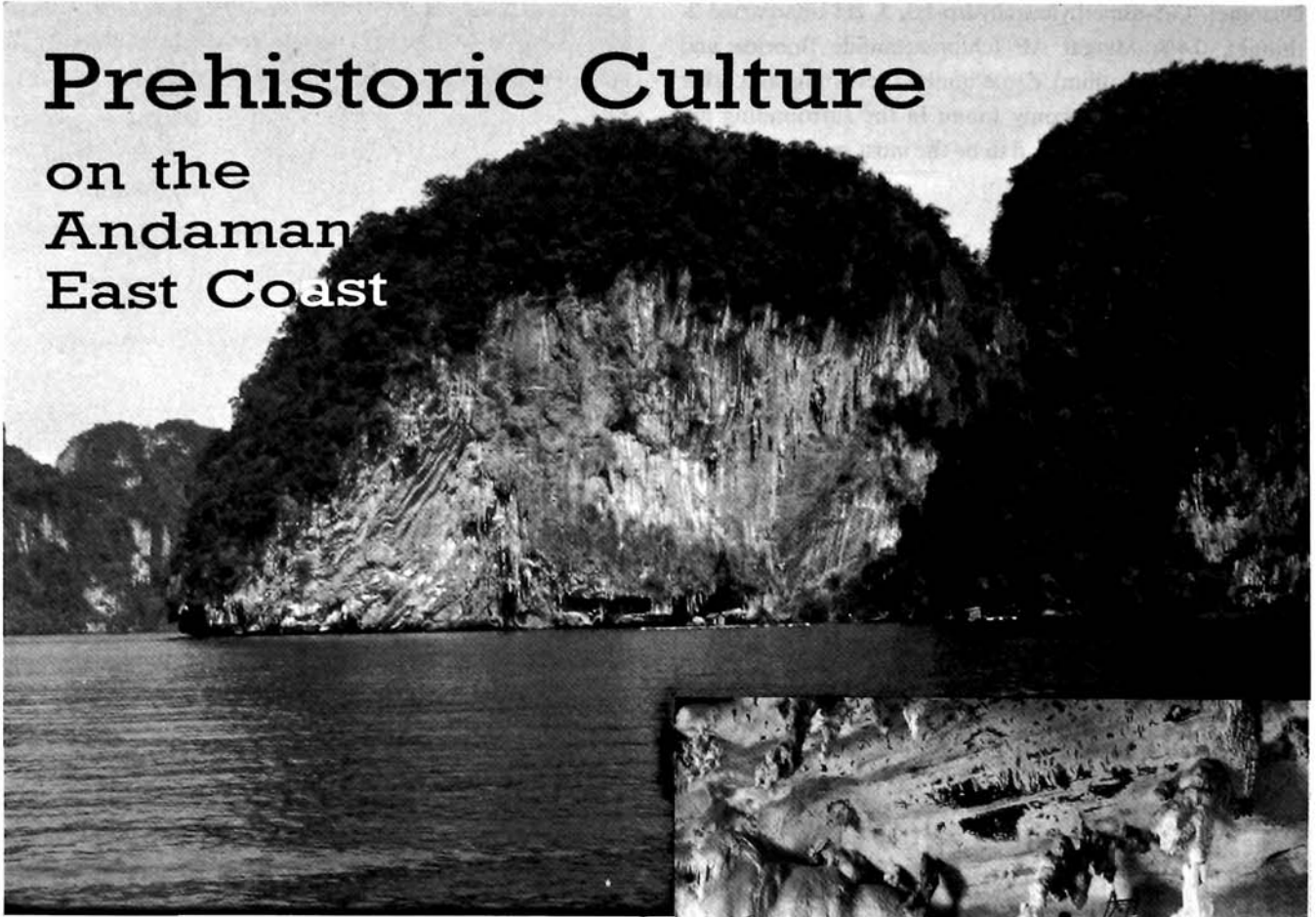


# Prehistoric Culture on the Andaman East Coast



by Suwit Chaimongkol and the Planning Team  
for the Southern Thailand  
Cultural Resource Site Preservation Project

**J**ust like many other exotic paradises, hotels and other related facilities have quickly found their way into Phangnga Bay in Phangnga Province and Luk Bay in Krabi Province. Foreign and local tourists along with their paraphernalia now make a stark contrast with the boat-paddling locals and their modest bamboo huts.

