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## UNVEILING INDIA'S ANCIENT PAST WITH THE KONKAN PETROGLYPHS

Dr Sreenivasarao Vepachedu

సరస్వతి నమస్తుభ్యం వరదే జ్ఞానరూపిణి | యజ్ఞారంభం కరిష్యామి సిద్ధిర్భవతు మే సదా ||



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Dr Sreenivasarao Vepachedu

### Introduction

The narrative of Bharat, now known as India, stretches back over tens of thousands years, challenging conventional historical timelines. Along the Konkan coast, particularly in Ratnagiri, Maharashtra, over 1,500 petroglyphs—carvings of elephants, rhinos, stingrays, and humans—have been discovered across more than 70 sites. These carvings, some as large as trucks and potentially older than the pyramids, were found not by archaeologists but by villagers, school children, and locals, revealing what may be India's oldest cultural memory. The significance, dating, and global context of these petroglyphs, drawing comparisons with other ancient sites highlights their implications for our understanding of Ancient History of India described in Vedic literature.

Petroglyphs are images or designs created by removing part of a rock surface. This is typically done by carving, incising, picking, or abrading the rock. Petroglyphs are images created by carving or incising into rock surfaces, often referred to as rock art. They are a form of symbolic communication and are not just random markings but rather carry meaning within their cultural context. Petroglyphs are found worldwide and are associated with various ancient cultures

Petroglyphs are distinct from pictographs, which are paintings on rock surfaces, often using natural pigments. Petroglyphs are found on every continent and are associated with prehistoric peoples. Petroglyphs are not just art but serve as a form of symbolic communication, often conveying information about the culture, beliefs, and history of the people who created them. They can represent hunting rituals, fertility symbols, boundary markers, records of important events, clan symbols, or even serve as a form of storytelling. Some petroglyph locations were likely considered sacred spaces prior to the creation of the images, and the petroglyphs may have formalized or verified their significance within the culture's cosmology. Petroglyphs can still hold contemporary meaning for descendant communities and may be used in ceremonies or for cultural preservation.

Pictographs and ideographs, in ancient times, served as mnemonic devices to help recall data and this early use of visualization led to the development of systems of symbolic [pictographs](#) and ideographs, the precursors of alphabets. Pre-historic pictographs, literally 'picture writing,' date back to the [Stone Age](#) and, as far as is known, represent [concrete objects](#). A related term, petroglyphs, refers to images etched in stone.<sup>15</sup> Ideographs (pictures representing ideas) originated about 5,000 BC in Sumeria on clay tablets and about 4,000 BC in Egypt on papyrus.

Several scenes from ancient Turkic life were discovered on petroglyphs. One of these is an image of a herd of hoofed animals pursued by a horseback hunter. Belonging of this imagery to medieval petroglyphs is easy to establish by the presence of some features and overall style: horse decoration, high pommels of the saddles, weaponry, patina, and other features. Nearby, mounted





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warriors with spades and banners are depicted. The shape of the banners has long been of interest to scholars. These are the banners with a characteristic cutout in the middle, resembling a wolf's head.

A review in of the petroglyphs of Siega Verde near Ciudad Rodrigo, far western Spain, showed that the site's corpus of rock art is mostly less than two centuries old, much of it dating from the early to the mid-20th century. Previously, the equid and bovid images of the low-grade metamorphics site had been widely attributed to the Upper Palaeolithic. The report also mentioned, very briefly, that similar circumstances apply to thousands of other Iberian petroglyphs at open-air sites. There is in fact a large body of zoomorphic petroglyphs across the Peninsula, consisting almost entirely of horse-like and bull-like petroglyphs on sites of schist, phyllite or slate that have been ascribed to the final Pleistocene. Most recently the first such site has been reported from Germany and assigned to the Aurignacian. In total, more than a dozen large centers of distribution of rock art have been recorded in the Eurasian continent only. Petroglyphs of the western and northern regions of Europe have been better studied both due to their combination with well-dated archaeological objects—axes, daggers, etc (which gave a fairly accurate dating), and due to long-term systematic archaeological research in these territories. Classifications of rock art and petroglyphs of Scandinavia, Italy, and the Sahara have already been developed.

A series of rock carvings known as petroglyphs, estimated to be 12,000 years old, offer priceless insight into the history of the area. Sitting atop small hills in the Konkan region, they've become known as the Konkan petroglyphs. Since their discovery, scientists and anthropology enthusiasts have hoped to shed some light on unknown civilizations that once thrived in the Konkan region. The Maharashtra government has declared geoglyphs and petroglyphs in Ratnagiri as protected monuments under the Maharashtra Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, dating back to the Mesolithic era. They depict various animals and footprints. Ratnagiri alone hosts over 1,500 artworks across 70 sites, some of which are on UNESCO's tentative World Heritage list.

### **Petroglyph Global**

**Petroglyph National Monument (New Mexico):** Protects one of the largest petroglyph sites in North America, with images carved by Native Americans and Spanish settlers.

**Jeffers Petroglyphs (Minnesota):** Features around 5,000 rock carvings made by the ancestors of today's Native Americans.

**Alibates Flint Quarries National Monument (Texas):** Home to petroglyphs created by the Antelope Creek People, offering a glimpse into their cultural heritage.

**White Tank Mountain Regional Park (Arizona):** Contains hundreds of petroglyphs, some potentially dating back 10,000 years, according to the Maricopa County Parks website.

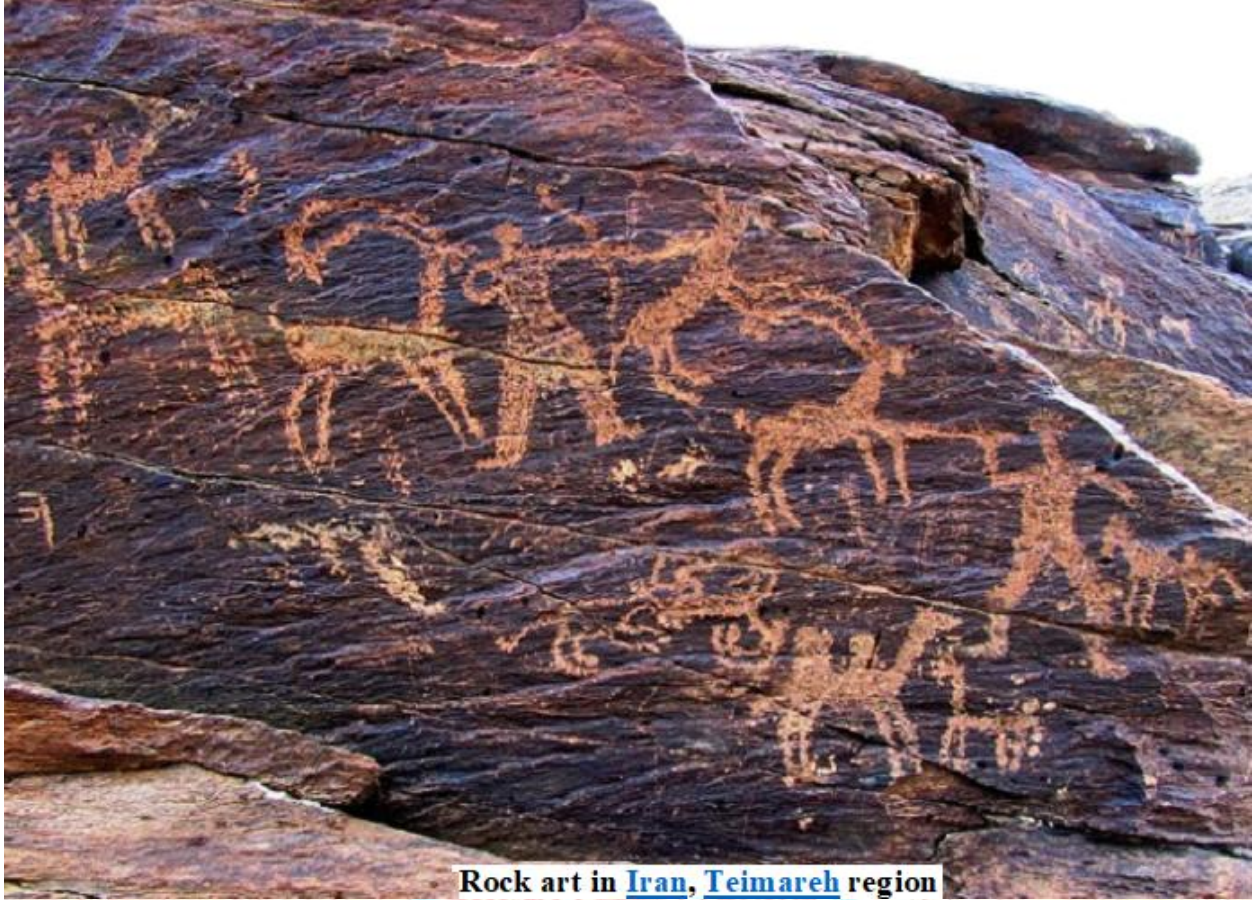
**La Cieneguilla Petroglyphs (New Mexico):** Features hundreds of petroglyphs, primarily created by Keresan-speaking puebloan people.





