

# Footprints in Central Indian Rock Art and particularly in Chhattisgarh

*This article is dedicated to Padma Shree Dr Vishnu Shridhar Wakankar, who devoted his life to Indian rock art. 2019 is the centenary of his birth. He was a guru for one of us (MDP), who has tried to follow his footprints.*

*Key words: Footprints. Central India. Rock Art. Chhattisgarh. Madhya Pradesh*

## **Abstract:**

*Red, white and more rarely yellow footprints are a particular motif of Central Indian rock art that we have found in several painted sites, even if it is not –by far– one of the most frequent themes represented. We shall particularly concentrate on the State of Chhattisgarh where we could study it in different areas.*

*If footprint representations are common the world over, in India, and particularly in the region under study, age-old traditions of footprint making are still alive in many places. In certain parts of the State, auspicious prints made on the floor of the house entrance and sometimes on the wall inside the house represent the feet of Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth. More to the point, we have collected evidence of footprint making in very recent times –the past decades– in rock art sites of the Chhattisgarh State.*

*We have systematically looked for information in the local tribes and from local people about the reasons why they made that particular gesture, on which occasions and who did it, both concerning the rock art and the prints on the floors of houses.*

*We are certainly not proposing to “explain” the rock art and its complex details in the light of present-day practices. The long persistence of ancient traditions in Central India, however, as well as the continuance of ritual practices in painted shelters, including making footprints and/or footprint representations on the walls, enable us to better understand some of the reasons that may have prompted their authors in the rock art of the region under study.*

Chhattisgarh is a State in Central India, just south-east of Madhya Pradesh, with 28 million inhabitants. It used to be part of Madhya Pradesh (capital Bhopal) until 2000. The capital city of Chhattisgarh is Raipur. A major part of the south of the state was known in ancient times as Dandakaranya, while the north was called Dakshina Koshal. It was mentioned in the Ramayana and Mahabharata epics.

In the past few years we have tried to see as many rock art sites in Chhattisgarh

as we could find. In all we found, visited and documented sixty-three, of various importance.<sup>1</sup> As two main parts can be distinguished in the State for its rock art, the South and the North, with a large band in-between with fewer or no sites (see map fig. 1), we shall quote them per big region, which will make the difference between the two more apparent.

In Chhattisgarh we have found footprints in thirteen shelters.

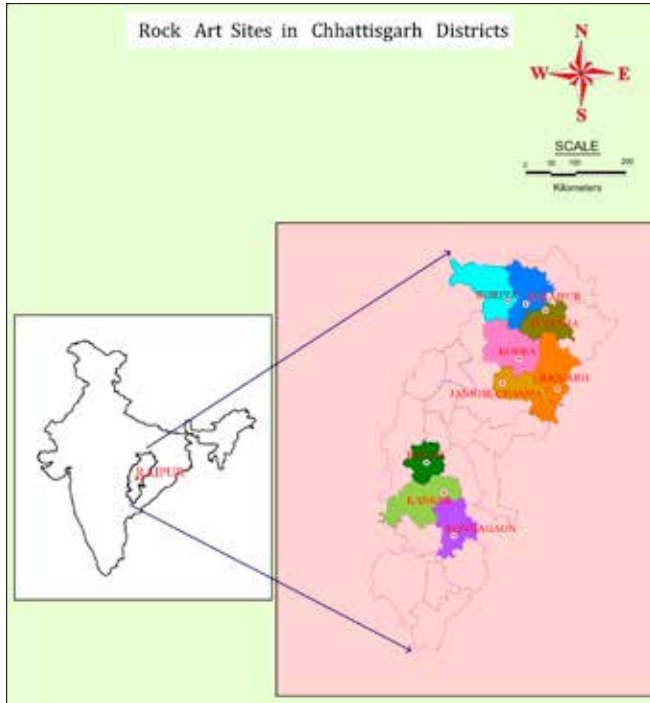


Fig. 1. Distribution of rock art sites in Chhattisgarh.

## Chhattisgarh North

**Ushakothi 1.** There are no footprints as in the preceding sites but four feet in a row have been drawn in red outlines with yellowish decorations inside. One pair has four toes and the other pair close to it has five (fig. 4).