They cannot be blamed. These parts of Thailand, which make up part of the east coast of the Andaman Sea, are indeed places for relaxation and for breathtaking panoramic views of limestone mountain ranges covered green by lush tropical forests and the never-ending deep blue sea.

But there is much more than that in the bays of

Phangnga and Luk. A number of ancient rock paintings, dating about 2,000-4,000 years, have recently been discovered in the many gallery-like alcoves on the mountains close to their shores. Depicted in rock paintings are stories of the prehistoric Andaman culture.

So far, the earliest evidence of Andaman existence dates only about 27,000-37,000 years while the earliest human remains found in Java, Indonesia, dates about not more than 1.3 million years. Earlier evidences of Andaman culture may still be waiting to be discovered if only more interest could be given to the east coast of the Andaman Sea. It stretches from southern Burma, the west coast of Thailand, and Malaysia.

The earliest mention of prehistoric rock paintings in Phangnga Bay was made in 1912 in the foremost document on prehistoric Thailand entitled "Essai d'Inventaire Archeologique du Siam" by E.E. Lunet de Lajonguiere. Then a few archaeological surveys and researches followed. But it was not until 1983 and 1985 when excavations made by Prof. Douglas Anderson in the province of Krabi, Thailand, that an important habitation site of the upper Pleistocene period was revealed. The site is believed to have actively existed about 27,000-37,000 years ago.

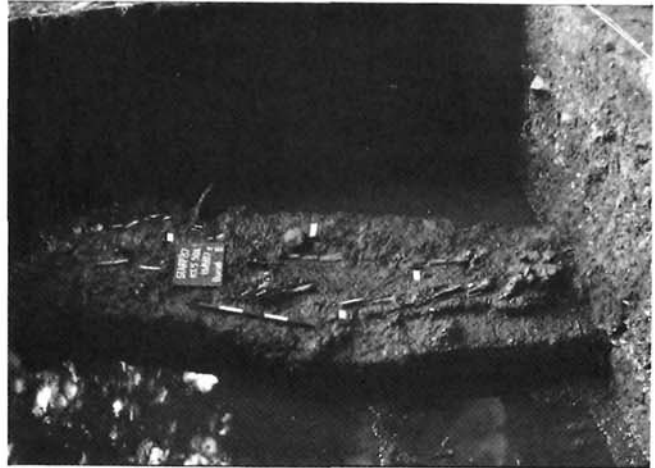
In 1986 the Southern Thailand Archaeological Research Project was set up for a more in-depth study of man in this part of the world. This was further strengthened by the 1987 seminar on the Prehistory of Southeast Asia, held by SPAFA in Thailand. In this seminar, reports related to the prehistoric Andaman culture on the east coast were presented by participants whose countries share the coastline. The years 1987 and 1988 saw 48 prehistoric sites investigated, bringing about a better understanding of the Andaman people's life style.

### The Prehistoric Andaman People

The prehistoric Andaman people lived in caves and rock shelters. These habitation sites were discovered located along the east coastline, not exceeding 10 km inland. Some were however found on islands very close to the coast. The floor of the shelters were found to be less than 10 meters above sea level.

