

# FAUNA IN THE ROCK-CARVING SITE OF THOR NORTH (NORTHERN AREAS OF PAKISTAN)

DR. M. NASIM KHAN

The tradition of engraving is very old and rich. Rock-carvings can be found in every other parts of the world but, one of the largest accumulations known to man comes, in fact, from the Upper Indus Valley-Northern Areas of Pakistan<sup>1</sup>.

The historical and cultural interest of the Upper Indus region has increased by the presence and diversity of inscriptions and multiplicity of drawings carved on cliffs and boulders. Because these petroglyphs are evidence of different civilizations which, since prehistoric time upto very recent times, have left us their traces in the form of engravings. We don't know exactly the origin and the specific role of all these. It seems, however, that they played an important role in the religious, social and cultural life of their engravers.

More than two thousands drawings and 350 inscriptions have been discovered only at the site Thor North, engraved on more than 250 stones. Majority of these carvings, of different origins and dates, are very banal and repetitive. Except for some drawings, most of them represent a number of examples (animals, cavaliers, hunters, reptiles, *stūpas*, tridents, etc). Apart from the religious or symbolic figures, some of them depict erotic acts, fighting, dancing and hunting scenes. The hunting scenes are numerous and one can see a number of species of the fauna of the region, e.g., *markhor*, ibex, etc. But among other types of faunal remains in the rock-carving at Thor North, the most important drawings are those depicting a variety as mentioned below.

## Wading bird:

A bird with a long bill, probably a reef heron or a stork. The right pinion is spread and one can see only one leg which is stretched out. The carving is made by pecking (Fig. 1:1). According to König, the figure under consideration is the drawing of a crane<sup>2</sup>. But, I am not sure because the crane has relatively shorter bill unlike the one here<sup>3</sup>.

- 
1. On the Geography of the region and history of discovery of the carvings, see Nasim Khan 1997: 97, 98.
  2. König, 1994 (126, Abb. 72).
  3. See for comparison between heron and crane Roberts, T.J. 1991.

### **Peacock ?:**

A bird with raised feathers on the crest; the corp is decorated with a zigzag line and dots. The feathers of the crest and tail make me think of a peacock (Fig. 1:2). The figure is marked in outline.

### **Sparrow:**

This small and tiny bird may be a sparrow. It is very artistically drawn with every detail: one eye, two legs and the feathers (Fig. 1:3). König is of the opinion that this carving might be of a pigeon<sup>4</sup>.

### **Goose or Duck:**

This bird gives the impression of floating on the surface of water because the legs are not visible and the lower part of the body is represented horizontally (Fig. 1:4)<sup>5</sup>.

### **Peacock:**

A bird, moving towards the right, is marked with claws, beak and feathers. It is represented in outline and is most probably a peacock (Fig. 1:5).

### **Stork:**

This figure of this bird is made in outline. The neck is elongated and the bill is almost absent. One of its leg is bent forward and the head moved downwards. It is found on the same boulder like the precedent. Both show the same patina and a similar technique; they might be engraved by a single hand (Fig. 1:6).

### **Bird (*unidentified*):**

Towards the left of Fig. 2:2 an incomplete carving of a bird, without any detail, is represented in outline (Fig. 2:1). According to the patina and technique, the present carving and Fig. 2:2 (below) might have been engraved by the same person.

### **Peacock ?:**

The body is marked in outline while the feathers of the tail are made by pecking. In front of the bird representation of a bushy thing (Fig. 2:2) suggests that it feeds itself.

---

4. König 1994: 132, Abb. 78.

5. See for comparison, Roberts, T.J. 1991: 130.

### **Bird of prey:**

A bird which has its head turned towards its back, probably depicts an eagle. The carving is made by pecking (Fig. 2:3). Above the carved figure is a *brāhmī* inscription of the 2nd-4th century A.D. The carving and inscription are not the work of the same hand.

