif) towards the ceiling of the shelter (enhanced using D Stretch software)



Figure 17: Decorative pattern (*alpana* motif (enhanced using D Stretch software)



Figure 18: Horse riders (The depiction of horses are in two different styles) (enhanced using D Stretch software)



Figure 19: Depiction of stupa (enhanced using D Stretch software)

Another commonly occurring motif is of horse riders. The animal is shown in both flat wash and line drawings. The human figures riding them are similar to the human

depictions in figure 8 (Figures 8 and 18). The horse riders also hold weapons in hand probably suggesting a battle scene (Figure 18). Interestingly there is also a depiction of a stupa rendered in flat wash. It is a naturalistic depiction. The stupa features an elongated *medhi* (platform) with a spherical *anda* (dome) and a *yashtika* (pole) supporting the *chatri* (parasol) (Figure 19). Adjacent to the stupa is an unidentified structure, often interpreted by locals as a *stambha* (pillar). The stupa motif in this shelter is positioned at an eye level.



Figure 20: Triangular patterns with circular motifs (enhanced using D Stretch software)

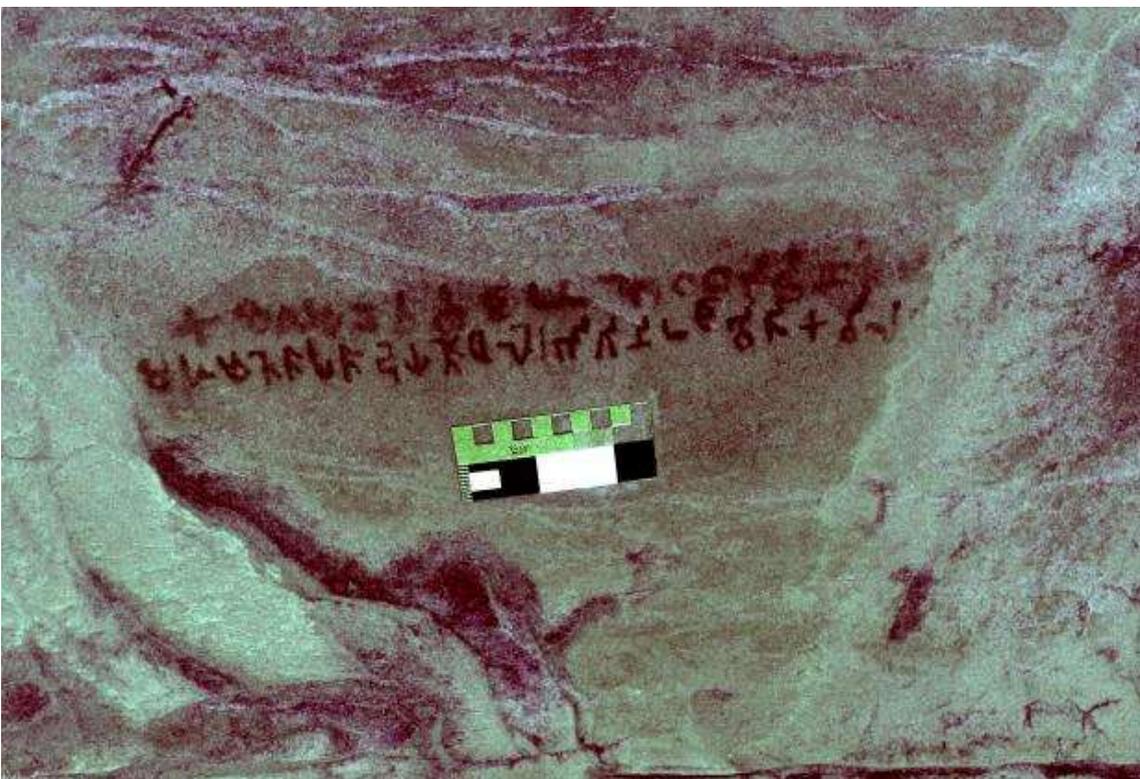


Figure 21: Two-line inscription (enhanced using D Stretch software)