**Ushakothi 2.** On the left side of a big diagonal crack across the wall, we could see a series of six horizontal small (10cm) feet at the bottom. Another series, just below them, is badly preserved and so are two other feet and perhaps more to their left. Above them, at 2.70m from the ground,

are two small feet (11cm) close to each other. Two others are a bit more to the left than the ones before (fig. 5). Slightly above them and to the right, we see a small crescent (20cm) with two footprints on each side, the two at left with five toes while the ones at right have five toes for one and four for the other (fig. 6). The more than twenty footprints are said to belong either to ancestors or to Goddess Lakshmi, i.e. this is a recent sanctuary dating to between 2000BP to 1000AD.

**Gidhpath.** Two small human feet are deeply engraved close and to the right of a small woman bowing her head towards them. Her name would be Sujata, a mythic character who offered rice pudding to the starving Buddha. The feet would be those of Buddha and right below the one at right, an offered bowl is represented full of food. The place is considered as being very auspicious and during our visit one of the villagers made an offering of a coconut (fig. 7). The people who cannot climb

## Chhattisgarh South

**Balarao.** Two painted panels with mostly red motifs but also with some yellow ones. On the first panel (3.20m high) are sixty-four handprints (including eight yellow ones and one of a very young child) and ten footprints (five pairs) of a very young child who must have been borne up in order to make them. They are close to an armed warrior (fig. 2).

**Jogi Gufa 2.** One can barely distinguish numerous hand stencils, feet drawings (fig. 3), animals and humans.

**Thakurpara.** Handprints and two small footprints.

**Singar Pathar.** Handprints and one single footprint made by sticking the sole of a naked foot covered with red paint against the wall. We did not see it with our naked eyes but we discovered it with DStretch as it is very faint.



Fig. 2. Some of the handprints, with footprints and an archer at Balarao. Baster, Enhanced with Dstretch (-Ire).

the steep slope and reach the cliff make their own offerings before the slope.

**Siroli Dongri 1.** The red paintings that remain visible are mostly on the ceiling and consist of two pairs of different quite small infant footprints (7cm x 3cm; 8.5cm x 4cm) and one pair of adult footprints (17.5cm x 6cm), and two other less distinct pairs (fig. 8). They seem to have been made by different persons applying colour on the soles of their feet before printing them onto the rock surface, the person lying on the rocky ground or perhaps using somebody's help.

**Siroli Dongri 2.** Two or three isolated footprints.

**Siroli Dongri 4.** The more than sixty images represent humans, hands, various animals including one big lizard, and more than a dozen footprints in pairs (fig. 9) (one of them is 20cm long and 7cm wide), finger marks, intricate big religious patterns with swastikas, *chakras* (a circle with a cross inside) and a big rectangle with inter-crossing lines inside, locally known as *Jhoothi* or *Mandna*. The majority of foot-

Fig. 3. Drawings of two feet with strange toes at Jogi Gufa 2. Baster, Enhanced with Dstretch (-Ire).

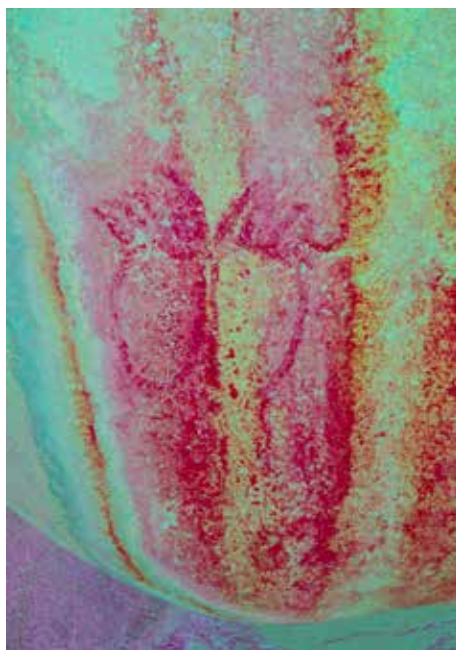






Fig. 4. At the bottom of the image one can see two pairs of feet in a row. They have been drawn in red with a yellow inside. Ushakothi 1, Raigarh.

Fig. 5. Many pair of footprints represented on the wall of this shelter. Ushakothi 2, Raigarh.





*Fig. 6. Details of some of the footprint representations. Ushakothi 2, Raigarh.*

*Fig. 7. A local villager is offering a coconut to deeply engraved footprints and other carvings. Geedhapat, Raigarh.*







Fig. 8. Real footprints, i.e. the foot covered with red paint was applied against the wall of the shelter. Siroli Dongri 1, Sarangarh. Enhanced with Dstretch (-Ire).