### **Pigeon ?:**

The tail is made by pecking, while the rest of the body is in outline (Fig. 2:4). On the same boulder are also found some animals and other unidentified carvings. It seems that all these carvings belong to the same person.

### **Unidentified Bird:**

A tiny bird in flying position with feathers, beak and tail are well-represented (Fig. 2:5).

### **Unidentified Bird:**

An unidentified bird is represented in a group showing a bird, a dog (?) and a chick (Fig. 2:6). It seems that the bird is protecting the chick from the dog's attack by fighting with it. The bird and the dog are filled in solid while the chick is marked in outline.

### **Cock:**

The last of this series is a very faint carving of a cock. The cock's comb is marked with simple lines and the feathers of the tail are spread out (Fig. 2:7).

\*  
\* \*

Birds, because at least in one sense that they were of the sky, had their pleasant, oracular, and amorous functions-transmitting messages from the gods between the lovers.

Birds figure largely in Vedic mythology. Ominous birds as well as beasts are occasionally connected with certain gods by whom they are supposed to be sent. Thus in the Rig Veda the owl and the pigeon are spoken of as messengers of Yama, apparently identified with death.

There is mention of birds in *Jātakas*<sup>6</sup> also. The *Jātaka* tales are the stories of the previous lives of the Buddha. Wherein he is incarnated in the form of an animal, man or other shapes in each of which he practiced compassion and worked for the welfare of the creation. According to the *Tittiri Jātaka*, *Tittiris* (female partridges) were trained to recite Vedic *mantras* and help students memorize. The crowing cock was utilized to rouse students from sleep to study in the early hours of the morning.

The earliest epigraphic reference to animals is to be found in the Aśokan rock-edicts. In his first rock-edict, the emperor declared: “Formerly in the kitchen of King Devānāmpriya Priyadarśin many hundred thousands of animals were killed daily for the sake of curry. But now, when this rescript on morality is written, then only three animals are being killed (daily), (viz.) two-2-peacocks (and) 1 deer, (but) even this deer not regularly”<sup>7</sup>.

In the Buddhist Sanskrit text, discovered in Central Asia, when Buddha was about to enter *nirvāna*, the kings of flying birds came to Buddha, touched his feet with the head, stepped back, and sat on one side. They were lapwings, wild geese, mandarin ducks, peacocks, and all such birds, *gandharvas*, *karandas*, *minas*, parrots, *kokilas*, wagtails, *kalavinkas*, *jivamjivakas*, and all such birds<sup>8</sup>.

Another rich source of faunal forms is the pottery of protohistoric sites in Pakistan. The ceramics, seals and sealings of the Indus Valley Civilization of the third millennium B.C. and of the later periods give some good examples of bird representations; the best may be the Bajaur pottery of the first century B.C. whereon birds, especially peacock and pigeon, are artistically drawn<sup>9</sup>.

In the decoration of metal work, animals and birds are largely represented and show a wide variety of fauna. In this respect, a reference may be made to the gold ornament, found in Pattan (North Indus region of Pakistan)<sup>10</sup>. This ornament exhibits an example of artistic skill and its faunal decorations are very striking. Like other designs of the ornament, eagles are also depicted with great skill. Silver punch-marked coins, issued by various authorities for over-half-a millennium from 600 to 100 B.C., are also a rich source for studying faunal forms in ancient time. Amongst other kinds of animal representations on punch-marked coins are peacocks, cranes and other birds.

The floral and the animal motifs are equally interesting not only for their artistic and stylistic antecedents but also for their chronological implications. In the religious and secular

---

6. Previous birth stories of the Buddha.

7. Hultzsch, E. 1925.

8. Bongard-Levin 1986: 287.

9. Lutf ur Rahman. 1993.

10. Saeedur Rahman 1990.

art of the subcontinent, birds and animals are represented with great proficiency. In the early Andhra period (72-25 B.C.), one of the main subject in the decoration of *Stūpa* No. I at Sanchi is the richly carved peacocks, perhaps, intended only as decoration, but possibly referring to the heraldic emblem of the Mauryan Dynasty. The Buddhist art of Gandhāra also gives some good examples of Faunal remains<sup>11</sup>. The art of the Scytho-Parthians, the Kushans and other nomads, who inhabited the Central Asian steppes and Chinese Turkestan, was much dominated by animal forms.

