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Rock Art and Prehistoric Cultural Expressions at Karoor, Uttara Kannada

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Abstract

The newly documented petroglyph site at Karoor, situated within the Koppa Grama Panchayat of Bhatkal Taluk, Uttara Kannada District, Karnataka, represents a significant addition to the prehistoric cultural landscape of coastal Karnataka. Carved into a lateritic bedrock panel measuring roughly 12 metres in length and oriented north-south, the engravings display a sophisticated arrangement of zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figures. Prominent among these are deer, bulls, and antelopes, often depicted in motion and surrounded by cupules, alongside a central female figure suggestive of fertility symbolism. Executed through pecking and abrasion techniques, the compositions evoke deliberate spatial planning and symbolic coherence-possibly representing ritual activity, ecological awareness, or mythic narrative. The presence of microlithic tools composed of quartz and chert, recovered in association with the site, points to a Late Stone Age (Mesolithic) cultural phase. Beyond artistic expression, these engravings reflect the cognitive and social evolution of early communities inhabiting the Western Ghats. The imagery appears to encode themes of fertility, protection, and cosmic balance, aligning with broader prehistoric traditions across peninsular India. The Karoor petroglyphs thus bridge art, ecology, and spirituality, underscoring the inseparable relationship between human adaptation and symbolic expression. This discovery not only enriches the corpus of rock art in southern India but also highlights the urgent need for conservation efforts, as such open-air sites remain vulnerable to natural and anthropogenic threats.

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Introduction

To reconstruct the lifeways of prehistoric communities, we must turn to the enduring imprints left on the landscape-archaeological remains such as rock engravings and petroglyphs that bear witness to the symbolic and cultural worlds of early humans. These visual expressions, often incised into the surfaces of caves, rock shelters, or open lateritic beds, frequently include linear and curvilinear representations of fauna such as deer, bulls, antelopes, and tigers, alongside anthropomorphic figures. Together with material artefacts like microlithic tools, these engravings serve as crucial markers for interpreting the cognitive, ritualistic, and socio-economic dimensions of prehistoric life. In this context, the forested expanse of Karoor, located within the Koppa Grama Panchayat of Bhatkal Taluk in Uttara Kannada District, Karnataka, emerges as a significant and hitherto undocumented site of prehistoric petroglyph activity. Nestled within a densely wooded tract of the Western Ghats, the site lies at geographic coordinates Latitude: 14.075359°

N, Longitude: 74.558984° E. It comprises an expansive lateritic panel, now partially cleared and documented during multiple visits, the most recent being on 01 December 2024. The petroglyph panel is oblong in shape and oriented roughly along a north-south axis, measuring approximately 12 metres in length. The width varies from 2.5 metres at the southern end to about 8 metres at the northern edge, with the maximum width near the center being 7 metres. The panel is carved into a natural bedrock slope, marked by patination, weathering, and seasonal vegetal overgrowth.

The engravings-created through pecking and abrasion techniques-consist of a rich assemblage of zoomorphic figures, predominantly large-bodied animals such as cattle and antelopes, arranged in close spatial relationship with a central anthropomorphic figure, interpreted as female. The female figure, stylized with pronounced hips and lacking in facial detailing, may represent a mother goddess or fertility symbol, echoing widespread prehistoric motifs associated with fecundity, nurturance, or divine embodiment. The

composition suggests a sophisticated symbolic schema, wherein the presence of both male (cattle-associated) and female (goddess-associated) imagery invokes a duality-fertility and protection, perhaps even cosmic equilibrium. The deliberate positioning of these figures, and their relative scales, imply more than decorative intent—they may encode narratives or ritual actions central to the belief systems of the site's prehistoric inhabitants.

Accompanying the engravings are scattered microlithic tools, recovered during surface surveys in the vicinity of the panel. These artefacts, largely composed of quartz and chert, support a tentative dating of the site to the Late Stone Age (Microlithic Period). Their presence further strengthens the hypothesis that this landscape functioned not merely as an artistic canvas but as a living, sacred, and perhaps ceremonial space where everyday subsistence and spiritual concerns intersected.