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Iran, Rock art in [Iran](#), [Teimareh](#) region



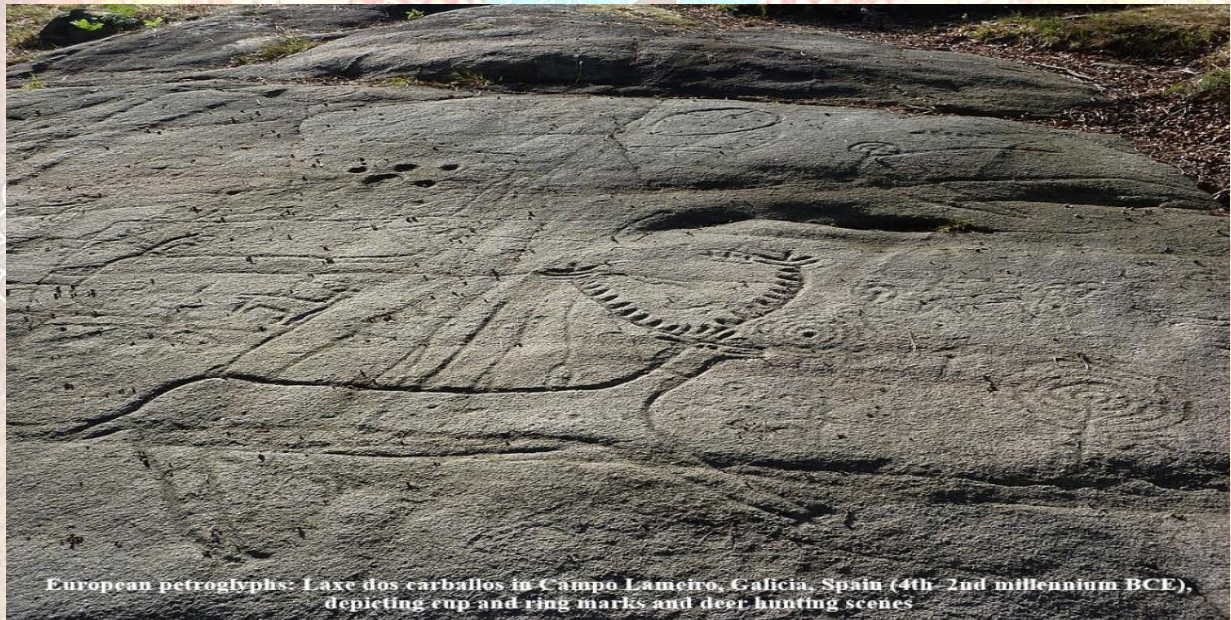
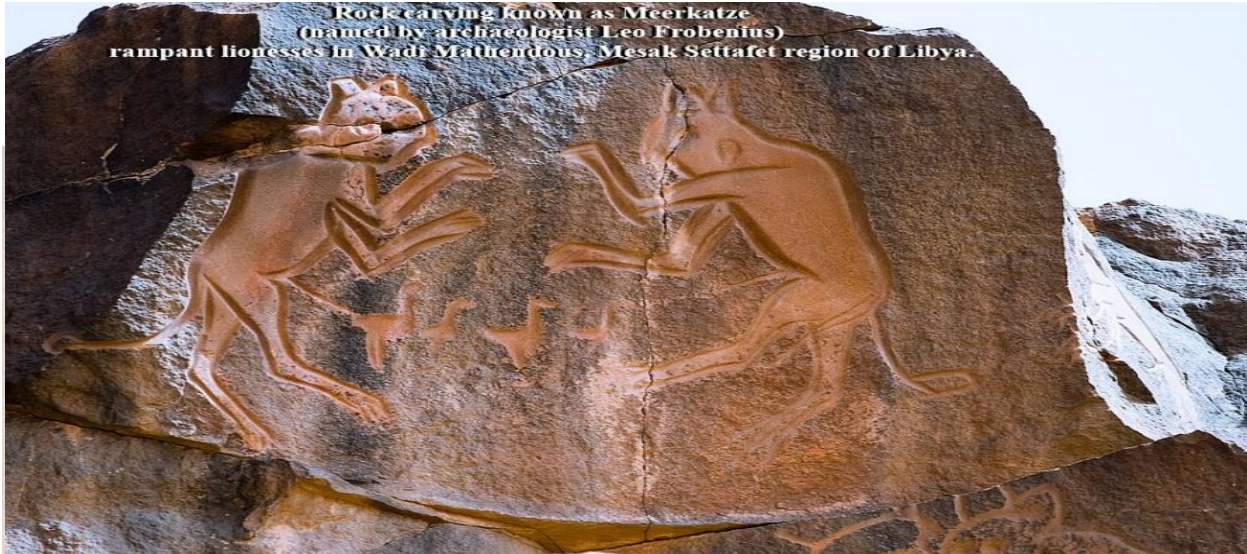
Rock art in [Iran](#), [Teimareh](#) region





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Petroglyph of a camel: Negev, southern Israel.



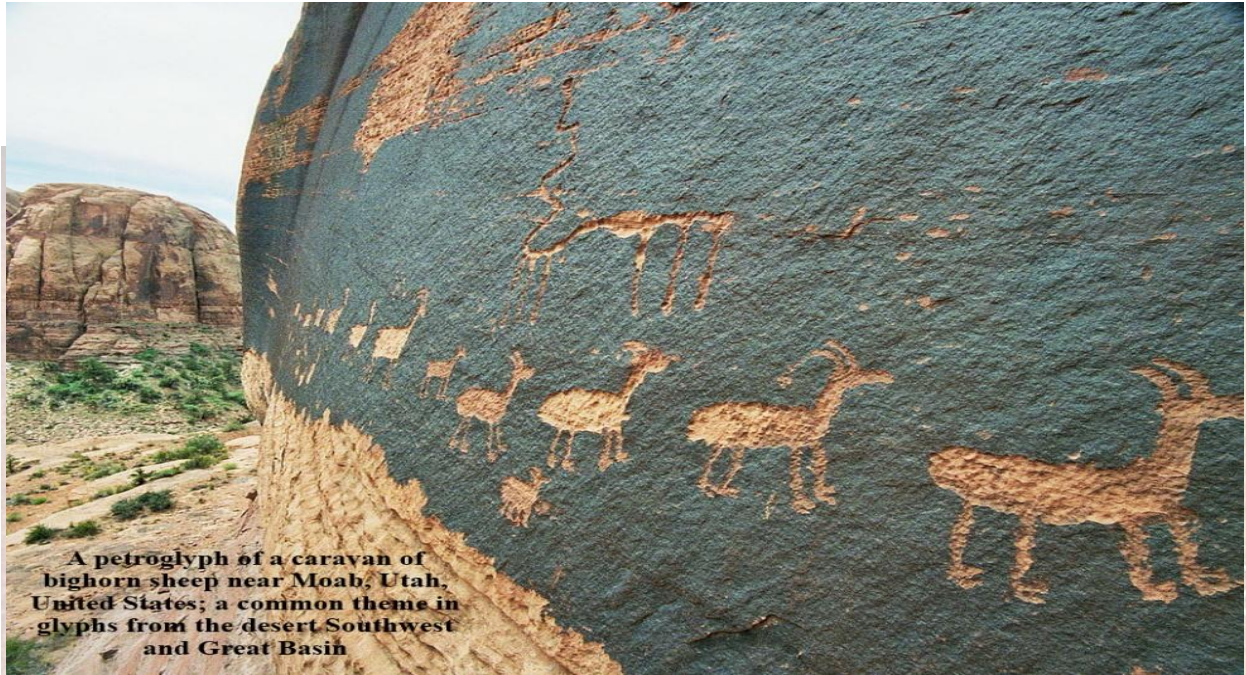
Composite image of petroglyphs from Scandinavia (Häljesta, Västmanland in Sweden). Nordic Bronze Age. The glyphs have been painted to make them more visible.