Animal representations in painting also occupy a central position. Several ancient traditions refer to the various aspects of painting in general. They sometime are corroborated by the extant archaeological remains.

From literary sources we know that the early Indian palaces and homes of the wealthy were usually decorated with mural paintings; and painting itself was practiced both by men and women of the upper class as well as by the professional artists.

Surviving examples of the early Indian painting, depicting birds, probably date only from about the first century BC. They are found in cave 10 at Ajanta. In the murals of Ajanta the everyday life of that time marches across the walls of the cave. They depict palaces with their occupants, kings and princes, courtiers, and women of the harem. There are crowds of peasants, beggars, pilgrims and ascetics; all the animals and birds; and the flora of garden and countryside<sup>12</sup>. The proficiency of the artist in the drawings of animals and birds continue and especially in the Mughal miniatures, the representation of faunal forms is a predominant theme.

From the literary and archaeological evidence, it is clear that the role of flora and fauna in the culture of the region goes deep into the earliest times. These representations show a long and continued development and manifest their powerful impact on the basic trends of the artistic crafts of Pakistan. As far as the fauna in the rock-carvings of Thor North is concerned, in the absence of a specific data of faunal remains in the rock-carvings of the Upper Indus Valley, it will be difficult to say whether they are intended only as decorations or they have some mythological or symbolic meanings. So far, no absolute date is possible, but on the basis of comparison with other dated material, especially, inscriptions on the boulders, these carvings might be placed between 3rd and 5th centuries A.D.

---

11. Krishna Murthy, K. 1977.

12. Madanjeet Sing 1965.

## References

- Bongard-Levin, G.M. 1986. *A Complex Study of Ancient India. A Multi-Disciplinary Approach*. Dehli.
- Hultzsch, E. 1925. Inscriptions of Aśoka. *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, Vol. p. 51. Oxford.
- König, Ditte. 1994. Zu den Tierdarstellungen auf den Felsen am Oberen Indus, Versuch Einer Zoologischen Bestimmung, in G. Fussman and K. Jettmar (ed.), *Antiquities of Northern Pakistan* 3: 73-171. Mainz.
- Krihna Murthy, K. 1977. *The Gandhāra Sculptures. A Cultural Survey*: 121, 122. Dehli.
- Lutf ur Rahman. 1993. Thin Sectioned Red Ware Bowls - The So-called 'Fashion Ware'. *Ancient Pakistan*, Vol. VIII: 209-216. Peshawar.
- Madanjeet Sing 1965. *The Cave Paintings of Ajanta*. London.
- Nasim Khan, M. 1997. Iranian Symbols in the Rock-Carvings of the Upper Indus Valley. *Athāriyyāt (Archaeology)*, Vol. I: 97-108.
- Roberts, T.J. 1991. *The Birds of Pakistan*, Vol: 85, 105, 269-272. Oxford.
- Saeedur Rahman. 1990. Unique Find of Gold Ornaments from Pattan (Kohistan). *Journal of Central Asia*. Vol. XIII, No. 1, July, 1990: 5-17. Islamabad.