The site at Karoor thus contributes vital evidence to the growing corpus of rock art and lithic traditions in coastal Karnataka, bridging artistic, symbolic, and functional aspects of prehistoric life. As such, it invites deeper study—not only for the iconographic richness of its petroglyphs but for the broader archaeological insights it offers into the human occupation and ritual landscape of the Western Ghats.

1. Period

The stone tools found at this site are narrow-sized stone tools, a characteristic of the culture of this period. Since they are present, it can be said that they were made during the Upper Paleolithic or Mesolithic period.

2. Tribal System

In the Northern Paleolithic or Middle Stone Age (Neolithic), when the steps of human life were seen, the Neolithic culture began by adapting to the environment. Tribal communities found in the forest area and the plains are the culture that settled in various parts of Karnataka. Many tribes had a tradition of leading a nomadic life. They used to raise animals and also started agriculture. Along with hunting, they used a food gathering system. For example, they used fruits and berries found in the forest hills. In this context, it can also be said that it is a group of tribes.

3. Protection

It is special that during this period, people had several strategies for their protection. Groups of people migrating from place to place used to make their accommodation according to the basic facilities available in that area. That was their protection measure. Thus, they learned to survive by using the natural resources of the forest. Weapons were used to protect themselves from animals.

4. Symbols

Local symbols represent the relationship between human culture and the environment. The rainfall, rivers, streams, lakes, geophysical features of the region, mineral deposits, soil, and the presence of native plant species have all laid the foundation for the resources required for the Okkalu culture. The figures of man and ox indicate the relationship with other animals.

5. Preservation of these

The history of the world begins with the remains of ancient settlements of man. The central and state governments should be convinced to save these sites of life that have been there in

the real time of man. Because today's governments only do profit-making programs. They do not pay attention to such places. It is very important to preserve the settlements where man first settled and the history of his life.

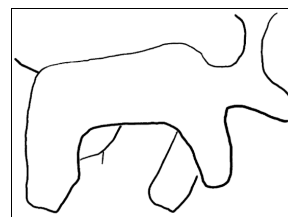


Figure 1 depicts a bull figure located in the southern sector of the site. The figure stands approximately 0.60 metres in height and extends 1.00 metre in width, with a total panel circumference of about 1.5 metres. The bull appears to be in motion, heading northward, and is surrounded by cupules.

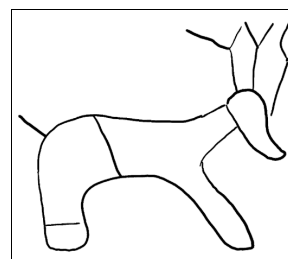


Figure 2 features a deer, also positioned in the southern zone of the site. The engraving measures approximately 0.60 metres in height and 1.10 metres in width. The antlers, rendered with evident clarity, span around 0.40 metres. The deer is oriented towards the north and, like other figures, is encircled by cupules.

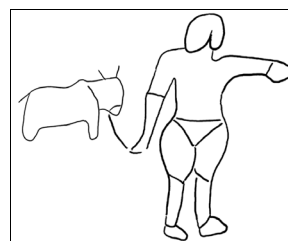


Figure 3 is particularly significant due to the narrative it suggests—a human figure appears to be leading a bull. The animal resembles a zebu-type bull, with measurements of 0.40 metres in height and 0.80 metres in width. Its horns measure around 0.15 metres. Both figures are oriented northward. Beneath them, a cluster of cupules has been carved. The human figure displays notable anatomical proportions: the raised right hand is grasping the bull's rein, while the left arm extends forward as if indicating the path or referencing figures ahead. The arm span measures 0.80 metres. The total height from shoulder to foot is about 0.90 metres, with a torso height of 0.45 metres, hip width of 0.30 metres, and legs measuring 0.25 metres. Overall, the human figure measures approximately 1.65 metres in height and 1.35 metres in width.

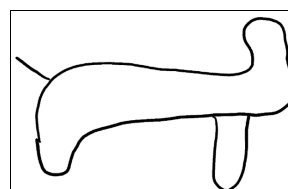


Figure 4 shows a partial animal figure that is difficult to identify conclusively, although the surviving portions suggest a deer. Located in the southern part of the site, it stands 0.75 metres tall and 0.95 metres wide, with a neck extending 0.30 metres. It faces north and is surrounded by cupules.