Figure 22: Single line inscription in shelter (enhanced using D Stretch software)

Figure 20 depicts consecutive triangular patterns. Above the triangles there are three horizontal lines. Two parallel lines have been shown below the triangles. In between the lines there is an infilling of intersecting lines. These appear to be stylized form of Buddhist stupas. Circular motifs can also be observed above the 1st, 3rd, and 6th triangles from the right (Figure 21). Interestingly it must be noted that there were three structural stupas in the same site and this representation may be representing the same. Circular motifs have been found globally including India from the Middle Pleistocene to the Historical period (Abbas, 2020). These motifs are evident in both petroglyphs and pictographs, suggesting a long history of representation with various meanings. Archaeologists through various ethnographic studies have associated similar circular motifs with concepts of sacred and profane, magical and mystic, supernatural and paranormal, as well as associations with gods, spirits, ghosts, and mythological figures (Abbas, 2020).

In figures 22 and 23, there are two sets of painted writings. The first set consists of two lines, both painted in red ochre. Based on the style and script used Wakankar (1992) has attributed such paintings to the Early Historic period. The placement of the paintings suggests accessibility to viewers, as they are at eye level and easily readable. The shelter itself is easily accessible, allowing for easy viewing. The first line of the painted inscription has faded. It is a two-line inscription (Figure 21). The letters are similar to those of the 2nd century BCE (Figure 21). The script is early Brahmi, and the language used is Prakrit (Figure 21).

Line 1: *Kamagasa tavajidana bhegathadana*

Line 2: *Mahamate Shapata deyatau Dhalera bhigini Ujakhigi Kavila*

Line 1: Mention of Kamagasa and the benefaction made by him (dana).

Line 2: Mentions Mahamate Shapata and the sister of Dhalara, Ujakhiti Kavila.

According to the inscription probably *Kamagasa* and *Mahamate Shapata* donated the cave. The second inscription (Figure 22) is in Brahmi script and Prakrit language. The

writing style is indicative of 3rd century BCE (Figure 22). The inscription mentions the name *Tasashahadhu*, probably the name of an individual. The paintings are primarily found on the walls and ceiling of the shelters. The placement of these paintings may carry significance due to the beliefs and ritualistic practices associated with them (Wakankar, 1992). Other motifs in the shelters include chariots, birds, humans riding elephants *et cetera*. These paintings do not have major stylistic changes. There is a seasonal stream close to the site which connects to the Deur Kothar water fall (Figure 23). The stream joins the Deur Kothar waterfall (Figure 23). Close to a seasonal stream, an array of microlithic tools was found (Figure 23).



Figure 23: Map showing areas with microlithic assemblage. (Courtesy: Google Earth)

These tools include blade tools, bladelets, blade cores, micro-blades, backed blades, and points (Figures 24-27). Some of the paintings in the shelters close to the assemblage can be stylistically dated to the Mesolithic period. The tools found can be associated with the Mesolithic period and helps in establishing the context of these paintings.

Trade Routes and Buddhism in Deur Kothar

Deur Kothar lies on an ancient trade route (Figure 28). The area of modern Rewa acted as a communication point connecting Deur Kothar to other sites like Sanchi and Bharut (Singh, 1998). There are two ways to approach Rewa from the Shankargarh-Garhwa sector (Chakrabarti *et al*; 2003). The first route climbed the Vindhyan scarp at Sohagi Ghat, where the excavated remains of Deur Kothar stupa overlook the slope by which the scrape was climbed (Chakrabarti *et al*; 2003; Mishra, 2001). As merchants would clamber up the scrape at the Sohagi Ghat, they would find the high Mauryan Stupa at

Deur Kothar (Chakrabarti *et. al.*, 2003). This route connected Prayag to Bhita and Shankargarh, Kaushambi to Mau and Shankargarh (Chakrabarti *et. al.*, 2003). From Shankargarh one could approach Rewa from two different routes (Figure 28). The first connected Shankargarh to Sohagi ghat or Deur Kothar which further connected to Keoti, Teonthar and Rewa (Chakrabarti *et. al.*, 2003). The second route was Sankargarh to Baldaha Ghat close to Deur Kothar. Baldaha Ghat connected to Teontar and then to Rewa (Figure 28).

