

# Cave Art in Kho My Cave, Ha Giang Province: Documentations and Awareness

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**Abstract:** The article discusses the cave art in Kho My cave, Ha Giang Province, Quan Ba District, Tung Vai Commune, particularly a fresco showing four figures of humanoid creatures, whose heads have two long horns and long snouts, in a dancing position. Ancient Kho My people created the work with dark pink ink made by blending yellow-soil rocks with vegetable oil or resin mixed with water. The author deems that the theme of the drawing is related either to the shamanic ritual of hunting or totemism. Through research and comparison with other frescoes of the same type in the adjacent area, especially in southern China, the author temporarily dates the fresco to roughly several centuries BC, deeming that it belongs to one of the Yue ethnic groups.

**Keywords:** Cave art, Kho My cave, Ha Giang.

**Subject classification:** Archaeology

## 1. Introduction

Ha Giang is a mountainous border province in the northernmost part of Vietnam. The province's achievements in archaeological research in recent years reaffirm its position as the land of archaeology with a long history and unique cultural physiognomy.

Recently, Ha Giang's archaeology has enriched its cultural identity by discovering graphic art archaeological sites with carvings and paintings on the rocks found in Nam Dan Commune (Xin Man District), Ho Quang Phin Commune (Dong Van District),

and Tung Vai Commune (Quan Ba District). This paper publishes the author's research findings from 2012 up until now on the fresco in Kho My cave, Ha Giang Province, Quan Ba District.

## 2. Location and landscape of the archaeological site

Kho My cave is named after Kho My Village and situated 20km west from Tam Son Township to the West. The geographical location of the cave is 23<sup>0</sup>05'13.8'' North, 104<sup>0</sup>53'24.1'' East.

In April 2011, during a survey of the tourism potential in Dong Van Karst Plateau, the survey team, including Portuguese Professor Artur Agostinho de Abreu e Sá and members of the management board of Dong Van Karst Plateau Global Geopark, discovered paintings in Kho My cave.

“*Khó My*”, the name of the cave as written in Vietnamese, means [a] “beautiful girl” in the Hmong language. The cave is located next to the main road, which makes it quite convenient for tourists to go sightseeing there. The cave entrance is shaped like a scalene triangle, and the cave ground appears a bit submerged in comparison to its outer surface. The entrance heads North, tilts 15° eastwards, and slopes down to the inside space. The ground is quite flat and 1.5m lower than the entrance area. The inner space of the cave is around 30-40m in width and hundreds of metres in length. The sun can shed light to the ambit of approx. 30m from the entrance. The further visitors go into the cave, the darker and wetter it will become. The cave ceiling is high, large, and covered with a lot of stalactites. The deeper one ventures into the cave, the more visible its unbelievably beautiful stalactite compound will appear. Every block of stalactite contributes to creating a masterpiece inside the cave. With high values from its magnificent landscape bestowed by Mother Nature, Kho My cave was classified as a national beauty spot in 2013. The cave is also surrounded by a plentiful forest ecosystem. Meandering terraced fields and house roofs next to the flanks are hidden in the fog, adding aesthetic values to the border landmark.

Going into the cave for about 40m from the entrance, visitors can catch sight of paintings found on the left wall of the cave,

which are 1.5m-1.6m above the ground. The area is so dark that identifying the surrounding sceneries is almost impossible without the support of a flashlight. Lying under the foot of the wall is a large strip of water. The wall where the paintings were discovered is wet, which caused the paintings to gradually erode and fade over time. During the author’s survey, it became apparent that this strip of water has been only formed recently when the management board of Dong Van Karst Plateau improved the cave ground to create favourable conditions for tourists [2].