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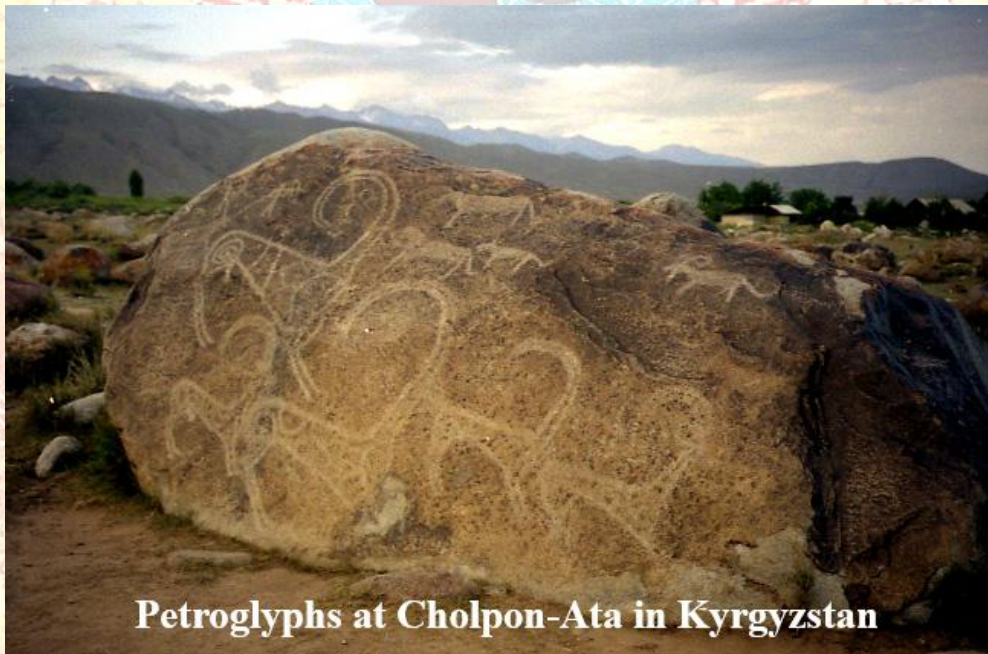
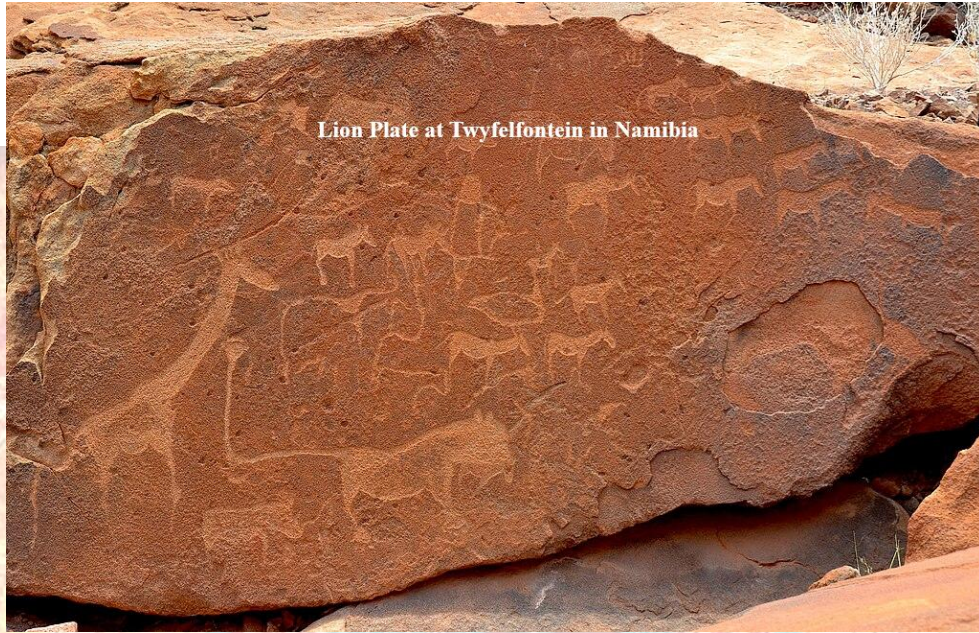
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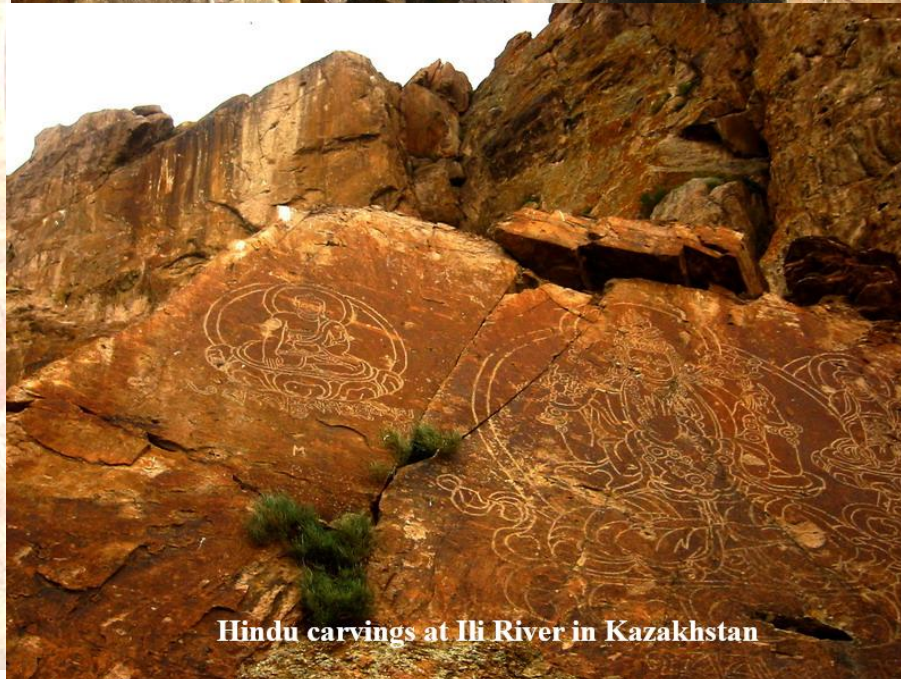
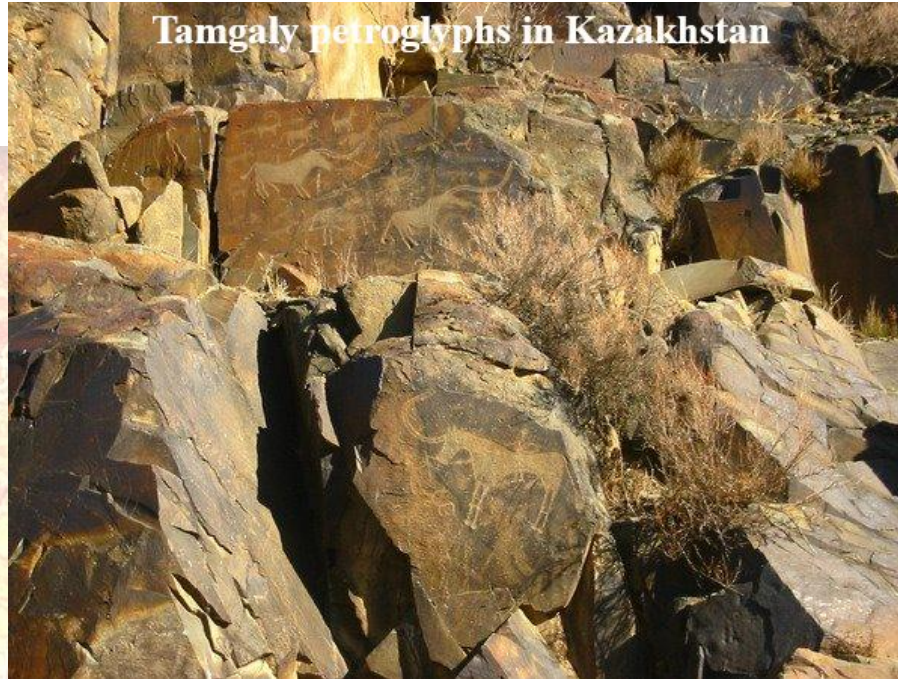
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Rock art images of the Kazakhs of Ustyurt and Mangystau are recorded in the mountains of Akmai and Airakty and in the caves of Cape Zhygylgan on the northeastern coast of the Caspian Sea. The dominant theme of local rock art is a horseman with military attributes: horse, engraved with