Fig-1

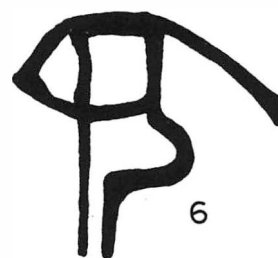
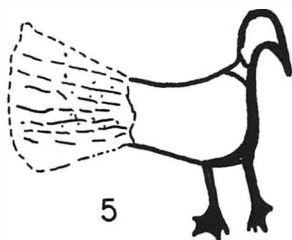
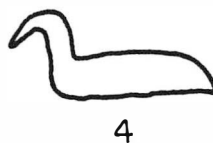
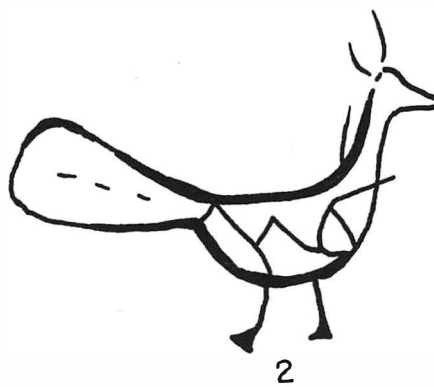
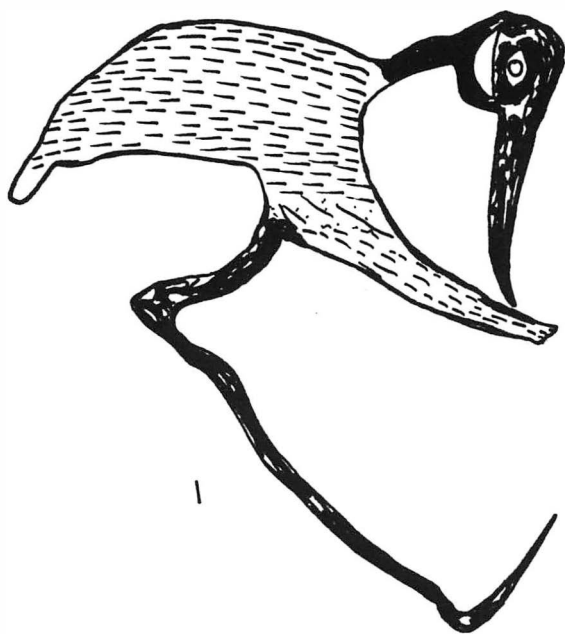


Fig. 1.1 Wading bird;  
Fig. 1.4 Goose or duck;

Fig.1.2 Peacock(?);  
Fig. 1.5 Peacock;

Fig. 1.3 Sparrow  
Fig. 1.6 Stark

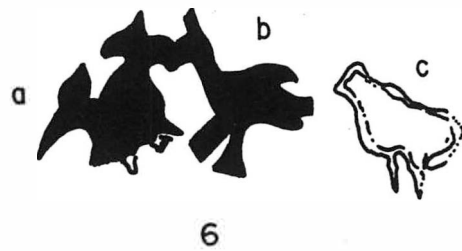
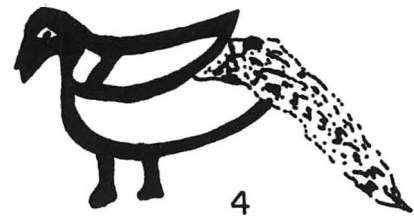
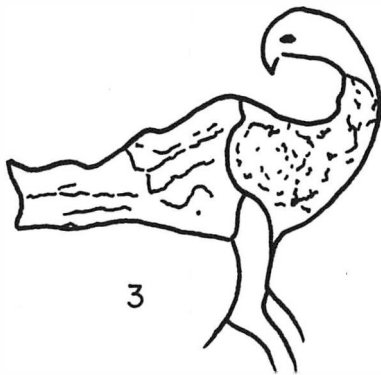
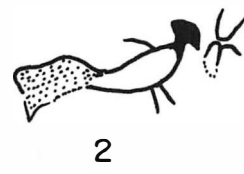
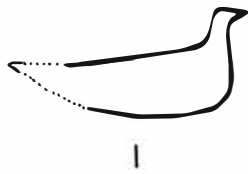


Fig. 2.1 Unidentified bird; Fig. 2.2 Peacock; Fig. 2.3 Bird of prey; Fig. 2.4 Pigeon(?);  
Fig. 2.5 Unidentified bird; Fig. 2.6 Unidentified bird; Fig. 2.7 Cock.