### **3. Fresco in Kho My cave**

#### *3.1. Overall description of the fresco*

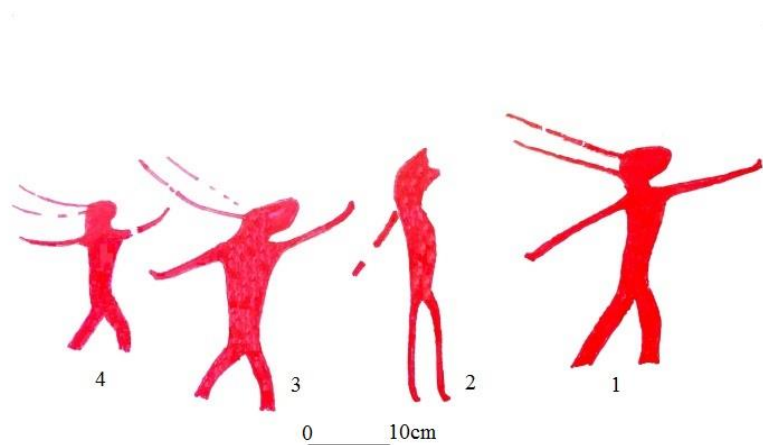
As mentioned earlier, the paintings can be found on quite a flat wall of the cave at a height within the reach of an adult. Paintings of humanoid beings were drawn with dark pink colorant on a small area of the cave wall of 1.1m length and 0.45m width (Figure 1). The drawings present four humanoid beings next to one another at relatively equal distances ranging from 15 to 20cm, looking to the left, and with three of them stretching their two arms slightly upwards. The left hand is raised higher than the right hand, creating an almost straight line. The straight bodies with two slightly stretched legs contribute to the impression of four persons who raises their hands to dance. Of the four beings, number 1, 3, and 4 are mostly intact. Meanwhile, the drawing number 2 is unclear, with only the body and head being clearly visible (Figure 2). Notably, the humanoids heads show an extended mouth like a snout of an animal with two small, long, and straight horns on top.

Figure 1: Drawings on the Wall of Kho My Cave



Source: Author.

Figure 2: Imitation of Drawings on the Wall of Kho My Cave



Source: Author.

The humanoid beings were drawn in line with the perspective, leading to their different sizes. The measurements of the drawings show that their average body size amounts to 30-32cm, with arms ranging from 30 to 32cm, as well as a couple of 19-20cm

horns. Thus generally, the drawn humanoids are proportioned in a similar anthropometric ratio as real humans. Due to being located deeply inside the cave, they have faded overtime when the cave wall becomes wet in the rainy season.

Despite further exploring the depths of the cave, especially its walls, the author found no traces of other frescoes. On the cave's ground was also no evidence of any further archaeological sites and artifacts

### *3.2. Properties of the graphic technique on the rock and presentation style*

In Kho My cave, on the flat area of its wall at a height within the reach of an adult, the ancient creators of the fresco made their artwork with the dark pink minerals. Drawings in Kho My cave can be considered a work of graphic art in a cave.

According to the research findings on similar cave frescoes in Southeast Asia, prehistoric humans, when such drawings are painted on cave walls, used are mostly colours made by grinding and sharpening minerals into powder and then mixing them with water. The dark red colour comes from hematite (iron oxide); bright pink and cinnabar from ochre (a dark red mineral); white from natural limestone or chalk; and black from manganese dioxide or coal. Some communities even knew how to heat up the minerals to produce new colours. Prehistoric humans sometimes combined these colours with animal fat or marrow and resin, to establish adhesion and penetrate them deeply into the surface of a rock. This drawing technique was quite simple as they used sticks and hands to make a painting [10, pp.73-104].

The drawings in Kho My cave are made of dark pink material. When comparing the painting there with paintings on the cliffs in other locations such as Ninh Binh and Cao

Bang provinces, the author believes that people in Kho My crushed the ochre and mixed it with oil or vegetable resin and water to create the colour. This is the most appropriate drawing material since it can be used on surfaces with small pores such as rocks and is resistant to environmental stresses. A lot of others scattered along the streams or on the surface of the trail leading to Kho My cave can still be seen nowadays. It was a rich source of material for the ancient Kho My artisans to use. However, the cave art in Kho My belongs to the category of red paintings which is still uncommon in Vietnam.