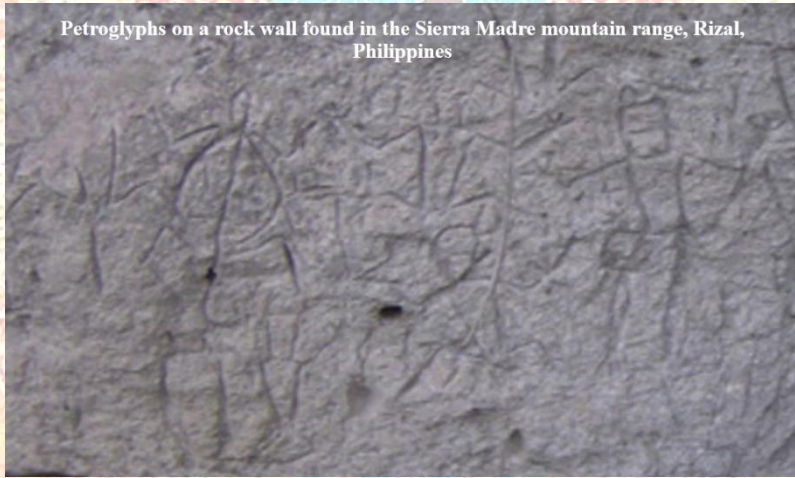




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special care; horse harnesses—a saddle with high pommels (more often with a curved front pommel, based on zoomorphic motifs) and shabrack, sweep bags; bridle with reins, chumbur and a triangular-shaped amulet with fringe, breast and tail belts; close and distant combat weapons and military equipment—a sabre in a scabbard and with harness straps, a dagger, a battle axe with various forms of striker, a spear, sometimes with rhombic tips at both ends of the shaft, loops and tugs made of horse hair, a stick, a bow, arrows, a bipod firelock gun of the 16th–17th centuries, a gunpowder box, a lashing stick, a spade. Rarely warriors are shown wearing peaked headdresses and spheroconical helmets with plumes. The horsemen are depicted participating in duels, mass battles, and hunting of mountain goats and argali. The motif of a mounted warrior prominent in Turkic art also becomes a leading image of Kazakh folk art. There are known groups of rock art associated with the Junghars. The most famous monument of this historical and cultural stratum is Tamgaly-Tas—a group of rock fragments rising above the Ili River with images of four Buddhas and one Bodhisattva. The Ili images of the five Buddhas belong to the Tibetan form Hinduism. In terms of artistic style and metaphysical characterization, these images belong to the Vajrayana or Tantric school, which developed in Tibet and Central Asia.

Petroglyphs on a rock wall found in the Sierra Madre mountain range, Rizal, Philippines