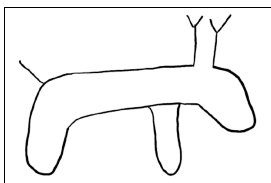


Figure 5 presents a stylised deer with budding antlers measuring 0.45 metres. The figure is shown in motion towards the north. It measures approximately 0.95 metres in height and 1.25 metres in width. As with other depictions, cupules are engraved around the figure.

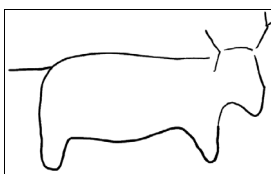


Figure 6 features a deer bearing a single, budding antler approximately 0.20 metres long. This figure, like others, advances northward. It measures 0.55 metres in height and 0.95 metres in width, with a midsection measuring around 0.34 metres. Cupules encircle the image.

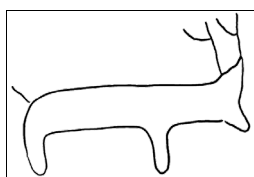


Figure 7 shows another deer, this time with two small budding antlers of about 0.50 metres in height. The figure faces north and spans 0.90 metres in height and 1.20 metres in width. The central body section measures 0.50 metres, and the figure is again surrounded by cupules.

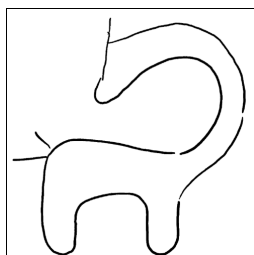


Figure 8 is a unique representation of a deer with an unusually elongated neck, dramatically turned backward as if glancing over its shoulder—a pose that adds expressive character. The figure measures approximately 0.95 metres in height and 0.75 metres in width, with a midsection of about 0.55 metres. Its orientation is northward, and it is surrounded by cupules.

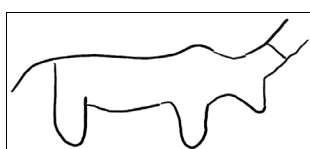


Figure 9 depicts a bull, identified by its two distinct horns measuring around 0.25 metres. The figure has its head lowered and moves northward. It measures 0.35 metres in height and 0.60 metres in width, with a midsection of 0.50 metres. Cupules are engraved around its form.

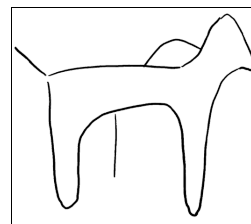


Figure 10 shows a northward-facing bull with two horns and a distinct hump, although the horns are not clearly preserved. This is the final image on the southern end of the site. The figure measures 0.70 metres in height and 0.90 metres in width, and is surrounded by cupules.

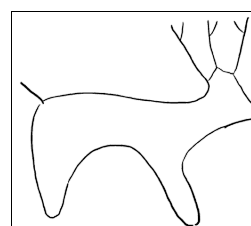


Figure 11 portrays a large deer figure that appears to occupy a central position within the site layout. This is evidenced by its placement slightly ahead of the animal and human figures progressing from both the southern and northern directions, suggesting a focal or dominant role. Notably, below this figure are smaller representations of fawns, indicating that the main figure may symbolise a matriarchal or protective presence. This deer is significantly larger than the surrounding figures, with a height of approximately 0.90 metres and a width of about 1.20 metres; the midsection measures roughly 0.55 metres. A unique feature of this figure is its three budding antlers, which exhibit varied heights—measuring approximately 0.50 metres, 0.40 metres, and 0.30 metres—adding to its distinctiveness. The figure is oriented northward, and cupules are engraved around its form, possibly denoting symbolic emphasis or ritual significance.

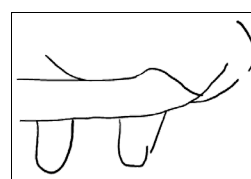


Figure 12 displays a smaller deer figure, measuring approximately 0.35 metres in height and 0.50 metres in width. The antlers are about 0.20 metres in length. This figure also faces northward and, consistent with others at the site, is encircled by a pattern of cupules.