- Prayag → Bhita → Shankargarh
- Kausambi → Mau → Shankargarh
- Shankargarh → Sohagi Ghat/ Deur Kothar → Keoti → Teonthar → Rewa
- Shankargarh → Baldaha Ghat → Teonthar → Rewa



Figure 24: Microliths found from Deur Kothar (Singh 2023)



Figure 25: Microliths found from Deur Kothar (Singh 2023)



Figure 26: Microliths found from Deur Kothar (Singh 2023)



Figure 27: Microliths found from Deur Kothar (Singh 2023)

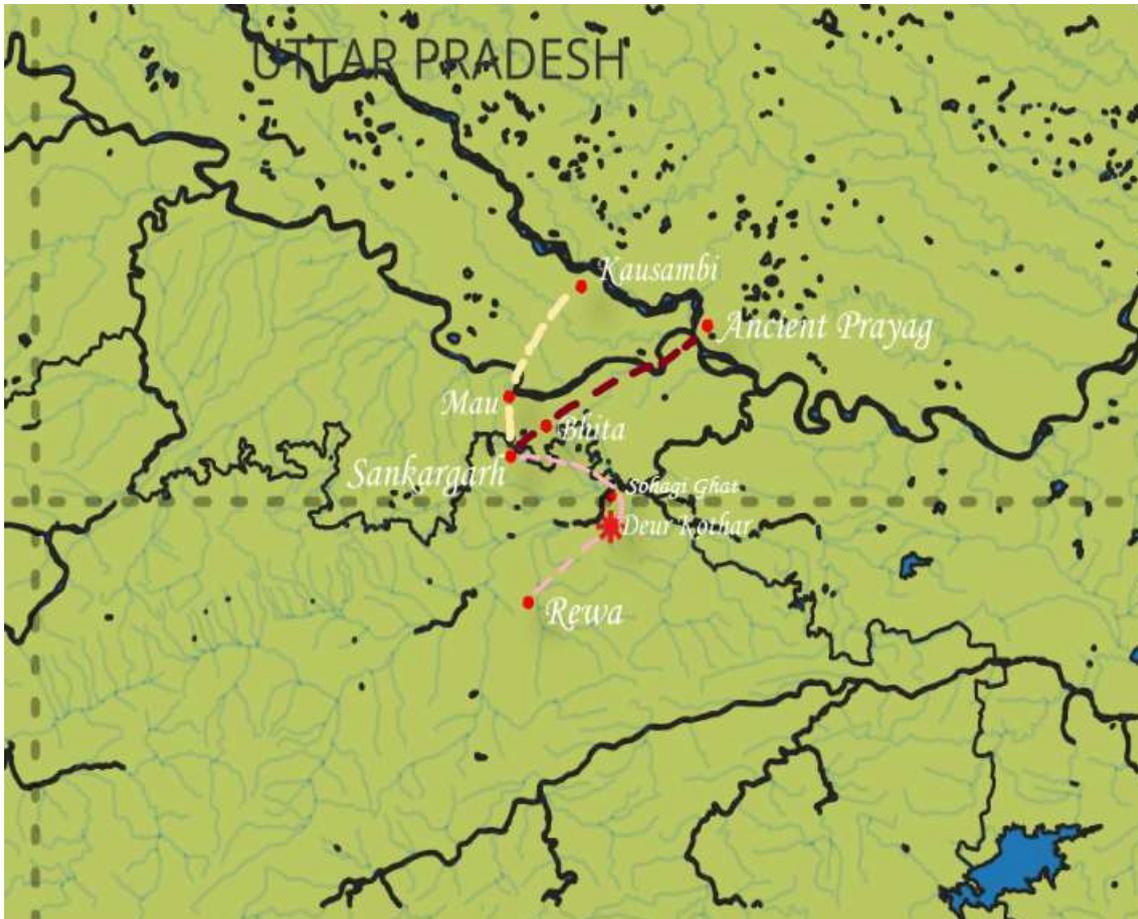


Figure 28: Trade route connecting Rewa to Kaushambi and Prayag (Singh 2023)



Figure 29: The main stupa of Deur Kothar



Figure 30: Stone Inscription near the *maha* stupa

The geography of a region plays an important role in the building and evolution of a culture. The trade routes of a country also depend on certain geographical factors (Chandra, 1977). In the context of South Asia Buddhist texts mention trade routes and also mention that they were especially constructed for various purposes (Lahiri, 1992) Stupa complexes developed around trade routes. Ashoka's inscriptions clearly indicates that roads were maintained in order to facilitate long-distance travel, both by his administrative agents and armies, but also by merchants and Buddhist monks who transversed between urban centres and religious sites associated with the Buddha's life and significant early monasteries (Kumar, 2015). Possibly, the stupa complex came up after the trade route became active in the region. The site of Deur Kothar *maha* stupa is placed on the edge of a cliff and is around 11.07 meters high from ground level (Figure 29) (Varma, 1990).

The excavations have revealed corroborative evidence of destruction referred to in ancient Buddhist literature (Mishra 2001). 