

## Oldest Indian Dance Carved on Rock in Goa

*Bharatanatyam*, a major form of Indian classical dance originated thousands of years ago in the temples and courts of Southern India. This form of Indian classical dance is reported in *Natya Shastra*, a Hindu text of performing arts, compiled between 200 BCE and 200 CE, attributed to the scholar Bharata Muni.<sup>1</sup>

The rock carvings at Usgalimal, although not archaeologically dated, are supposed to be 4000 – 6000 years old. According to international experts the centrally located labyrinth (reported earlier)<sup>2</sup> is estimated to be at least 4500 years old. The carving of the dancer was also reported earlier<sup>3</sup>. Because of the historical significance of this carving, it is now being re-visited.

Figure 1 is the photograph of the dancer carved on the rock by the river Kushavati in Sanguem. This exquisitely carved image maybe the earliest representation of the dance performed by the very early settlers of Goa. The dance, with torches and the hand and leg movements are also widely incorporated in Indian religious iconography. (Figures 3 and 4 are just two such examples.)



Fig.1. Rock carving of the dancer at Usgalimal



Fig.2. A wood carving of the dancer



Fig 3. An androgynous god  
(Art Institute, Chicago.)



Fig.4. A composite image of the  
hand movements of the dance.<sup>1</sup>

Some Indologists and modern authors have argued that Bharatanatyam is a descendant of an ancient Devadasi (servant girls of Deva temples) culture, suggesting a historical origin back to between 300 BCE and 300 CE. This theory has been questioned for lack of any direct textual or archeological evidence.

A closer inspection of the rock carving also reveals that the dancer-storyteller may be a shaman or someone dressed as an androgynous individual, as depicted in figure 3.

Androgyny among humans has also been recorded since earliest historical times. In the ancient land of Sumer, androgynous men participated in the cult of *Inanna*. A set of priests worked in *Inanna's temples*, where they performed elegies and lamentations. In later Mesopotamian cultures, *kurgarrū* and *assinnu* were servants of the goddess.<sup>4</sup>

Until a newer archeological site is discovered in India that provide an even earlier date, the carving in Usgalimal, in *Govem/ Gomanchala/ Goa*, may be considered to have been the site and genesis of the dance.

#### References and comments.

1. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bharatanatyam>
2. <https://goaprehistory.files.wordpress.com/2018/06/labyrinth-at-usgalimal-decoded3.pdf>
3. <https://goaprehistory.files.wordpress.com/2018/06/dancers-and-story-tellers-at-usgalimal2.pdf>
4. During the Akkadian Period, kurgarrū and assinnu were servants of Ishtar who dressed in female clothing and performed war dances in Ishtar's temples.