The drawings on the walls of Kho My cave are developed in a realistic style, the ancient artists attempted to portray the people dancing in the most authentic and vivid manner. The ancient Kho My people knew how to describe the light and bold dashes to show the layout and shape of a painting based on the perspective. These drawings are not simply art, but they also have other functions, reflecting an essential part of the spiritual life of the Kho My people. According to E. H. Gombrich, author of the book *The Story of Art*, primitive art was often associated with beliefs, magic, and magic rituals [9]. Perhaps, the frescoes in Kho My cave were also influenced by such beliefs or practices.

In terms of contents, the author believes that these ancient drawings depict a ceremony with a group of dancing people disguised as beasts with long snouts and horns that are related to a magical ritual of hunting or totemism. It should be also noted that these drawings were made in a dark and mysterious cave. These frescoes, which

are extremely valuable regarding culture and history, are hard to be found in Vietnam and need to be preserved.

### 3.3. *Creators and dating*

To understand the creators and chronology of the graphical works in Kho My cave, the author used ethnological research and archaeological comparison.

#### 3.3.1. Creators

Are there any legends related to the drawings in Kho My cave? The results of the ethnological survey in the area showed that there is no legend associated with these frescoes. The current residents living in Tung Vai Commune are mostly Hmong, Dao, Nung, Tay, Giay, and Bo Y people. When studying the historical names of fields, forests, caves, and streams in Tung Vai Commune, the author found a pattern of mixing different ethnic languages. This indicates that many ethnic groups have come here to live, fusing many layers of ethnic languages which are difficult to be distinguished from one another.

The local Hmong people, however, do have a legend about a fairy associated to Kho My cave, which has been passed down by word of mouth through many generations. According to the legend, a couple in their 50s found it hard to give birth to a daughter, but eventually ended up giving birth to one and named her My. The girl grew up and became as beautiful as a flower. At the age of 10, she was competent to plow, twist and weave and always willing to help others. Therefore, she was loved by the villagers. At

the age of consent, she fell in love with and got married to a poor man in the neighbouring village. At that time, the official governing this area was greedy and thirsty for pretty women. One day, he came across the village and met My. Enthralled with My's beauty, he immediately wanted to marry her. By using despicable tricks, My was kidnapped, her parents and husband were imprisoned and maltreated to death. Upon receiving knowledge about these happenings, she became extremely miserable and determined to avenge her parents and husband. One day, when the official did not take precautions, she stabbed him to death with a knife, then escaped into the forest and sought shelter in a cave. During the daytime, she went out of the cave to work on the fields, plant linen and went back to the cave at night to sleep. At that point of time, the Hmong people in the neighborhood did not know how to cultivate linen to weave cloth and still used barks to cover their bodies. It was My who taught the villagers how to grow linen, spin yarn, and weave cloth. People in the area respectfully called her "Fairy Khu My". One day, the villagers suddenly did not see her anywhere. Everyone gathered to find her, but she was nowhere to be found. There was only her dress left beside a pile of termite leftovers in the cave. To show their love and respect for Fairy Khu My, the villagers built a temple, which still exists today, on a small hill to worship her, and named the village after her also. The cave where she lived is called Kho My cave. Since then, on holidays, villagers always gather in the area in front of the cave and hold the Gau Tao festival with traditional games such as throwing the *còn* (the ball

made of colourful fabrics, with rice and cotton seeds inside), stick pushing<sup>2</sup> and others.

Through ethnological interviews with older villagers in the region, the author found out that, for many generations, the presence of the drawings in Kho My cave has always been a mystery. Residents do not know when those drawings were painted either. The legend of Kho My cave also seems to be in the later period and has little to do with frescoes in the cave.

According to many historical ethnologists, the Tay, Lo Lo, Dao, Hmong, Nung, Giay and Bo Y ethnic groups migrated to Ha Giang Province in different periods. The Tay people made their presence visible here in the second half of the first millennium AD; the Lo Lo people came around the 10<sup>th</sup> century; the Dao people after the 13<sup>th</sup> century; and the Hmong people in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, etc. [5, p.21], [6, p.11], [7, pp.100-145].