3 layers of brickbats, terracotta objects, stone balustrades, NBPW pottery sherd, parts of *ushnisha*, monolithic stone steps and iron nails were found *in situ* (Mishra, 2001). It is suggested that the stupa complex was abandoned in the Shunga period, which is the 2nd century BC (Mishra, 2001). However, the material evidences found around the site suggests that activities continued even in the later periods. A single stone inscription was also found in the complex, which reads "*Rishi Sashi*." (Figure 30). It seems like early Brahmi characters, while the language used is in Sanskrit. It is probably mentioning the name of a sage "*Rishi (Sa) shi*" (Figure 30). The inscription characters probably date back to the 2nd century CE. During the excavation of the stupa complex a broken pillar shaft was found, with inscriptions that read:

Inscription in Sanskrit	Transliteration
भ ग व तो बु ध	Bhagavato Budha
उ त र मि त्रो उ त र मि त्र स अ	Uttara Mitro Uttara Mitra Sa
भ ड् भ ड् स आ ते वा सि ना दि नु	Bhad Bhad Sa Ate Vasi Nadinu
उ पा स क स आ ते वा सि स व ज य स व	Upasaka Sa Ate Vasi Sa Vajaya Sa
ध म द वे न के क डी के न ब स ति ये	Dhamma Devena Ke Kodi Ke Na Basati Ye
उ स पि तो भं भो आ आ च रि ये न क	Usapito Bhambho Aa Achariye Na Ka

The inscription mentions Buddha in the first line. Further, it mentions *Dharmadeva* and his disciples *Uttarmitra*, *Bhadra*, and *Upasaka*, who resided in the monastery (IAR, 1999–2000).

Table 1: Summary of tentative chronology of the site of Deur Kothar

Sl. No.	Period	Rock Art			Associated Archaeological Material
		Content	Style	Colour	
1	Period 1 (from the Mesolithic and beyond 10000 BCE to 2500 BCE)	Geometric patterns	Line drawings	Red	blade tools, bladelets, blade cores, micro-blades, backed blades, and points.
2		Human figures	Thick outlines partially filled and decorated. Use of geometric designs.	Red	
3		Animal paintings	Thick outlines partially filled and decorated. Use of geometric designs.	Red	
4	Period 2: Chalcolithic and Iron era (2500 BCE to 300 BCE)	Elephants, Bulls, Monkeys	Silhouette	Red	The Maha stupa, two smaller stupas and the monastic complex have been dated to the 3 rd century BCE.
5		Domestic animals	Simple and complex outlines, physiological and internal body details	Red	
6		Animals and human figures with triangular	Thick crude lines	Red	