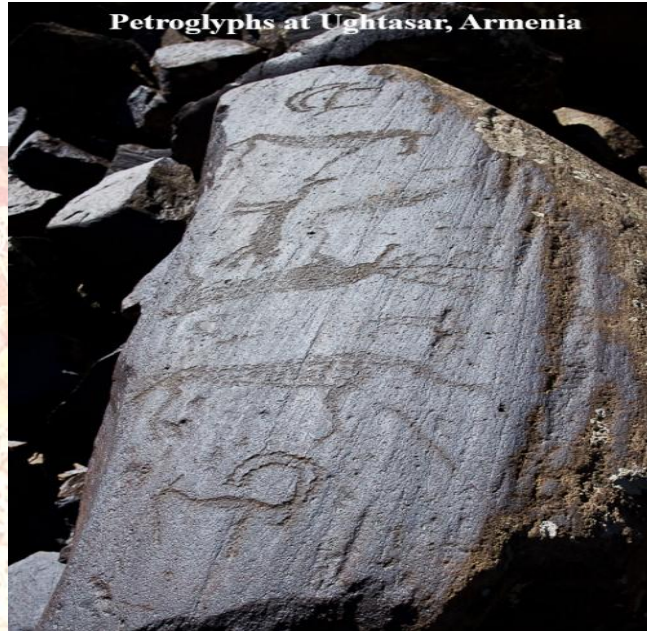




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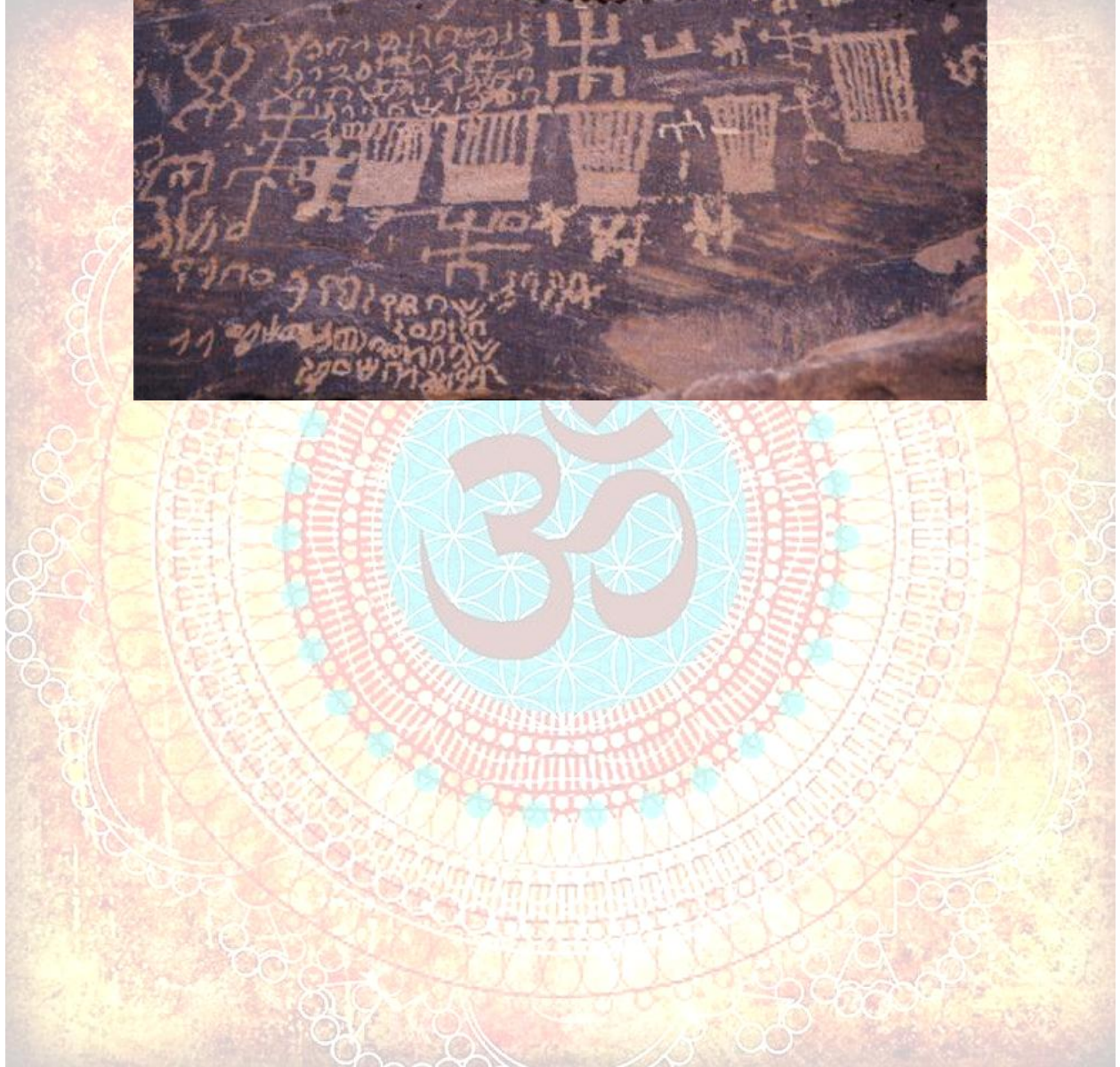
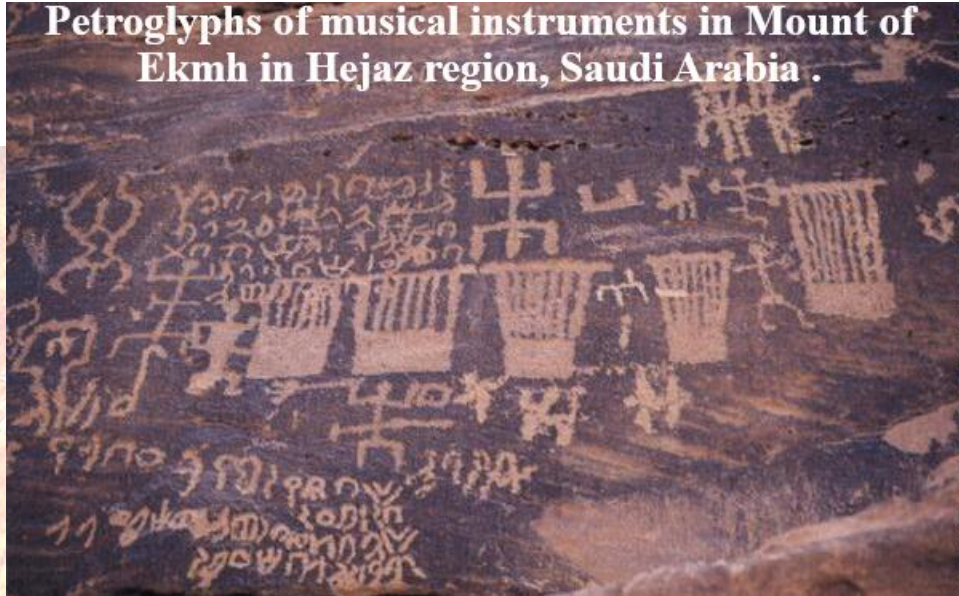


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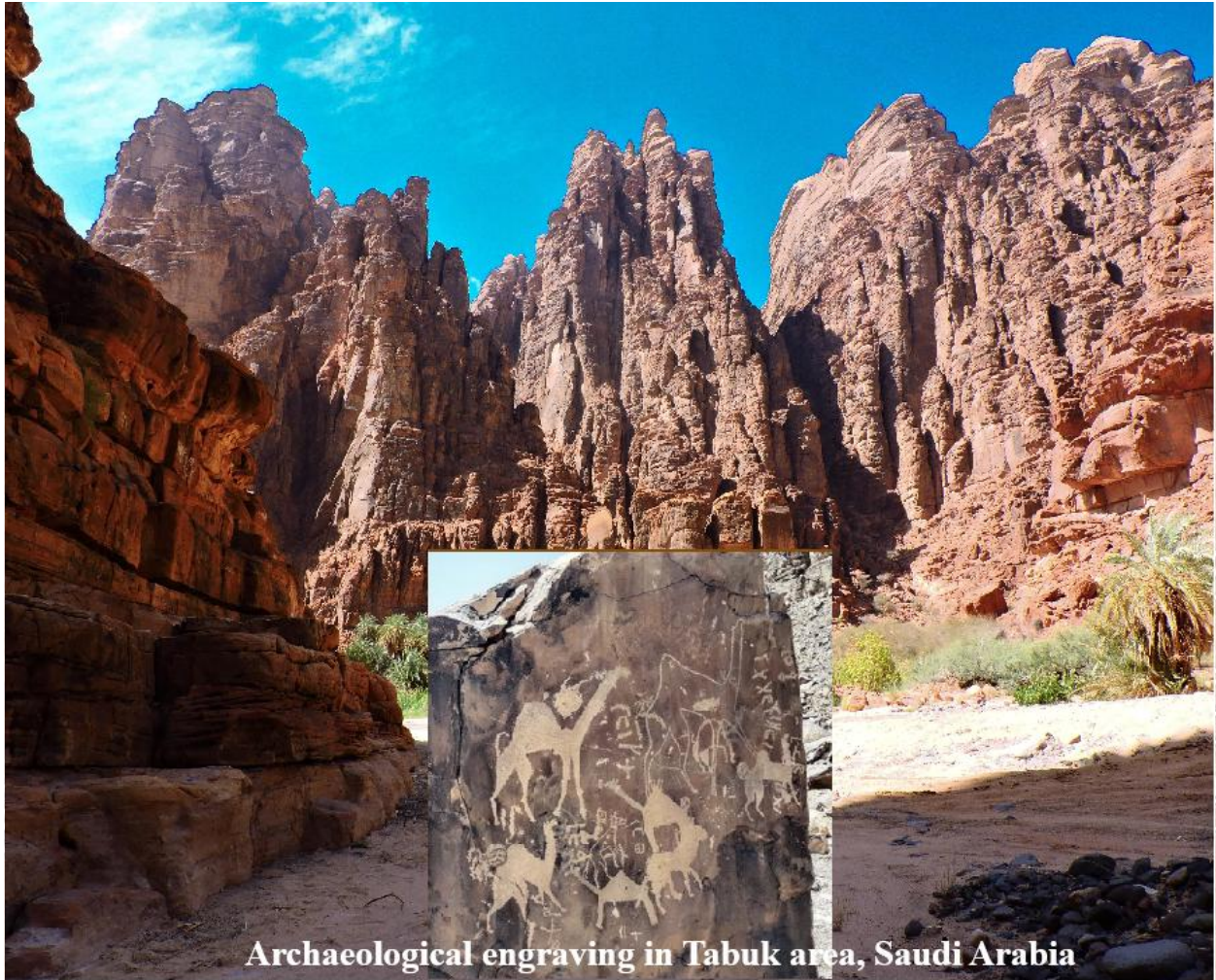
**Petroglyphs of musical instruments in Mount of Ekmh in Hejaz region, Saudi Arabia .**