The connection between the life of the residents here and the frescoes in Kho My cave has not been discovered yet. The works on the rock here have been sunk into oblivion, becoming the local folk memory, and the true creator of the above-mentioned carvings remains a mystery.

In the short term, it is impossible to identify the ethnic group who created the drawings in Kho My cave. However, this line of art certainly belongs to one or several ethnic minorities with a nomadic or “slash-and-burn” lifestyle. According to history books, at the points of time before and after AD, the north of today’s Indochina bordering the south of China was once part of the residence of the ancient Bach Viet (lit. one hundred Yue ethnicities) people. This is an area that witnessed many social upheavals. At that time, due to the annexation and

expansion of feudal Han lords, the Bach Viet ethnic groups carried out many great exoduses from southern China. They travelled in waves along the valleys and riversides, spreading to the south. From the second to ninth century, due to the pressure of the great dynasties in the north (Eastern Han, Sui, and Tang dynasties), enormous national-ethnic changes in southern China, especially in Yunnan, Guangxi, and Guizhou provinces, were recorded [13]. Many waves of migration along the big rivers such as the Red River, Da River, Lo River, and Mekong River created new population structures in ancient Northern Indochina and Southeast Asia [8]. Most of the ethnic migrants used to have social institutions and leaders and obtained outstanding achievements based on wet rice farming. They have also mastered the techniques of iron smelting, irrigation, husbandry, and cultivation, among others.

Due to a lack of data required to draw conclusions about the creators of the drawing, the author assumes that an ethnic group in the Bach Viet bloc, who moved down to reside in Tung Vai valley in today’s Quan Ba District, was the creator of the drawings in Kho My cave, which, for example, could be the Tay-Thai ethnic group.

### 3.3.2. Dating

The dating of the frescoes of Kho My cave encountered many difficulties as the number of drawings is limited, and the objects are quite simple. Other archaeologically valuable data could not be found in the cave.

Based on an archaeological comparison, placing the research subject in relation with murals of the same type in the vicinity, the author initially provided a chronological framework for Kho My frescoes.

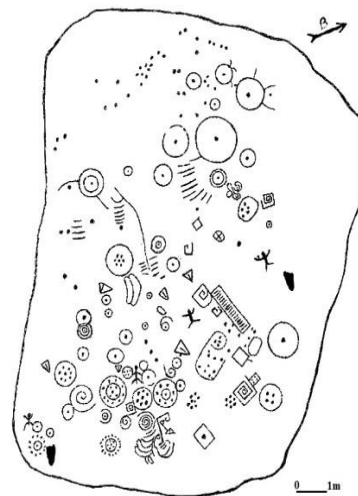
In Ha Giang Province, in addition to Kho My cave, the author also discovered artifacts on the rock in Nam Dan Commune (Xin Man District) (Figure 3) and Ho Quang Phin Commune (Dong Van District) [7, pp.76-84], [3, pp.84-86]. At both sites, the drawings were created by carving the surface of large outdoor rocks, with schematic geometric elements and emblematic humanoid figures. On closer inspection, differences can be found. However, it is difficult to compare the frescoes in Kho My cave with the ancient carvings in Nam Dan and Ho Quang Phin communes.

Meanwhile, in southern China, archaeologists found more than 20 drawings of multiple colours similar to the ones in Kho My cave at two sites in Dawang, Malipo County, Wenshan Prefecture, Yunnan Province. The drawings are placed on two rock ceilings, over 20m apart from each other and show 11

humanoid figures in a stretched position like frogs, as well as three buffaloes, four bipedal animals, and a few twisted, sinusoidal circles. At the second Dawang site, there are more than 10 pink drawings, including nine figures in a stretched position and four undefined figures [16, p.80].