		torso			
7	Period 3 (300 BCE to 800 AD)	Symbolic pictures, scripts	Thick and thin lines	Black, red and inscribed	The stupa complex yields evidence of continuous activity until the 3 rd century BCE. However an absence of potsherds other than that concordant with the NBPW period strongly suggests that the site was abandoned in the Shunga period that is the 2 nd century BC (Mishra, 2001).
8		People riding horse and elephants, swordsmen	Outline, flat wash	Red	
9		Single coloured designs	Line drawings	Red	
10		Stupas	Flat wash and line drawings	Red	
11		Battle scenes	Flat wash and line drawings	Red	
12	Period 4 (middle Ages (800 AD to the 1300 AD)	Devanagari scripts	Thick lines	Red	-

Chronology and Dating

Rock art images rarely occur in dated archaeological contexts. Reliable determination of the age of rock art assemblages has always posed a major challenge for rock-art studies. The scientific study of rock art is crucially dependent upon some form of reliable absolute dating of the art. The rock art at the site have been studied and interpreted on the basis of previous works done in the field of rock art. Preconceived models of dating charts proposed by V. S. Wakankar (1992), S. K. Pandey (1993), and Yashodhar Mathpal (1992) have been used for comparison of motifs and to arrive at relative chronologies. The classifications done are on the basis of stylistic patterns, colour, content, and superimpositions. The associated artifacts found in situ are also analyzed to provide further context and understanding. Microliths such as backed blades, bladelets, flake tools, and blade cores were found. However, further explorations of the site are required to fully understand the cultural practices of the people who inhabited the area.

The tentative date of Deur Kothar might be from the Mesolithic period to the early historic period (Table 1). There are a few paintings at the site that can be assigned to the Late Historic Period, but their numbers are very few. The exact timeline of Deur Kothar remains uncertain. However, it is suggestive that the site was in use for a long period before it was abandoned. The continuity in rock art is suggestive of a long period of cultural activity at Deur Kothar. The Table below shows a tentative

chronology of the site. It is prepared on the basis of the study of the archaeological material, stupas and rock art found in situ.

Discussion and Conclusion

During this investigation the author successfully completed a comprehensive documentation of the rock art surrounding the stupa complex. The documentation of the rock art was crucial due to the deterioration of many of these paintings in various shelters. Additionally, the identification of a microlithic assemblage at the site contributed to a better understanding of the period during which the site was utilized. To understand the life history of a site, understanding its chronology becomes significant. In this study the author was able to devise a tentative chronology of the site. This was done on the basis of the archaeological material found at the site. Claims for a correlative relationship between rock art and archaeological finds will always remain in asserted proportions. The diversity in the rock art of Deur Kothar suggests a long period of production and interaction between groups and diverse social organizations. It cannot be clearly stated as to when the stupa complex was abandoned. Excavations suggest that the complex lost its visitors around the 2nd century BCE (Mishra, 2001). However, based upon the study of the rock art, it can be suggested that even after the stupa complex was abandoned the rock shelters were probably in use for some time. Deur Kothar was once on a major trade route that connected node points in Prayag, Kausambi, and Rewa. The site might have been a common resting place for traders, craftsmen, and monks who would pass by the route.

The author was able to study the relationship between Buddhist stupa remains, microlithic assemblages, and rock art from Deur Kothar. As a result of this study a tentative chronology of the site is suggested by the author to be ranging from the Mesolithic to the Middle Ages (Table 1). The evidence of activities in the later period is flimsy. A clearer understanding of the site, its past can be obtained from further study of the site. The rock art and shelters need to be documented and the area requires explorations for microlithic assemblage from the site.

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