Fig. 9. Many real footprints in pairs. Siroli Dongri 4, Sarangarh. Enhanced with Dstretch (-Ire).



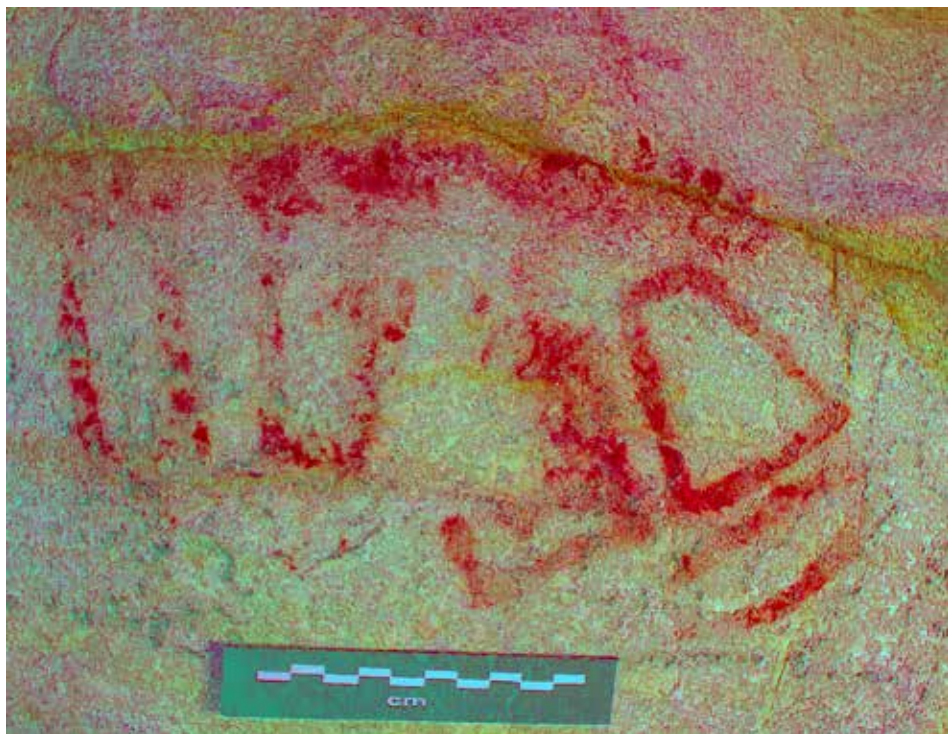


Fig. 10. Painted footprints. Only the outlines were drawn at Siroli Dongri 4. Sarangar. Enhanced with Dstretch (-Ire).

prints were applied as the ones before, but three pairs that were just drawn might represent Goddess Lakshmi's feet (fig. 10).

**Siroli Dongri 6.** Among an intricate jumble of geometric figures and marks, we worked out four representations of footprints and four of handprints.

**Siroli Dongri 7.** Half a dozen pairs of adult footprints, handprints, long vertical finger marks such as the ones which are still being made during *dhan pujas* (ceremonies for the first rice crop).

**Rabkoh cave.** A big adult footprint has been painted in red next to a sketchy human (fig. 11).

While working on Madhya Pradesh rock art we have only noticed footprints in six shelters.