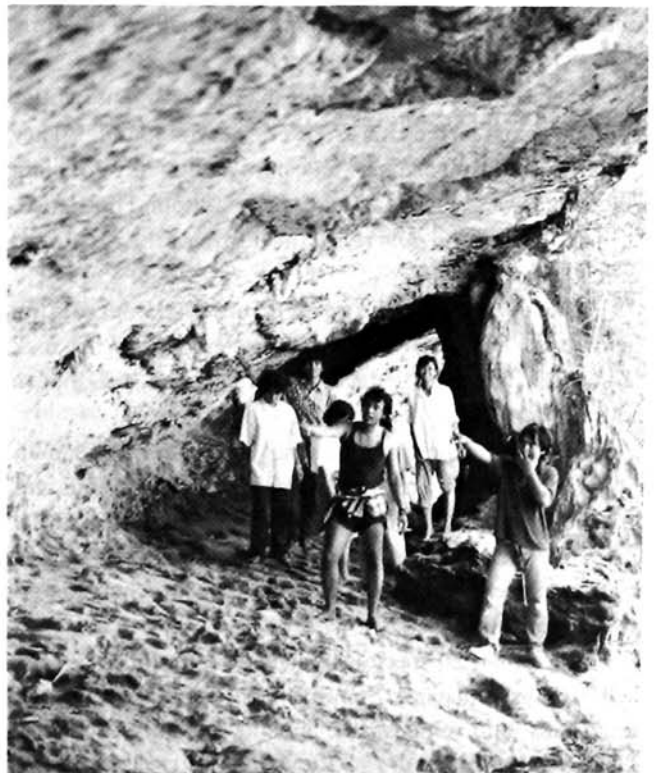
As a number of habitation sites were found to have been occupied for only a short period of time, it is assumed that the Andaman man is nomadic. During an excavation made in the province of Phangnga, Thailand, in 1987, a complete human skeleton was found with his crude stone tools under a rock shelter.

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Skeleton of a prehistoric Andaman man found lying flat at a rock shelter on Khao Thao Mountain, Phangnga Province.

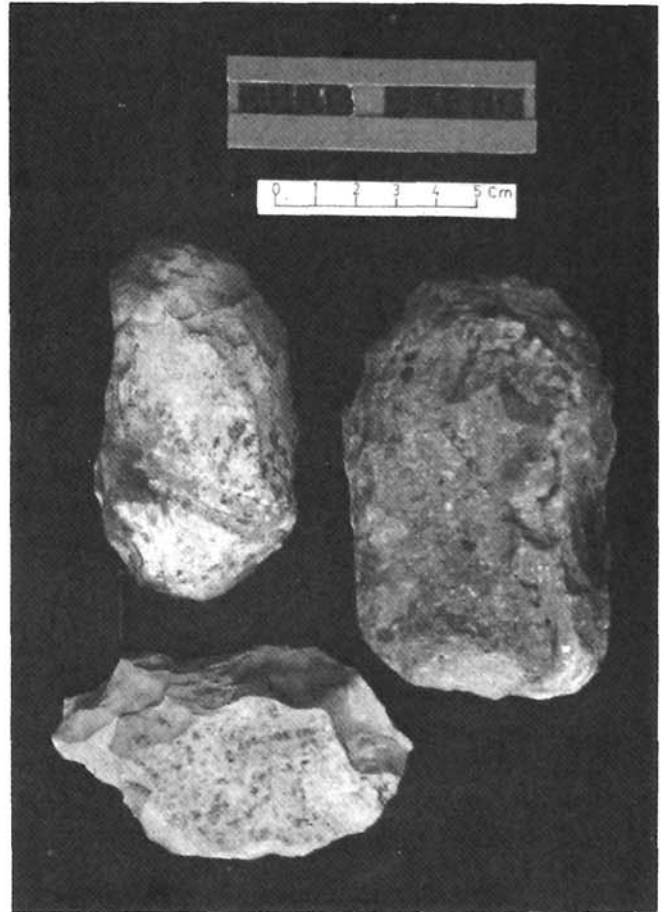
Limestone caves and rock shelters (opposite page) were the habitation sites of prehistoric men along the east coast of the Andaman Sea. The survey team of the Southern Thailand Archaeological Research Project found this alcove gallery (below) at Khao Khian Mountain Island, also in Phangnga Province.





Left : A piece of bone tool found in a rock painting site.

Below : Most of the stone tools found in the habitation sites were of quartzite and limestone.