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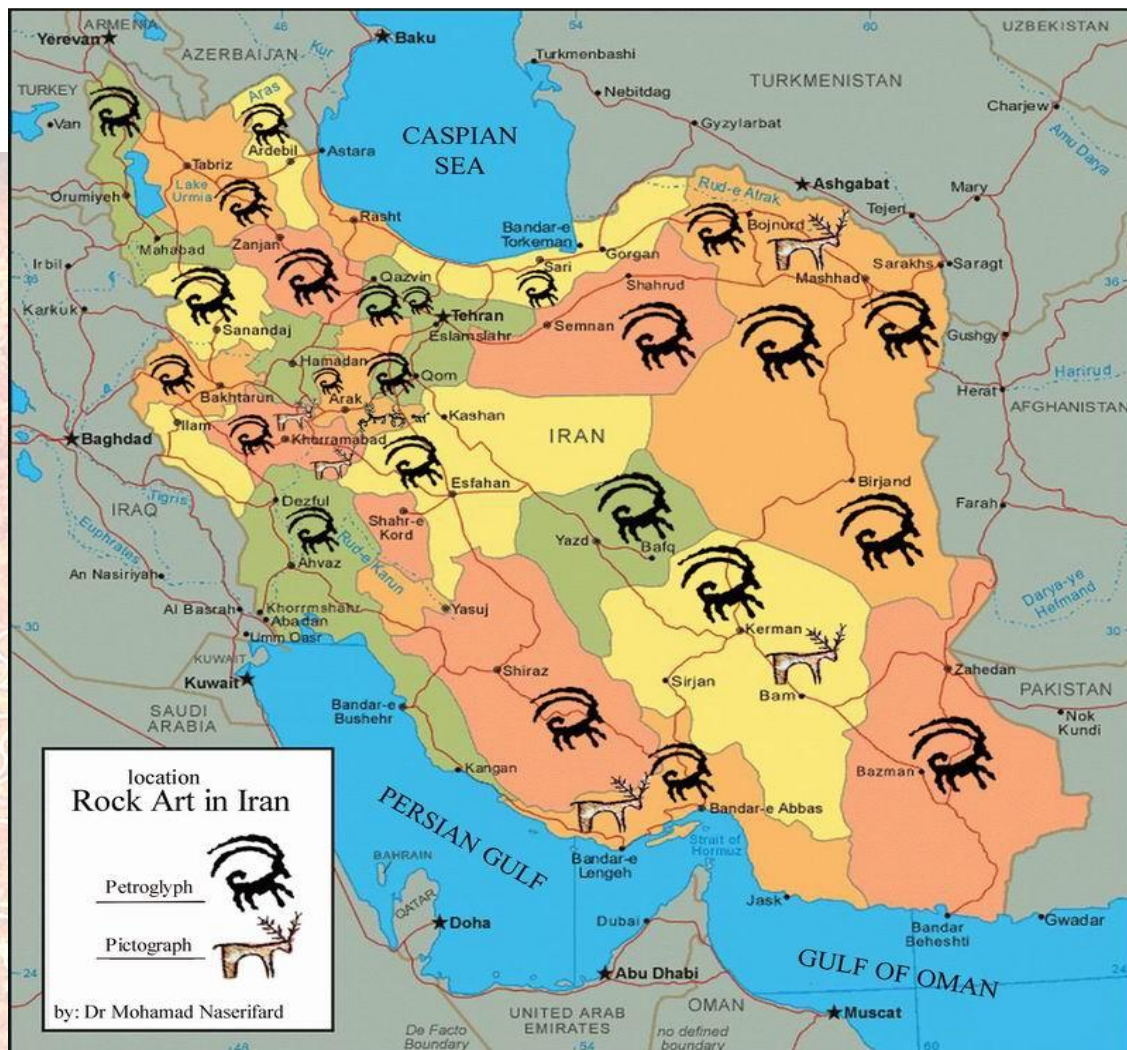
Archaeological engraving in Tabuk area, Saudi Arabia





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## Methods of Petroglyphs

**Pecking:** A common technique involved using a hammerstone (a fist-sized rock) to repeatedly strike the rock surface.

**Indirect Percussion:** Another method involved using a second rock as a chisel between the hammerstone and the rock surface.

**Incision:** Fine lines could be created by scratching or etching the rock surface with a sharp piece of stone or other material.

**Abrasion:** Rubbing a stone against the rock surface could create broader images.

Importance of Context:





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**Orientation:** The way the petroglyphs are oriented to the landscape, other images, and the horizon can be significant.

**Relationship to the Landscape:** The surrounding environment and access points to the petroglyph site can also be crucial to understanding their meaning.

**Preservation:** Petroglyphs are fragile and need to be protected from damage, including touching or defacing the image.

### **Petroglyphs of India**

Petroglyphs, or rock carvings, are found in both India and Pakistan, particularly in the northern regions along the ancient Silk Road. These carvings, dating back thousands of years, offer insights into the region's history, culture, and religious practices.

**Konkan Region (Maharashtra):** Thousands of petroglyphs have been discovered in the Konkan region, some dating back 10,000 to 12,000 years, potentially created by a previously unknown civilization. The Konkan petroglyphs offer insights into the social, economic, and spiritual life of a hunter-gatherer society, possibly from the Upper Palaeolithic to the Magdalenian/Epipalaeolithic era. The Konkan petroglyphs depict animals like rhinoceroses and hippos, which are not native to the area, suggesting they were created by a civilization that had contact with other regions.

**Ladakh:** The Ladakh region also boasts numerous petroglyphs, with some dating back 500 to 5000 years.

**Northern Pakistan (Gilgit-Baltistan):** The Karakoram Highway in Gilgit-Baltistan is home to the Shatial petroglyphs, showcasing diverse symbols, languages, and writing systems spanning from the Stone Age to the birth of Islam.

**Chilas:** The Thalpan petroglyphs near Chilas, dating back to 600 BC, include carvings of animals, hunting scenes, Buddhist shrines, and inscriptions in various languages.

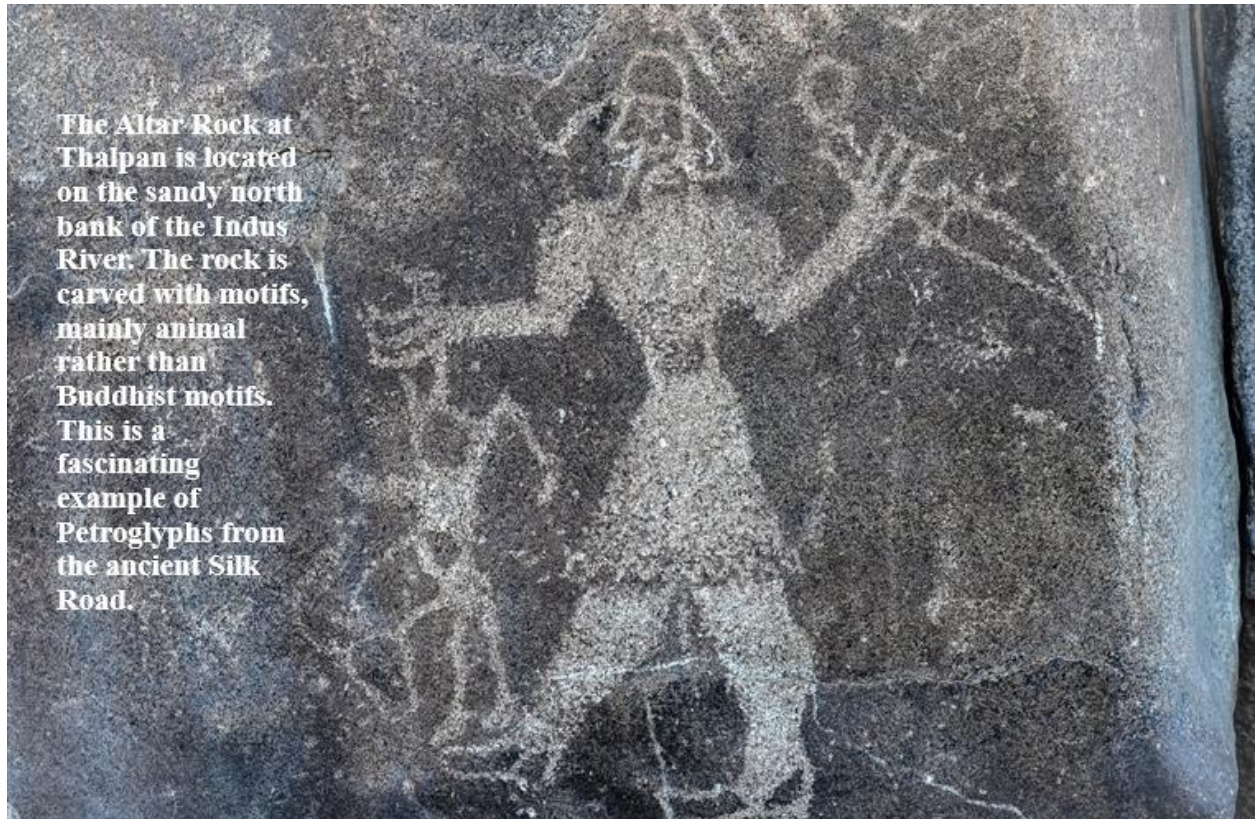
The petroglyphs in Pakistan provide valuable information about trade routes, religious beliefs, and cultural exchanges along the Silk Road, particularly the Buddhist heritage of the region. Some petroglyph sites in Pakistan face threats from dam construction and other developmental projects, as well as looting and vandalism. Many of the petroglyphs in both India and Pakistan are found along the ancient Silk Road, indicating the region's importance as a crossroads of cultures and trade. The petroglyphs exhibit diverse artistic styles and symbols, reflecting the cultural richness and historical depth of the region. Archaeological research continues to uncover new petroglyph sites and shed light on the civilizations that created them





