

Divers at an ecolodge in West Papua have been instrumental in the discovery of new rock art from a lost civilisation.

Divers from the Misool Eco Resort spotted the previously unreported rock art and contacted Jean-Michel Chazine, a research engineer from the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS-France) three years ago to survey the discovery.

Jean-Michel Chazine presented his research at the international World Archaeology Congress in Jordan this week and commented "It is a small paradise for archaeologists. The paintings are very ornate and beautiful."

The recent second survey of a new cluster of paintings upon cliffs sinking in the ocean in the Misool islands archipelago has provided new insights. Seven new sites, which enhanced already the total of sites to thirteen, have been discovered in the vicinity of the previous located sites. These new sites present also a large number of hands stencils, which would appear, apart two cases, in all painted places.

The other confirmation in content and expression concerns the subject of the paintings, which are in majority related to the sea fauna. Tuna, sharks, dolphins and general more or less large fishes' features compose the main core of representations. Being represented in majority up or down in a vertical position, they would obviously correspond to a basic symbolic figure. Many signs, dots, patches, thin or bold lines circling cupules, are also scattered within paintings.

That extension of the number of ornate cliffs was important enough to study the sorting of the different paintings, but permitted moreover to elaborate a preliminary inductive procedure of discovery of ornate sites.

Practically, upon all the surveyed cases, we could observe that 11 had some common features sufficient for determining the probability of the presence of paintings. These common features are numbered 3 to 4 and would be:

- a large and rather high cliff;
- a cavity, cave, overhang or hole around the foot of the cliff;
- a main coloured (red-yellow to red-brown) wide strip pouring out, or reaching down to the cavity;
- a (facultative) step-bank (coral or karst platform) at the foot.

It has been verified that in every case, when the four (or even three) parameters are present, paintings are also present, whatever the state of rocks surface. If one only of the combination of parameters is missing, so does the paintings.

The interpretation of such a selection of parameters is still open, but the combination of a large coloured strip automatically associated to a “cavity” permitting, inducing -provoking- the action of painting, may be interpreted minimally as a strong chthonian, say fertility or maternity symbolism. Decipheration of sexual gender using has already shown that there were also female hand stencils scattered around these places.

Jean-Michel Chazine stated “Interestingly, many of the works have been over-painted with beautiful red coral and I believe it provides clues to the place being for ceremonies dedicated to fertility and reproduction process.”

Over 1,000 participants from seventy countries have been at WAC-7 in Jordan sharing scientific information about archaeology and cultural heritage. Held once every four years, the World Archaeological Congress will run until Friday, 18 January and the patron for WAC-7 is King Abdullah II Bin Al Hussein of Jordan. Former patrons include Prince Charles, Nelson Mandela and Harriet Mayor Fulbright.



Photos: Jean-Michel Chazine at WAC-7 in Jordan this week.



View of a large cliff
with high probability
of paintings presence parameters:
- a coloured pouring strip linked to;
- a cavity/hole at the basement



A marine life panel including some « X-ray like » inner views



Fertility symbols, reproduction
genesis or incantations rituals?