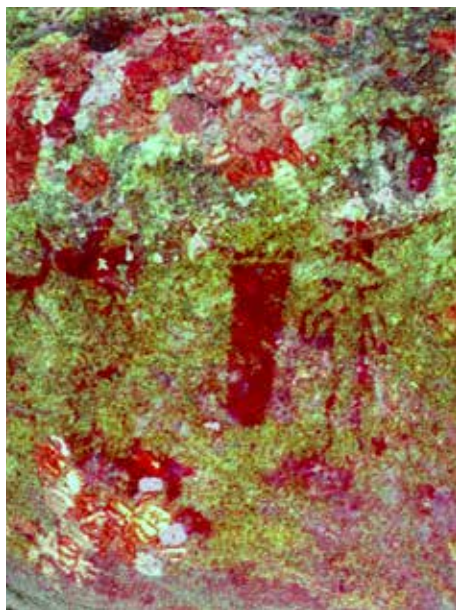
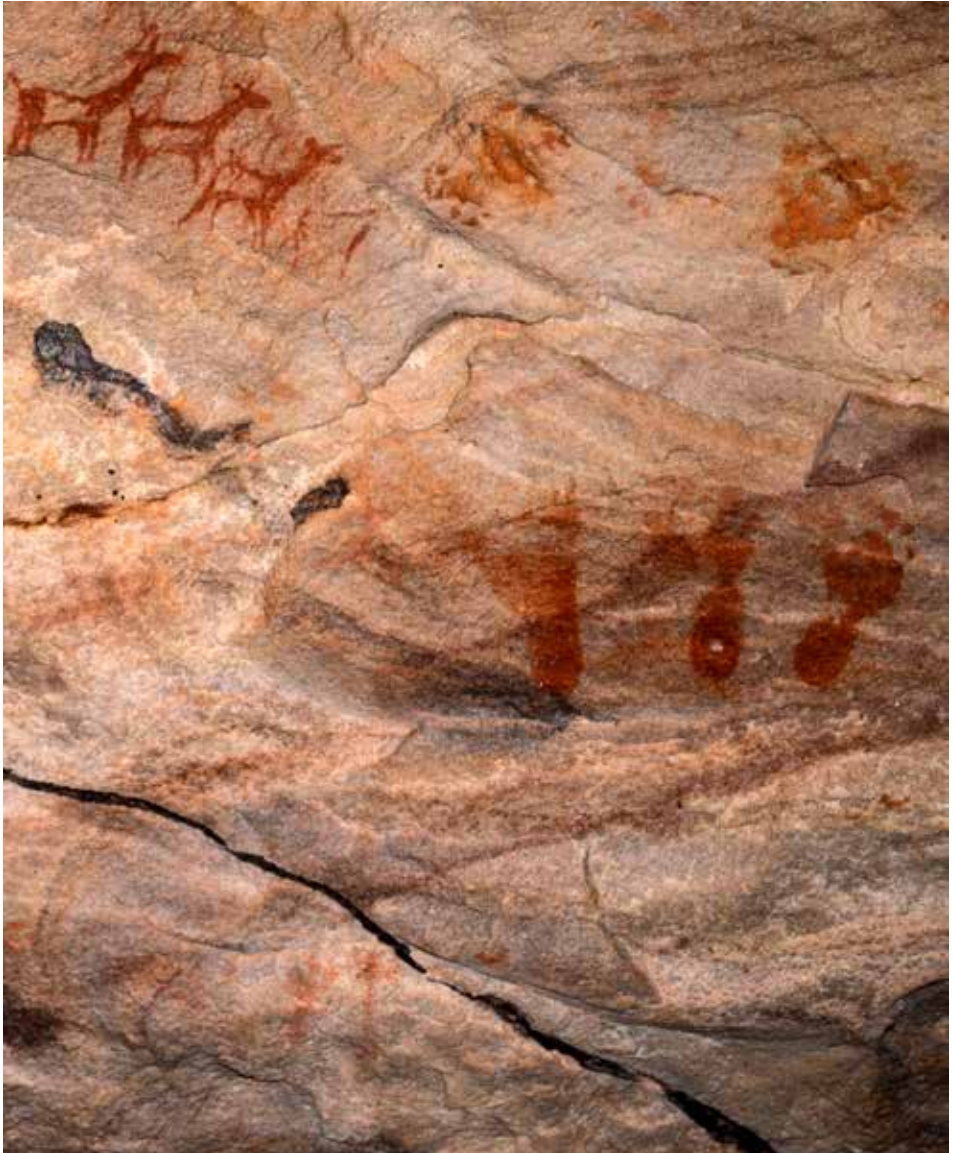


Fig. 11. An elongated foot painted inside at Rabkoh, Raigarh. Enhanced with Dstretch (-yrd).





*Fig. 12. Three red footprints on the wall of the shelter at Kathwar, Panna.*

If handprinting is a fairly common practice in Madhya Pradesh, making footprints on a shelter wall is more rare.

At **Kathwar (Panna)**, three reddish feet are close together; two of them may have been applied to the wall (Fig. 12).

**Putli Karar (Raisen)** has two horizontal red drawings of rectangular feet with eight toes each (Fig. 13).

At **Salbardi (Betul)**, there are quite a number of footprints, mostly deeply engraved and filled with colour like the





Fig. 13. Red drawings of a pair of feet at Putli Karar, Raisen. Enhanced with Dstretch (-Ire).

numerous vulvas near by (Fig. 14a). Two of them are joined by a line at the bottom (Fig. 14b). Out of two feet one is filled with red colour (Fig. 14c).

