Fig. 1
Tham Roob

Fig. 2
Tham Roob
The Oracle at Tambun
Malay and Thai Cave Paintings Compared

by
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In February this year it was reported from Bangkok, that the Thai-Danish Archaeological Expedition had come across prehistoric rock-paintings in Thailand. The site was far off in the jungle west of the KWAE NOI river, where an old elephant path climbs across the mountains close to the Burmese frontier. Here the pictures were found covering the two leaning side walls of a triangular fissure in a steep cliff, overlooking the pass. Strictly speaking this lofty chamber with its wide opening towards the valley is a rock-shelter, but the Thai members of our expedition liked to call it a "Tham", which is their word for "cave". To them the site was "Tham Roob", — the only "picture cave" known so far to exist in Thailand.

As a representative of the Danish National Museum, the present author spent 10 days at the place, studying the figures and mapping the complete painted wall in scale 1: 10. Excavations were carried out all over the floor, and some pebble tools of mesolithic aspect turned up, but no archaeological findings were made to throw light upon the age and origin of the pictures. In our attempts to solve these problems, therefore, we are reduced to considering the painted figures themselves. But furthermore there is a chance for us to get help from comparing the circumstances at Tham Roob to those of other rock-painting sites in South East Asia.

Only three years ago there would have been no material for comparison at hand except from Celebes, but in 1959 the situation changed completely after the discovery of the painted caves at Niah in British Borneo, and of the painted rock-shelter near Ipoh in Malaya. The latter attracts the attention in quite a special degree because of its geographical position, which from old times must have made it an advanced station for such southbound migrations that would have touched Tham Roob about 1000 km.s further North. Therefore I found it worth while, after having finished the work in Thailand, to pay the Ipoh shelter a visit and — with the impressions from Tham Roob still fresh in mind — look for relationship and differences.

Situation. In spite of the variations in shape of the two shelters, there is a certain striking similarity in their position, both of them placed at the upper end of a steep slope and exposing their picture-galleries to a free sky, above all tree-tops. Both of them gain thereby the same air of monumentality.

Technique. The material used for painting is haematite. Some figures are "drawings" with red outlines only, others are red all over. At both places you find several layers of designs, one over and across the other, painted by artists to whom the earlier representations obviously had no value any longer. At Tham Roob as well as at Ipoh the colour of the pictures occur in many variations from scarlet (or "vermillon") red to dark purple and blackish red. In many cases this will have relation to the chronology, so that the older a picture is, the darker it appears. But other factors such as the varying consistence of the limestone wall may have an influence too.
Motifs. At first sight the subjects of the two rock-paintings seem to be very different. At Tham Roob the picture gallery is dominated by a certain group of drawings, the meaning of which so far is obscure. They are rectangular or square V figures, often very large and with rounded corners, and they are provided with a small appendix at one end, like an entrance (fig. 1). Sometimes the area of the figure is divided up into smaller “rooms” (fig. 2), sometimes it is filled with oblique lines crossing each other. One could suppose these drawings to be ground-plans of houses or designs of some sort of fish traps. These motifs seem to be absent at Ipoh,—unless we have them in two very unclear figures to be found uppermost above the large, dolphin-like animal in the centre of the wall (fig. 3).

On the whole it must be concluded that both at Tham Roob and at Ipoh a large number of pictures have disappeared either completely, or to such an extent that an interpretation of them is uncertain. A statement saying that a figure of this or that particular kind only occurs at one of the two localities, therefore, would be false. The type of figure in question might have been at the other locality, too, or might even be in a rudimentary and unrecognizable state of preservation.