Figure 13 depicts a stylised deer figure, measuring approximately 0.35 metres in height and 0.70 metres in width. The antlers of the animal, etched with notable clarity, extend up to 0.30 metres. The figure appears to be in motion, advancing northward. Surrounding the animal are engraved curvilinear border patterns, possibly demarcating sacred or symbolic space.

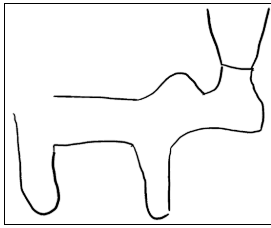


Figure 14 features a bull, rendered in almost symmetrical proportions with a height and width of 0.60 metres each. The horns span about 0.25 metres, and the figure includes a distinct hump, typical of the Indian zebu type. It too is oriented northward, accompanied by curvilinear motifs framing its silhouette.

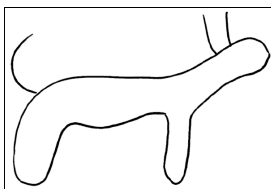


Figure 15 returns to the deer motif, here in a larger form, with an estimated height of 0.65 metres and width of 0.95 metres. The antlers measure approximately 0.25 metres in length. Like its counterparts, the animal is shown in motion towards the north, again surrounded by cupules.

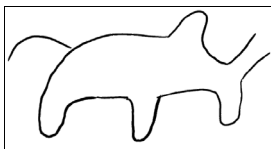
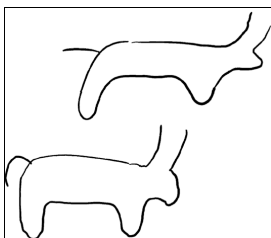
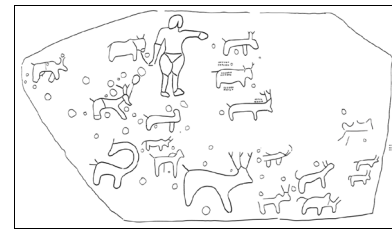


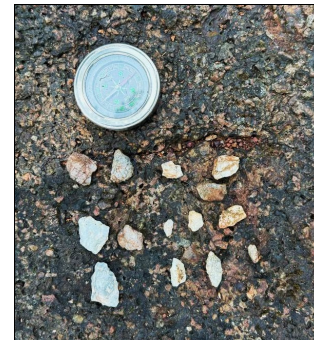
Figure 16 presents another bull figure, slightly more compact in height (0.40 metres) but with an impressive width of 0.85 metres. The horns extend 0.20 metres, and the presence of a hump is once again clearly depicted. The north-facing orientation and the surrounding curvilinear engravings maintain the consistent symbolic language of the panel.



Finally, Figure 17 shows yet another deer, this time more modest in scale with dimensions of 0.50 metres in height and 0.55 metres in width, and antlers measuring 0.20 metres. The same directional orientation and bordering curved engravings continue in this depiction, reinforcing the hypothesis of a deliberate compositional layout tied to either mythic storytelling, territorial marking, or ritual procession.



Together, these figures suggest not random artistic impulses, but a cohesive visual programme—likely anchored in ritual, ecological knowledge, or cosmological beliefs. The repeated directional motif and symbolic framing hint at a deeply encoded worldview where fauna, fertility, and movement toward a specific cardinal direction held enduring significance for the creators of these petroglyphs.



Conclusion

The Karoor petroglyph complex stands as a vivid testament to the artistic and spiritual consciousness of prehistoric communities inhabiting the Western Ghats. The engravings—marked by recurring motifs of deer, bulls, and a central female figure—reveal a coherent symbolic language that merges ecological awareness with ritual expression. The spatial organization, recurring northward orientation, and association with microlithic artefacts collectively suggest that Karoor functioned not merely as a habitation site but as a ceremonial or sacred landscape.

By extending the archaeological horizon of coastal Karnataka, the site bridges the cultural continuum between upland and littoral Mesolithic traditions. It also reaffirms that prehistoric art was not ornamental but ontological—an articulation of existence, survival, and belief. However, these fragile visual archives face increasing threats from erosion, vegetation, and human neglect. Therefore, systematic documentation, protection under heritage legislation, and community-based awareness are essential to preserve this invaluable record of early human imagination and identity. Karoor, in essence, is not just an archaeological discovery—it is a rediscovery of the human impulse to create meaning in stone.

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