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The Altar Rock at Thalpan is located on the sandy north bank of the Indus River. The rock is carved with motifs, mainly animal rather than Buddhist motifs. This is a fascinating example of Petroglyphs from the ancient Silk Road.





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Rocks below Ensa Gompa along the right bank of the Nubra river depicting human figures.





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The Alter Rocks are the masterpieces of the Indus River Petroglyphs.



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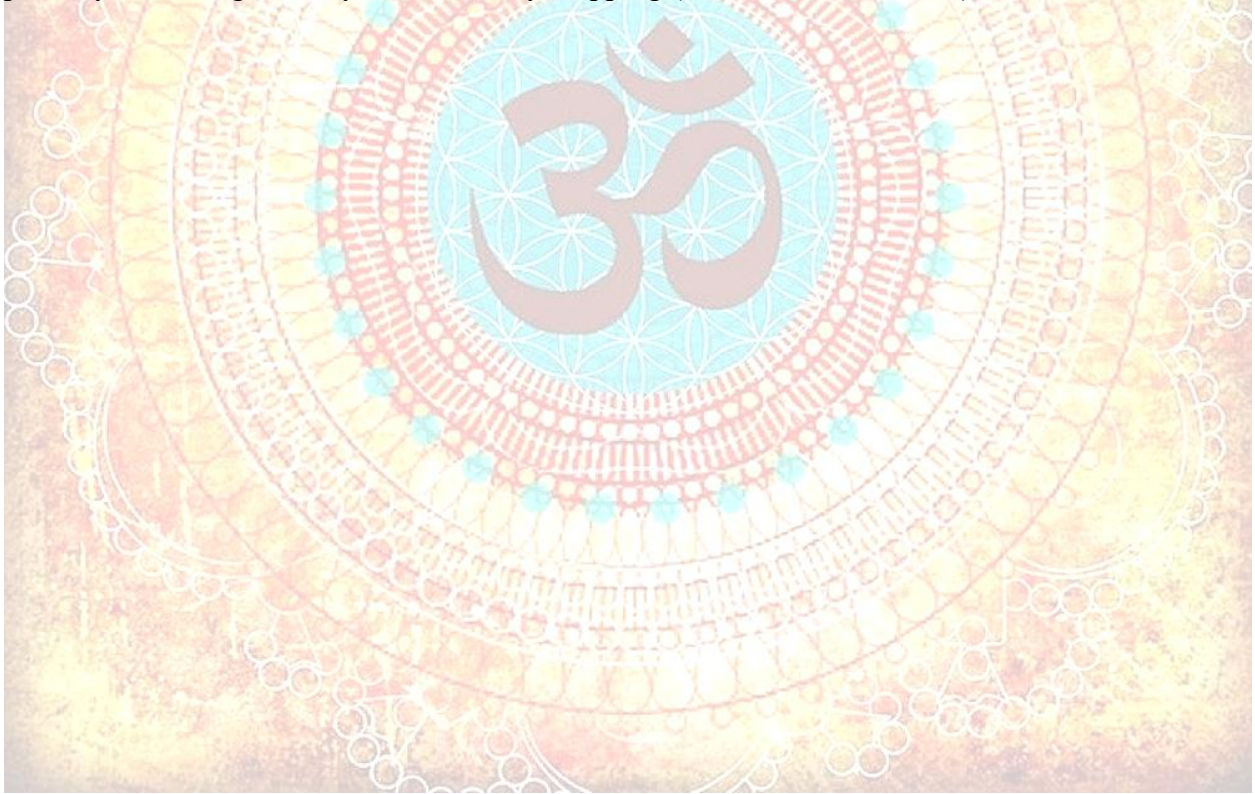
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### Discovery and Description

The Konkan petroglyphs were first noticed by villagers in Ratnagiri, who observed unusual shapes on rocky plateaus near their farms, some believing them to be sacred footprints of gods (Risbud, 2019). Local curiosity, sparked by individuals like Sudhir Risbud, led to the identification of extensive carvings depicting giant elephants, tigers, sharks, rhinos, and stingrays, etched into open rock surfaces known as *saddas*—flat hilltops often kilometers from villages (Risbud, 2019). As of recent documentation, over 1,500 petroglyphs have been recorded across 70 locations from Ratnagiri to parts of Goa (Garge et al., 2021). The largest, an 18-meter-long elephant at Kasal, contains dozens of smaller animals—stingrays, monkeys, tigers, and birds—carved within its outline, resembling a prehistoric encyclopedia (Garge et al., 2021).

These carvings, created without metal tools or machines, reflect a deep knowledge of the environment, depicting land animals (tigers, elephants, rhinos), marine life (stingrays, turtles, sharks), and birds (peacocks, eagles), all wild with no signs of domestication or farming (Garge et al., 2021). Abstract designs—spirals, circles, and maze-like forms—accompany these figures, possibly indicating ritual symbols or early mapping (Blinkhorn et al., 2020).

