

Badat Caves or Badalin Caves: the Biggest and Oldest Prehistoric Site of Myanmar

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Abstract

Myanmar is endowed with prehistoric materials mainly discovered in Central Myanmar area. One among them is the Badat or Badalin Caves in the Ywangan Township, Taunggyi District of Southern Shan State. About 10,000 years old prehistoric site hosted people and the remains of stone tools, potsherds, animal bones and cave paintings revealed the standard of Myanmar prehistoric men called Anyatha or Myaylattha. Findings at Badalin show affinities with the Hoabinhian Culture of Vietnam.

The Badat Caves are situated at Latitude 21° 10' N and Longitude 96° 20' E on the western slope of Shan plateau about four miles (6.43 km) due east of Nyaungkyat Village (on the Panlaung) and in Ywangan Township, Taunggyi District. There is a discarded village of Yepok about four furlong in the east, the Panlaung Creek is about two miles four furlong in due west, about three miles in the northwest is Taungpon Village and Nayyaungka Village in the northwest respectively.

There are two caves; one in the east and the other in the west all facing the south. The east cave (Cave No. 1) has a measurement of 80 feet long, 20 feet wide and 14 feet high. The west one (Cave No. 2) is much bigger than the former having about 800'x 300' in measurement with up to 90' at its highest point. There are about six holes on the roof of this cave giving ample light and air for the people to live in, and forming stalactites and stalagmites in the cave as it is a lime stone cave.

Cave No. 1 has some pictures of animals and others also have drawn pictures on the cave wall. People living in it, named Myaylatthaor Anyatha for the sake of convenience, must have been living in it for more than 10,000 years (22,000 11,000 years BP, Before Present). Paintings on the walls of the cave firstly discovered by a geologist named U KhinMaungKyaw in 1960 in his sojourn as an underground rebel before his coming into the legal fold. He reported his discovery to the then Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) Organizing Committee Headquarters in Yangon and the caves were excavated under BSPP sponsorship and encouragement from 12 to 27 January 1969 by a team of researchers led by U Aung Thaw the then the Director of Archaeology comprising scholars of geology, anthropology, botany and zoology.

The cave is in a lime stone area and about 1,000 feet above sea level. The animals they drew look strange to us. There are two reasons for it. During the rainy season lime water oozes out of the wall giving the pictures a lime wash obliterating several details. Next, the animals they drew were now extinct. So they look rather odd. They were ancestors of modern cattle, deer, elephant, horse, pig, rhinoceros etc. or we would say that those animals were wild. They were not domesticated yet.

Cave 1 (east cave) has these pictures drawn about 10 to 12 feet (3 to 3.65 m) above the cave floor on the central partition. As in the letter E the cave has three walls coming out of the back wall and the pictures were drawn on the south side of the middle wall. The Myaylattha would not have these pictures for decoration like we have in our homes. They were for some practical purpose. He wanted to show what kind of animal he wanted for meat. He also wanted

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to show how the animal was hunted or trapped. And he wanted to do some magic to have more kills in the next hunt.

We find that the pictures of Las Coux, France, were drawn by Cro-Magnon man in about 30,000 years BP for a ritual dance. Myaylattha who drew the Badat Cave pictures in about 16,000 years BP would also have them for a ritual dance too. His pictures were excellent even by the present day standards. The climatic conditions were changing from a too wet to a too warm climate of present day during 20,000 to 10,000 years BP. They might have noticed the changing condition by showing figures of the sun shining (in figure 1 and 7).

Apart from cave paintings, over 1,500 stone artefacts of both finished and unfinished were discovered in Cave 1. Stone tools vary from scraper, chopper to hand-adze and axe which were made of fossil wood, silicified tuft and pebble. Moreover stone tools, bones of animals, charcoal, pieces of potsherds and red ochre were also found. The stone artefacts show the fact that they were not taken from other locality but from within the region. Bones of animals may be the remnants of meat eaten by cave people and potsherds may be that of pots cooked by them. The excavations at Badalin exposed a stratification consisting of five layers which are mainly made up of calcareous soils of different textures and clay. The excavator remarked that the majority of them were made from river pebbles. Choppers were uni-facially flaked while the chopping tools were flakes struck off from them on both faces. Some traces of grinding on the tools, crude shouldered adze and a few chord impressed potsherds led the excavator to the conclusion that Badalin was Neolithic.