The skeleton lies flat with its face looking south and head pointing southeast. Its bones were sharply cut into were cut strongly indicates some kind of a cult playing an important role in the lives of the prehistoric Andaman people.

Most of the tools found in the area, starting from pebble tools and flake tools to polished adzes, show development of sophistication over the years. The quartzite, limestone, and chert stone tools discovered show some similarities to those found in other southeast Asian locations. And most of the bone tools found are usually in the form of a pick.

Prehistoric Andaman people made extensive use of fire. A number of earthenware potteries were found. They appeared in various shapes and designs. Some were plain while others were cord-marked or incised. Round bottomed, carinated and tripod pots reveal the degree of their technical sophistication.

These cave-dwelling men enjoyed decorating themselves. They used shell bracelets. And from the rock paintings it could be deduced that they wore imaginative clothings and fancy headdresses.

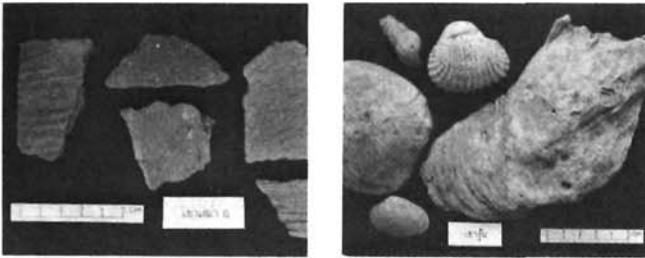
Because of the environmental setting, the Andaman culture is dominantly sea-based. People fed on seafoods and travelled by boats. There was an abundance of food in the area: fish, shells, turtles and crabs were plentiful. Ancient bones and shells discovered present ecofact-archaeological evidence.

More than 20 species of shells were found in several shell deposits in the area. Some of them, particularly oysters, clam shells and venus shells, are still presently consumed as seafood delicacies.

Owing to the huge amount of shells in the mounds, skepticisms have been raised on the use of shells mainly for consumption. Many speculate the shells were either used as materials for an industry or brought by sea waves and accumulated with the passing of time. Nevertheless, frequently found along with the shells were tools or rock paintings.

#### Art of the Prehistoric Andaman People

The setting for prehistoric Andaman culture is enviously a picturesque paradise, blessed with an abundance of food and natural resources. It is indeed conducive to the development of an artistic culture. Hence, expressions of artistic talents abound on the Andaman east coast.

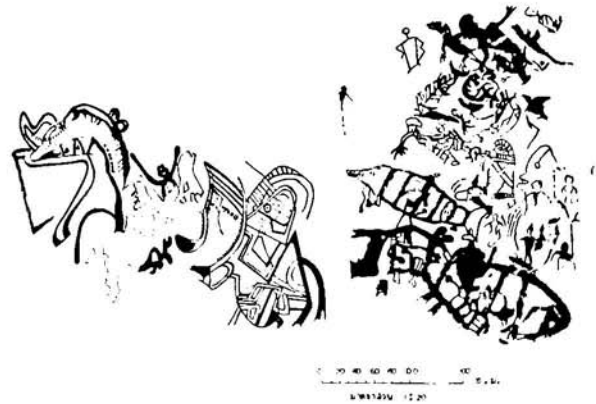


**Far left :** Pot sherds found in many of the Andaman sites indicate the prehistoric people's advanced technical skills in the use of fire.

**Left :** Shells were found in abundance at most sites. Some of the shells found are still today's seafood delicacies.

Paintings were found on rock walls and cave ceilings. And it seems like painting sites were wisely selected for smoothness of surface and protection from rain and sunshine. A number of them are long, gallery-like alcoves and voluminous caves on the mountains.

The largest collection of rock paintings, approximately 200 pictures, was found at Pee Hua To Cave in Krabi Province, Thailand. The sizes of the paintings range from a few centimetres to a few metres. Colour pigments were mixed with natural resin or animal glue to make it more adhesive to the rock surface.