As far as the distinct pictures are concerned, however, there is a difference between the register of animals occurring at the two places. At Tham Roob the list includes elephant, “muntjak” or “barking deer”? (fig. 4), tortoise, and reptile (3 cases). At Ipoh we have tapir, wild boar, sambar deer?, domesticated animals?, and fresh-or salt-water creatures (fig. 3). The section “domesticated animals” refers to a female with three suckling young (fig. 3 to the left). Of the female very little is left, and the diagnosis is based on the fact only, that wild animals seldom have more than two young. Among the aquatic animals we have the large, dolphin-like monster, already mentioned, and difficult to identify. It has been damaged at the rear end by lime-water seeping down from stalactites above, so that it is questionable whether the long, hanging tail belongs to it or not. It might be a seacow (dugong) as proposed by J. M. Matthews, but could be a sea-otter just as well.
Cross hatching in figures of animals: Ipoh.

So much for the present about the differences. At Tham Roob and Ipoh, however, we also find figures so much alike that they must be considered to represent the same thing. In other words there is a relationship at hand confined to certain motifs, some of which are the following: a human-like reptile, a dancing figure, a man with lifted arms, a human figure symbolized by means of few lines (transferred from technique of wood or stone-carving), a narrow ellipse furnished with 4 legs, patterns of double lines meeting at sharp angles. In no case do the related paintings show a pronounced likeness, but their difference of appearance do not exceed what can be ascribed to greater or less artistic skill.

Style. Most observers probably will admit that the paintings at Tham Roob on the whole are of a higher standard than those at Ipoh. Some of the Thai pictures—as for example the deer (fig. 4) and the central group of human figures (fig. 5), reveal an unerring eye for the expressiveness of distinct contours. Not a few drawings at Ipoh, on the other hand, are primitive in the sense of crudeness, reminding us of the first attempts to draw made by small children (figs. 6 & 7).

On the rock-wall at Tham Roob as well as at Ipoh it is possible to distinguish groups of paintings representing different styles. One such group (shown 1959 on the cover of Malaya in History, Vol. 5, No. 2)
exhibits a striking similarity to drawings made by Australian Aborigines from Arnhem Land. This was already pointed out by H. R. van Heekeren in a letter of October 1959 to Mr. Mubin Sheppard, where at the same time the writer spoke about affinities between a second style at Ipoh and rock paintings from Central and South India.

Regarding the pictures at Tham Roob one might be tempted to attach importance to the occurrence of large, geometric designs on the one hand, and of the representation of men and animals on the other hand, identifying them with two different styles which furthermore could be ascribed to different ethnic groups of artists. I would at this early stage not dare to draw that conclusion. After having seen the Ipoh shelter I should rather give importance to the existence at Tham Roob of another group of drawings, occurring as hardly visible but widely extended substratum. This group is the above mentioned “double lines meeting at sharp angles” (fig. 5 left, fig. 4), reminding me very much of the crosshatchings inside the Australoid animal-drawings at Ipoh.

Age and Interpretation. If we leave the Australoid affinities out of account there are at Tham Roob certain elements pointing to the bronze age, which to my belief could be underlined by a comparison between Tham Roob and the pictures at Niah. One Tham Roob figure—the often repeated reptile—is to be found among tattoos on living people in Thailand nowadays. The same figure, enclosed
Chinese oracle-bones from the Shang bronze-age, and this is not the only element pointing back to the oracle-bone figures.

Whatever connection can be proved here, it seems to be a reasonable explanation to interpret the Tham Roob and Ipoh shelters as oracle sites. Their monumental, elevated positions, and the scarcity of archaeological remains indicate that they have been central sanctuaries, to which people have made pilgrimages on special occasions, to obtain omens or to request answers on different questions, rather than dwelling places. This would explain, too, the strange habit of painting new pictures across the former ones, which is against all deep-rooted, primitive traditions of decoration. Each time when visitors consulted the oracle new pictures had to be painted on the magic rock, symbolizing the particular problems of private or mutual interest. Each picture should in some way or other make the rockwall answer a certain question, symbolized by the motif, and when the wall had spoken, the picture would have no meaning and no value any more, a phenomena well known from the world of ceremonial art among primitive people.