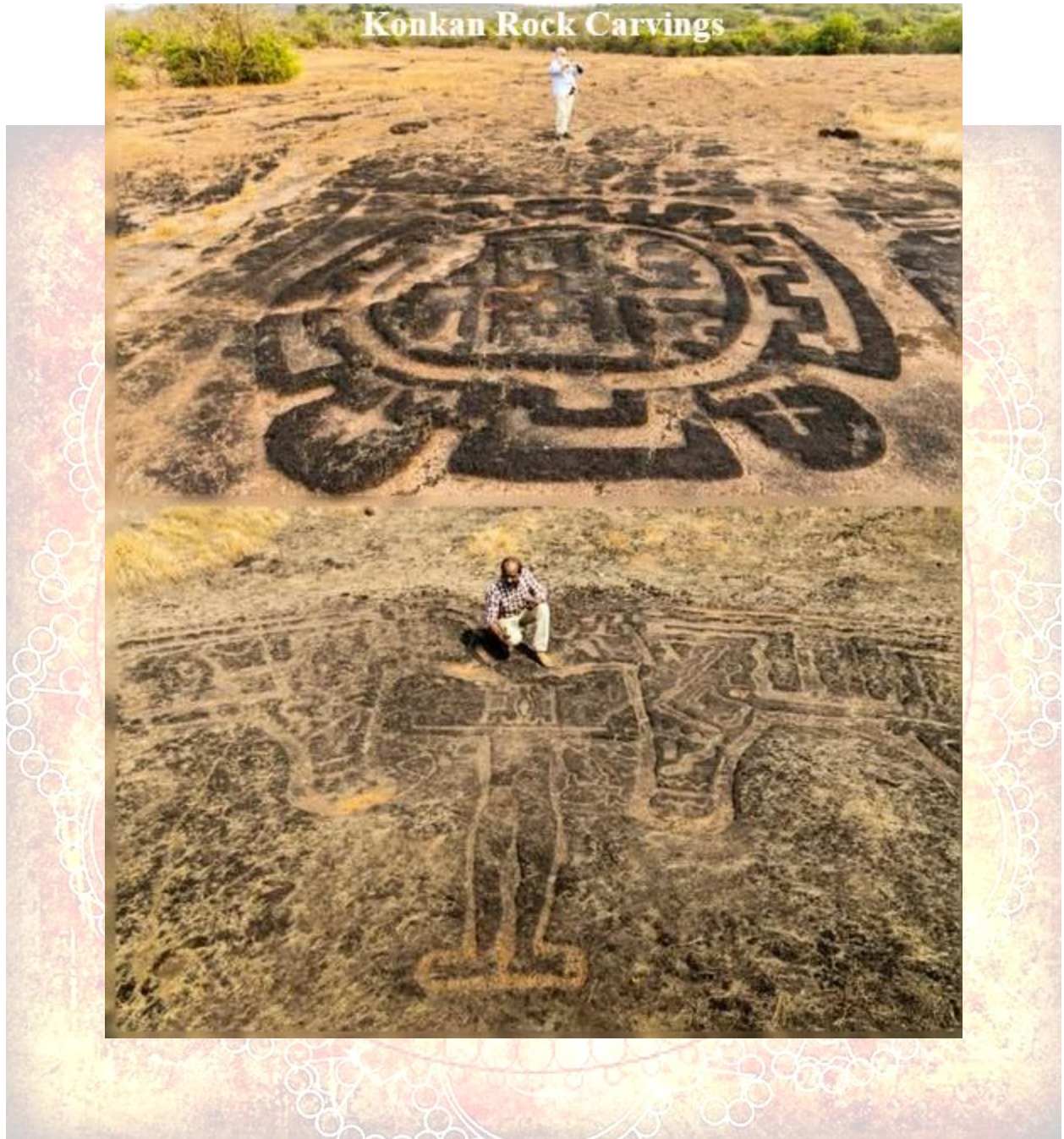




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### Geoglyphs of Konkan Region of India

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#### Description

S. No.	State, Province or Region:	Names of the component parts:	Latitude and Longitude, or UTM coordinates:
1.	Maharashtra	Kasheli	16° 46' 0.3" N; 73° 18' 31.60"E
2.	Maharashtra	RundhyeTali	16°44' 16.9" N; 73°30'58.2768"E
3.	Maharashtra	DevacheGothane	17° 5' 53.80" N; 73° 22' 36.12" E
4.	Maharashtra	Barsu	16°38'58.54" N; 73°28'28.44"E





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5.	Maharashtra	Devi Hasol	16°44'16.9" N; 73°30'58.2768"E
6.	Maharashtra	Jambharun	17° 5' 53.80" N; 73° 22' 36.12" E
7.	Maharashtra	Kudopi	16°15'26.8"N 73°31'00.4"E
8.	Maharashtra	Ukshi	17° 7' 56.31" N 73 °26 ' 1.28" E
9.	Goa	Pansaymol	15°07'15.1"N 74°07'59.1"E

Rock art in India is one of oldest material evidence of the country's early human creativity. These are generally in the form of rock paintings, rock etchings, cup marks and ring marks found all over India. However, the large concentration of geoglyphs on the laterite plateaus (Sada) of the Konkan region (southwestern Maharashtra to Southern Karnataka) is the most remarkable open-air ensemble of prehistoric human expression of rock art in the Konkan region (south western Maharashtra to Southern Karnataka) from Mesolithic (10Kya) to Early Historic (1.7Kya.).

### Dating the Petroglyphs

Establishing the age of the Konkan petroglyphs relies on contextual evidence, as direct dating of rock carvings is challenging. Several lines of evidence suggest they are at least 10,000 years old, placing them in the Mesolithic era (10,000–20,000 years ago):

1. **Absence of Agricultural Motifs:** The carvings depict only wild animals, with no signs of farming tools, grains, or domesticated cattle, indicating a hunter-gatherer society predating settled agriculture (Blinkhorn et al., 2020).
2. **Microlithic Tools:** At sites like Kashi and Runal, archaeologists found microliths—tiny, razor-sharp stone tools used for hunting and skinning. These tools, carbon-dated at other Indian Mesolithic sites, align with a timeline of 10,000–20,000 years ago (Garge et al., 2021).
3. **Environmental Context:** The presence of animals like stingrays and rhinos, no longer found in Konkan, suggests a vastly different ecosystem, possibly resembling African wetlands with rivers and swamps (Blinkhorn et al., 2020). This aligns with paleoenvironmental studies indicating such conditions in the region during the late Pleistocene.
4. **Carving Techniques and Erosion:** The petroglyphs were created using blunt-force hammering into hard laterite rock, without metal tools. Erosion patterns suggest exposure to sun and rain for millennia, supporting their antiquity (Garge et al., 2021).

These clues collectively position the Konkan petroglyphs as older than Mesopotamian, Sumerian, and Egyptian civilizations, potentially predating even the Indus Valley Civilization.

### Global Comparisons

The Konkan petroglyphs are not isolated but part of a global tradition of prehistoric rock art. A striking parallel exists with Gobekli Tepe in Turkey, dated to approximately 11,600 years ago





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(Schmidt, 2010). Like Konkan, Gobekli Tepe features carvings of wild animals (birds, lions, scorpions) and abstract symbols on open stone platforms, created by hunter-gatherers without evidence of farming or villages (Schmidt, 2010). Both sites share non-random patterns, with motifs like spread-winged birds and maze-like designs, suggesting a shared "prehistoric language" of nature and ritual (Blinkhorn et al., 2020).

Similar patterns appear globally. In Nazca, Peru, over 2,000 years ago, people created massive geoglyphs of spiders, monkeys, and birds, visible only from the sky (Aveni, 1990). Petroglyphs in Australia, Africa, Scandinavia, and North America also depict animals, humans, and spirals on rocks and hills, reflecting a universal human impulse to carve enduring messages into stone (Flood, 1997). The Konkan petroglyphs, with their giant elephants and life-sized stingrays, fit this tradition, possibly created for rituals, to mark sacred land, or to communicate with the cosmos.

### **Significance and Challenges**

The Konkan petroglyphs challenge Eurocentric narratives of civilization's origins, suggesting that sophisticated cultural expressions existed in South Asia over 10,000 years ago. They highlight the ingenuity of hunter-gatherer societies, whose detailed carvings reflect intimate environmental knowledge. However, these sites face significant threats. For decades, they remained unprotected, exposed to weathering and unnoticed by researchers (Risbud, 2019). Modern development, including urbanization and infrastructure projects, risks further damage (Garge et al., 2021). Preservation efforts, led by local communities and supported by archaeological surveys, are critical to safeguarding this heritage.

### **Conclusion**

The Konkan petroglyphs are a testament to India's deep prehistoric past, revealing a hunter-gatherer society that left an indelible mark on stone. Dated to at least 10,000 years ago through contextual evidence, these carvings predate many of the world's earliest civilizations. Their parallels with global sites like Gobekli Tepe and Nazca underscore a universal human drive to create lasting messages. As we uncover more about these petroglyphs, we must listen to the voices of those who, without written language, spoke through stone—and protect their legacy before it is lost to time.





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