In **Jhinhari 1 (Katni)**, a single vertical foot is between many handprints.

In **Churna 2 (Pachmarhi)**, two big feet images in red are superimposed on an off-white bird (peahen) (Fig. 15).

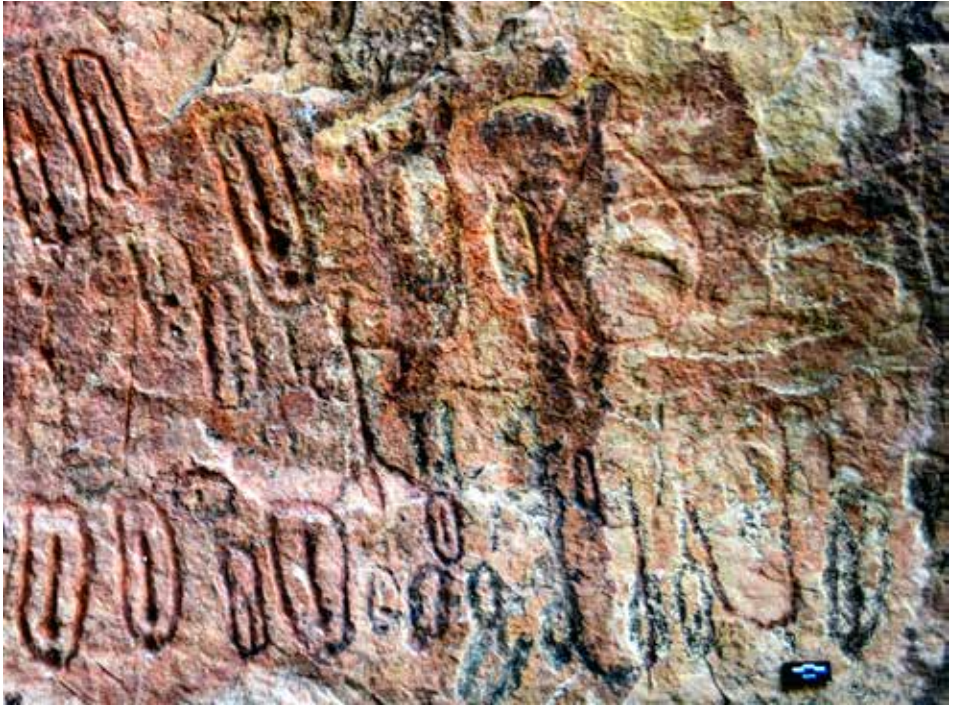
**Gurh**, a small town in the Rewa district, is famous for its Bhairav Baba statue (just 3 km from Gurh). On the ground of small rock shelters located near the bank of the small stream, we noticed a series of engraved footprints and symbols (Fig. 16a) (Fig. 16b).

## Discussion

Representations of hands are frequent, with different techniques. The easiest and most common technique is covering the palm of the hand with wet colour, gener-

ally red or red-brown but sometimes yellow, and applying it against the wall, thus creating what is called a positive hand-print. Sometimes the outlines of the hand touching the wall are drawn. Stencils and hand drawings may be found on the same site (Hamtha, in Chhattisgarh) including a hand with only the ring and middle fingers; hands with missing fingers are also present at Jogdadeo. Finally, we also saw hand stencils (Hamtha): the hand is applied against the wall and paint is blown onto it and its outlines; when the hand is removed, it appears in negative. Hands may be isolated, in pairs or in groups or even arranged in patterns, such as a semi-circle of seven positive hands at Balarao next to two important human figures.

As to feet representations, they are less numerous than hands but one often finds them on the same sites as the hands. They may be of different sizes (adults and children) as at Ushakothi 1 (where they



*Fig. 14a. Quite a number of feet and vulvas were engraved on the wall. Salbardi, Betul.*

*Fig. 14b. Two feet were engraved and joined by a line at the bottom. Salbardi, Betul.*







Fig. 14c. One of two feet is filled with red colour at Salbardi, Betul. Enhanced with Dstretch (-Ire).

Fig. 15. Two sandals in red at Churna, Pachmarhi. Enhanced with Dstretch (-Ire).