**Above :** Some of the drawings show animal forms.

**Left :** Several paintings superimpose earlier ones.

**This example shows a man with a unique headdress and is probably holding one of his tools.**

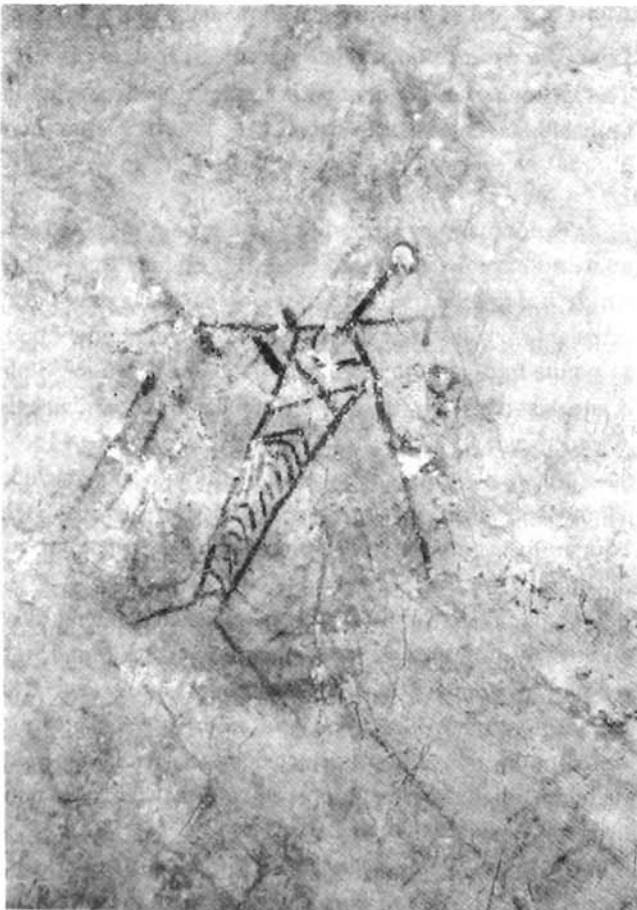


Various colours were utilized in the paintings. Red was a favourite colour and could be easily obtained from ochre which is plentiful in the mountains of the area. Black, extracted from charcoal, is another colour commonly found. Limonite-mineral produced the Andaman yellow while orange was created by the mixture of red and yellow pigments or faded red.

Most paintings are two-dimensional and include silhouettes, outlines, x-ray types, and geometrical styles. Human forms are the most painted subjects; they appear in different poses.

A man with a triangular head having antenna-like protrusions, a man wearing a headdress with a round ring on top, a decorated male figure showing an exaggerated genital, a mummy-like figure, and an artist's self portrait, were among the subjects depicted by the Andaman rock painters. Interestingly, a number of paintings portray a man holding a fish on his left hand.

Fish was definitely popular among the Andamans. Various types of fish were used as subjects in the paintings,



**Left: A human figure holding a fish on his left hand. This is a common picture found in the rock painting sites and could, thus, be a symbolic figure.**

particularly the dolphin. Other animals, such as birds, monkeys, dogs, elephants and lizards were also artistically portrayed.

Simple boats and fishing nets also appeared in prehistoric Andaman paintings. The many geometrical patterns which appear on the paintings could possibly be communication symbols, if not written characters.

Imaginative figures played an important role in the prehistoric paintings. Abstract paintings of human crossed with various animals could indicate their belief in spirits.

The art of prehistoric Andaman culture is very intriguing and unique. Interpretations of the paintings could be as varied and as many as the people analyzing them.