The fish they caught for food might not be sea fish, but fresh water ones from either lake or stream and were caught by fishing tool made of bamboo not that of net made of flax. Bones of the meat were that of the ancestors of present day cow, rhino, elephant, deer etc. which were drawn on cave walls by those people. The figure of a blazing sun seemingly about 2 pm suggests that they were happy about the decline of heat or otherwise, they became aware the changing pattern of climate increasingly hot day by day. They had no idea of changing alternate seasons thinking that they were created by certain divine person, and therefore, rituals had to be done for the appeasement and for getting favour of that person. And there might be a practice they had that if a dependable person died one of his fingers (thumb or index finger) would be cut off.

There are altogether 11 figures drawn on cave wall running southwest to northeast. They include- (1) a left palm of 9"x 4" in size (2) a right palm of 10"x 4" in size having no thumb and no index finger (3) five centipede figures of 3' 1"x 1' (4) an elephant (5) a deer (6) a boar (7) a blazing sun between the two mountain walls (8) a cow and her calf of 8"x 4" in size which is the most distinct of all (9) a fish of which the sketch is blur except its head (10) a bison of 8"x 1' in size and (11) a flying squirrel of 10 feet square which is also in blur. All these pictures were covered by a thin layer of lime as these are lime stone caves. The pictures were drawn on the wall which partitioning the interior of the cave into two rooms about 10 to 12 feet above ground. They might not be made for decoration purposes but for ritual ones for the sake of gaining good hunting.

In the history of Myanmar painting, the cave paintings at Badalin are the earliest and foremost ones. The cave painter or painters used both outlining, sketching and colour-filling to describe what they wished. Red ochre was mixed with heated animal fat to get red colour which they seemed blood representing life and living. Dark red ochre later changed into brown colour and light one into orange. Yellow ochre and black colours were also used by those painters. Some figures are related each other but some are not and there may be some missing and some are repeated on existing ones.

Stone artefacts collected from the successive phases in banks of the River Ayeyarwaddy indicate that they were used by people living in the mid-Pleistocene epoch (about 10,000 years and above) who are also termed as homo-erectus or standing men. They made simple tools of chopping and scratching for cutting meat and digging tuber and bulbs etc. Due to this improvement they came to get nutrient for both physical and mental development and their teeth gradually becoming small in size as they knew the art of making use of fire and ate baked meat.

Dr. Alan Thorne from the Department of Archaeology and Natural History of the National University of Canberra, Australia suggested that the homo-erectus of Asia might have used effective tools made of wood and bamboo more over that of stone tools. The homo-erectus of Myanmar called Anyatha were the contemporary of that same kind found in Indonesia, China and India. Unfortunately, any remains of Myanmar Anyatha have not been found yet. It may be said that they had been living around the area which could be easily eroded by rains and flood water. The Peking Man of middle Pleistocene period found near Beijing in 1926 was in better mode of deposition than that of Anyatha and remains of early men were found together with tools they used.

The leader of archaeological survey U Aung Thaw suggested that the cave dwellers of Badalin lived in Upper Paleolithic Period (circa 25,000 to 12,000 BP), but later analysis revised the period as Mesolithic (13,000 to 7,000 BP) by radio carbon dating of the stone artefacts and similarities of Badalin tools with that of Hoabinhian Culture of Vietnam in which chopper, chopping tools, chipped pebble tools, chipped flake, hand-axe, scrapper and edge ground tools were found. By a radio carbon 14 test the animal bones unearthed from middens in these caves were found to be 13,000 years BP. But some of them would be 6,570 old BP and charcoal pieces were of 7,740 years BP.

The bones collected from the Badalin excavations were sent to the Anatomy Department of the University of Medicine (1) from which said that there was no human bone among them. They are bones of animals of sizes ranging from goat to buffalo. U MyaMaung, the then Assistant Lecturer in Zoology of the Yangon University, a member of the Badalin expedition, said that those pieces of bones were of wild animal species and do not show any sign of domestication. U SeinTun, an Anthropologist from the above said university and also a member of the team, wrote in his article that “as regards food production, the Stone Age cave dwellers of Badalin should be said to have only in the food gathering stage, and no agricultural implements which could have been used by them were found.”

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