*Fig. 16a. A pair of big feet along with two small feet and a square symbol engraved on the ground of a small shelter at Gurh, Rewa.*

were drawn in a spectacular way, with decorated insides), Ushakothi 2 (drawings of feet only; no hands and no stencils), Thakurpara and Jogi Gufa 2. There are footprints in pairs at Siroli Dongri 1, 4 and 6: the two feet covered with paint seem to

*Fig. 16b. Feet and symbols engraved of the ground of a small shelter at Gurh, Rewa.*







*Fig. 17a. This site is known as Bada Tola and is dedicated to the Goddess Mai. Kathotiya, Sehor.*

*Fig. 17b. Wooden replicas of feet and hands deposited under the shelter wall at Bada Tola, Kathotiya.*



have been applied against the wall (also at Balarao). At Siroli Dongri 6, a horizontal "foot" has eight toes. A big difference with hands is that feet are never stencilled as far as we can tell.

Thus, four different techniques were used for making footprints in some Chhat-tisgarh shelters: -covering the sole with paint and applying the foot against the wall; -drawing the outlines of a foot; -after drawing a foot, filling the inside with colour; -after drawing a foot, filling its inside with a pattern (Ushakothi 1).

If handprinting is a fairly common practice the world over, making footprints on a shelter wall or on the ground (Gurh) is more rare. As we have seen, we know of real footprints that have been made by applying the sole covered with red paint onto the surface (Siroli Dongri 1 and 4, Kathwar). Sometimes in the same shelter there may be drawings of footprints with any number of toes, as we saw at Siroli Dongri 6. Toe numbers do not seem to be relevant.

A tradition of making children's footprints is still going on in the Bastar area. A very old man (over 100 years old), called Amluram, from Kumaharpara in the Kondagoan district, told us how, once a year during a ceremony for their ancestors, the local people will paint the entrances to their houses with cow dung. Then with rice flour paste they will print the feet of their younger child who is considered as one of their forebears reborn. Also, a few days after birth a ceremony takes place to ensure longevity for the baby: its feet are dipped into a vessel full of rice paste before being softly stamped on the ground in the front courtyard of the house.

Another way of using feet representations can be found at Bada Tola near Kathotiya. In this big shelter, its first half part is painted with many red and white images of animals, horse riders and some religious symbols, while its next half part is full of red and white dots and deposits of wooden replicas of human legs and hands (fig. 17a, 17b) in addition to many red flags, glass bangles, terracotta small lamps, incense sticks and coconut shells.

This site is known as Bada Tola and is dedicated to the Goddess *Mai*. It is located on one bank of the *Nala* small stream. Both banks have small shelters. Some of them show a few traces of faded red and white images. Madhya Pradesh Bhils/Bhilalas, Gonds, Korkus and Muwasi worship this site. If somebody from their clan gets paralyzed or breaks a leg or a hand they will go to the site do do manta for his or her recovery. After their wish is granted they will organize a big thanksgiving ceremony, sacrifice a goat and offer a wooden -made with teak wood- leg or hand to the *Mai*. Every two years just before the Holi festival, Gonds and Korkus come from different parts of the state to perform a ritual.

As to tattooing it is still quite popular among the Gonds. It was originally a magical means of protecting the body against the bad eye and to be always fit. "It is also supposed that people were tattooed with images of their totem in order the better to identify themselves with it."<sup>2</sup> A Baiga priest and his wife (Baigan) will do it. Gond women used to tattoo their full body from forehead to feet but nowadays very few are doing it. For an example, the women used to tattoo their feet to avoid being cut or hurt when they walked barefoot. The sole of their right foot is tattooed with a triangle pattern and the sole of their left foot with an outlined oval shape sign.

"It is meant to be in the shape of a foot, and is called Padma Sen Deo or the foot-god. This deity is represented by stones marked with two footprints under a tree outside the village. When they have pain in the foot they go to him, rub his two stones together and sprinkle the dust from them on their feet as a means of cure. The device tattooed on the foot no doubt performs a similar protective function and a line is drawn round the foot from the big toe to little toe. This sign is said to represent Gajkaran Deo, the elephant god, who resides in cemeteries. He is a strong god, and it is probably thought that this symbol on the feet will enable them to bear weight."<sup>3</sup>





Fig. 18. In the Ramapali Village in north Chhattisgarh we saw traditional paintings in private houses where large geometric patterns enclose cattle hooves and feet going inside the house as far as a small altar. The feet are said to be Goddess Lakshmi's.