There are many different views about dating these frescoes. Based on the contents, techniques, and regional historical context, it is argued that the humanoid figures represent the character Nong Zhigao - a national hero of the Zhuang (Tay, Nung) people in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Other humanoid figures created on the cliffs could be patronage gods of the Zhuang people<sup>3</sup>. On the contrary, others argue that the creators of these frescoes are post-Neolithic inhabitants, when there were no classes in society, dating back 3,400 years ago [16, p.83].

Figure 3: Images on A Rock in Xin Man District, Ha Giang Province



Source: Author.

In southern Guangxi Province, over years of research and survey up until now, Chinese archaeologists have discovered 82 places with similar drawings, scattered within over 200km along Zuojiang River in Pingxiang, Longzhou, Ningzming, Chongzuo, Fusui and Daxin districts and prefectures. They are collectively called Huashan lava murals, or Zuojiang lava murals [12, p.98].

The graphical techniques and styles of these drawings are similar to the ones at Dawang. The red figures of humanoid creatures are stretching their legs and raising their arms in a frog-like posture and wearing shorts words with flattened handles, swords with handles in the shape of the Chinese character “yi” (-), meaning “one”, or swords

with round handles; horsemen; bronze drums; bells with shanks in the shape of a goat horn; and dogs on the high cliffs near rivers, streams... (Figure 4).

Many different opinions have been put forward with regards to contents of the Huashan lava murals. Some think that they are records of a historical event, such as the uprising of the Trung sisters and Jiaozi people against the Eastern Han dynasty. Others consider it some kind of linguistic symbol of the transition from painting to literary iconography. Another opinion states that these drawings could be the manifestation of cultural heritage of shamanism or primitive religious consciousness related to the water god, ancestor worship, and tribal totem cult.

Figure 4: Bells with Shanks in the Shape of a Goat Horn



Source: Author.



Because the interpretation of these images shows many variations, the dating among researchers is also different. In general, there are numerous different groups of opinions. While some argue that the mural was created in the Western Zhou period (about 3,000 years ago), others date the drawings to the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, related to the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom movement [14, pp.159-170]. The most widely accepted opinion is that the Zuojiang frescoes date back to the period between the Warring States and the Eastern

Han (5<sup>th</sup> century BC to 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD). The author is fortunate to have an opportunity to survey the frescoes on the Zuojiang River in Chongzuo District and agrees with this point.

There are also numerous theories about the creators of the Zuojiang lava murals, with some associating the images with the Hmong-Dao people, the Lac Viet people, the Au Viet people, and others. However, it seems, the creators of the Huashan lava murals are part of the Bach Viet communities in South China [11], [15].

Figure 5: Drawings in Zuojiang Valley, Chongzuo City, Guangxi Province, China



Source: Author.

Through comparing the graphic techniques, art styles, and themes depicted in Kho My cave with those in Dawang mountain (Yunnan Province) and Zuojiang valley (Guangxi Province), the author concludes that they have common characteristics in technique and expressional style, such as the use of dark

pink and cinnabar pigments made from ochre as materials to draw on rock, as well as the simple use of sticks and hands for creating these drawings. The above drawings are all works of Rock Painting Art in the category of Red paintings and are all expressed in a realistic style.

There is a slight difference in the contents of the drawings. The drawings in Dawang mountain (Yunnan Province) and Zuojiang valley (Yunnan Province), are more diverse with human and animal figures, and geometries. In the Zuojiang area, there are also humanoid figures with short swords with flattened handles, swords with handles in the shape of the Chinese character “yi” (-), or swords with round handles; horsemen; bronze drums; bells with shanks in the shape of a goat horn. That is one of the grounds for Chinese scholars to determine the age of frescoes here. The number of drawings in Kho My cave remains humble, and most of them portray humanoid beings dressing up in a dance posture. The author believes that they are related to the magic ritual of hunting or totemism.