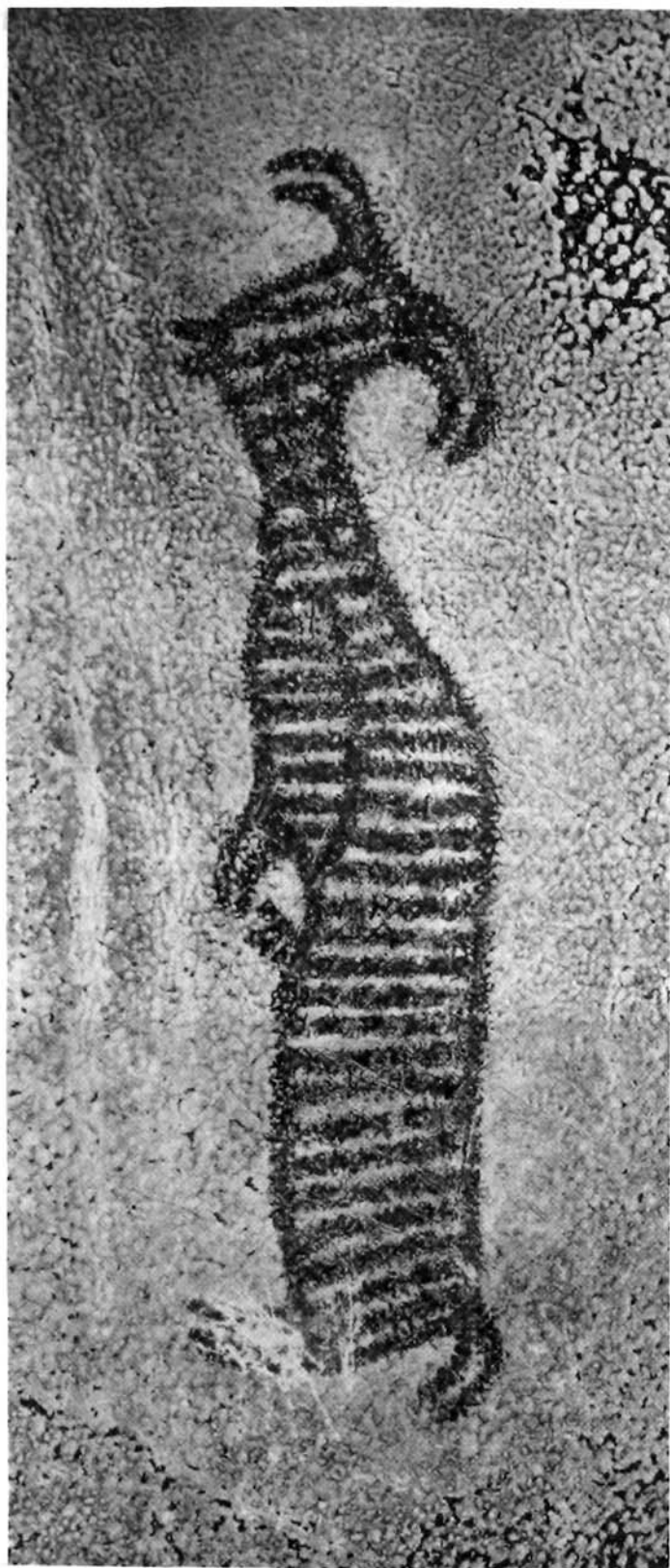
Prehistoric Andaman people have lived in the east coast continuously. As a result, there is reason to believe the suggestion that theirs is not a totally extinct culture. And that some of them may, in fact, be our ancestors. At some point of time, they could have been heavily influenced by outsiders.

Migration of people from neighbouring countries, particularly those from India could have caused new developments in the prehistoric Andaman culture. External cultures brought by these foreigners could have gradually altered the Andaman people' language and general way of living. As more people migrated, more outside cultures were assimilated. Then the population increased and towns began to form and develop.

This is only one of the many hypotheses formed on the Andaman culture. Owing to the scarcity of proofs and evidences, a lot of questions are still left unanswered. Only more diggings, explorations and further studies could shed more light on the lives of these prehistoric people's culture and development.

Meanwhile, Phangngg Bay and Luk Bay continue to attract and fascinate lovers of beauty. And, just like their prehistoric counterparts, modern-day men are continuously roused artistically by the exotic and scenic appeal of the Andaman east coast.

**Left: Another human figure, this time drawn with a long neck and probably clothed with a long dress.**



Probably an imaginary figure drawn by a prehistoric man.

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