In the north of Chhattisgarh (Ramapali village, near Ushakothi 1), the villagers, after harvesting their first rice crop in November (*Kartik month*) offer it to Goddess Lakshmi (the Goddess of Wealth and Prosperity). Then, every Thursday of the month and very early in the morning, the woman of the house will make geometric designs on the ground with soaked ground rice paste. The patterns she draws are known as *Jhoothi*. In addition to cattle hooves for wealth, as cattle are still the main richness of villagers, they include the small feet of Goddess Lakshmi always going inside the house (fig. 18). Similar customs take place in Madhya Pradesh by using a paste made

Fig. 19. Feet, geometric patterns, representations of lamps and swastikas painted on the floor in front of a house for the Diwali festival in Madhya Pradesh. Kurana Village, near Bhopal.



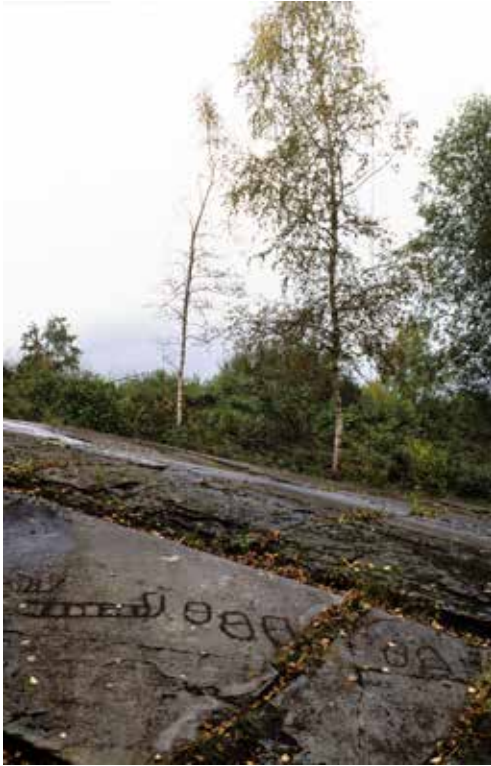


Fig. 20. Engravings of feet with boat motifs at Leirfall (Norway).

of white clay (fig. 19), but only at Diwali, the main yearly Hindu festival that lasts fifteen days.

In Hindu culture, making footprints with red paint is tied to wedding rituals. Before the bride first gets into her husband's house, she will dip her bare feet into a plate full of red liquid placed at the entrance. So she will leave a trail of red footprints in her "new" house. She will also dip both palms into turmeric paste and make handprints on both sides of the entrance. Footprints and handprints are thus closely linked and are symbols of prosperity.

In Chhattisgarh and more generally in Central India, where we not only have quite a number of footprints and foot representations in the rock art but also examples of their use during distinct ceremonies and cultural events among local populations, we thus have testimonies and explanations about some of their uses.

It is quite different elsewhere in the world. For example, we know of feet engraved in Scandinavian rock art (Leirfall, Norway) (fig. 20), at Valcamonica in Italy (Foppe di Nadro) (fig. 21), in Niger (Ekarkaoui), in Mexico (Baja California), or painted (Yalgi, Australia; Caboclo, Brazil, fig. 22) i.e. on all continents.

On the other hand, it is not scientifically possible to attribute dates to the footprint images that we have found in Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh. At Salbardi where they are associated with numerous engraved vulvas they look



Fig. 21. Close up of a pair of feet engraved on a rock at Foppe di Nadro, in Valcamonica (Italy).





Fig. 22. Painted feet on a wall at Caboclo (Brazil).

rather old, while at Putli Karar and Churna they could be quite recent but even there no precise date can be forwarded.

If representations of feet are far less frequent than those of hands they still do exist, not only in India but in the whole world. Being able to know what they were about in some rare cases is thus far from negligible.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> We have published a book on Chhattisgarh rock art: Dubey-Pathak & Clottes 2018. *Powerful Paintings. Rock Art and Tribal Art in Chhattisgarh.*

<sup>2</sup> Russell & Hiralal 1916: 125 in RV Russell & RB Hira Lal, 1916. *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India. Col.II.* London, McMillan and Co. Ltd. Reprinted in 1993: New Delhi, Madras, Asian Educational Services.

<sup>3</sup> Russell & Hiralal 1916-1993: 125-126.

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