Obviously, the magic ritual of hunting reflects the fact that prehistoric people believe in the ability to impact the hunted animals by symbolic actions (praying, enchanting and others) or supernatural ways in other words. Thanks to magic measures, the prehistoric people tried to impact the hunting of animals and make it happen in the way they wanted. Meanwhile, totemism is an ancient form of religion, expressing the belief in a close or biological relationship between a human community and some animal, plant, or natural subject. An illusion of the relationship between the creature and the community of hunters and collectors has accordingly emerged. Eventually, the creature became a common ancestor (the totem) of that community.

Hence, based on the interpreted contents of the drawings in the Kho My cave, the author believes that their age could be equivalent to the drawings of Huashan and

Zuojiang valleys. Regarding the specific date, the author would like to refer to the existing archaeological documents in the area of Quan Ba, where people were present in the Metal Age at Tham Ke cave near Bao An Village [4, pp.65-73].

The cave is located more than 10 km away from Kho My cave as the crow flies. In 1996, the Institute of Archaeology conducted an excavation to survey this cave. The cultural stratum is about 0.5m thick, including two layers, the upper and lower. The upper layer (L2) is 0.2m thick and contains 25 pieces of ceramic and porcelain of the Le and Nguyen periods. The lower layer (L1) is 0.3m thick and located directly on the bedrock, containing many coarse ceramic fragments, animal teeth, and field snail shells. It was possible to restore the shape of 43 pieces of the L1 grade raw ceramic, possibly broken from various artifacts. Because most of the pottery is moulded by hand, the inside surface of the ceramic is not smooth, with a few protrusions. There are two types of ceramic materials: coarse ceramic (dark red ceramic bone mixed with a great deal of small grit) and fine ceramic (black ceramic bone, fine grain). Most are round-bottom ceramic pieces without a base. Patterns are mainly small printed even squares and fine coarse cords. Based on the ground topography and cultural stratum, archaeologists believe that Tham Ke cave used to be a temporary stopover for a few groups of migrating ancient residents. The appearance of printed pottery and coarse cord impressed pottery shows that there was some contact with the cultures from the North, which is an important basis to consider that Tham Ke cave was a residential site of people during the Early Iron Age, dating back a few

centuries BC or AD [4, p.71]. Therefore, the author also predetermines the age of the drawings in Kho My cave to a similar timeframe, based on the appearance and style of the drawings, which could come from some ethnic groups of the Bach Viet people moving to live by the mountains of Quan Ba District, Ha Giang Province.

#### 4. Conclusion

The ancient drawings in Kho My cave show similarities in technique, as well as artistic expression, with some traditional cave paintings in Southeast Asia and southern China, which may contribute to understand ethnic groups from ancient times.

Through the carvings and paintings on the rocks at Kho My, as well as in other caves in Nam Dan (Xin Man) and Ho Quang Phin (Dong Van), the region's ancestors sent many messages. However, numerous mysteries remain to be discovered and decoded. Hopefully, in the future, many competent institutions and researchers will make concerted efforts and devote their time to discover and study the ancient art in Ha Giang Province, especially in Kho My cave, as such drawings remain rarely found in Vietnam and should be preserved and promoted.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The paper was published in Vietnamese in: *Khoa học xã hội Việt Nam*, số 10, 2020, then developed into this English version. Translator: Vu Xuan Nuoc. Language editor: Etienne Mahler.

<sup>2</sup> According to Thao Mi Ho, a 75-year-old Hmong woman in Kho My village, the Gau Tao festival is the largest and only festival with the participation of all Hmong in the region. This festival is associated with the non-material life and beliefs of the Hmong and relates to well-being and happiness (interview in 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Nong Zhigao (1025-1055) is a historical figure born in Cao Bang's Quang Uyen. He represents the will and strength of the highland peoples against the feudal rulers. Nong Zhigao became a cultural symbol and legendary hero in the spiritual and cultural life of the Tay-Nung (Zhuang) people. Names and images of Nong Zhigao are recorded in history books as well as in the minds of local people, not only in Cao Bang, Lang Son, Ha Giang provinces, but also in some neighbouring countries such as China and Thailand.

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