



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Archaeological Research in Asia

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ara

Case report

New engraving finds in Alor Island, Indonesia extend known distribution of engravings in Oceania

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Rock art
Engravings
Cupules
Island Southeast Asia
Indonesia
Oceania
Mainland Southeast Asia

ABSTRACT

Engraving sites are rare in mainland and Island Southeast Asia and few examples have been identified in the Indonesian islands. Here we report three new engraving locales in Alor Island, Indonesia. The engravings are executed on boulders and in shelters and include figurative and geometric motifs, some combining cupules. Motifs incorporating cupules occur widely in Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Near Oceania but have not previously been reported to the west in Indonesia. The Alor engraving sites thus extend the known distribution of cupule-based motifs to the west. These recent finds also indicate that the paucity of engravings found in the islands of eastern Indonesia is likely due to the comparatively few archaeological surveys conducted in this region.

1. Introduction

Engraving sites are rare in mainland and Island Southeast Asia and few examples have been identified in the Indonesian islands (see [Tan, 2014](#) for an overview). [Specht \(1979:63\)](#) drew attention to a west versus east division in the distribution of engraving and pigment in Oceania, with pigment art dominating in mainland Papua New Guinea (PNG) and to the west in Island Southeast Asia, and engravings dominating to the east in Near and Remote Oceania. [Specht \(1979:74\)](#) also thought that engravings were predominantly executed in open coastal locations on igneous boulders or rock walls near water, and “never in caves or shelters”. He also drew attention to the fact that despite the deep prehistory of Near Oceania the engravings showed a high co-occurrence with areas where Austronesian languages were spoken and thus defined the tradition of engraving as “the Austronesian Engraving Style”. While acknowledging differences in the distribution of engraved and painted art, [Wilson and Ballard's \(in press\)](#) recent analysis found more overlap in motif type between engraving and painting traditions in parts of the western Pacific than had previously been recognized. They questioned whether the choice of these artistic techniques might to some extent be “governed by the geological availability of rock surface types, with painted galleries occurring where limestone cliff faces are present, from eastern Indonesia to Fiji while engravings predominate where the principal canvases are boulder fields, volcanic flows and beach platforms, as in much of Polynesia”. Here we report the

significant find of a number of new engravings sites in Alor Island, East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia, which extends the previously known distribution of engraving sites.

Alor is one of a group of islands known as the Lesser Sunda Islands ([Fig. 1](#)). It is east of the Wallace Line and thus has not been connected with continental Sunda, although at times of lowered sea levels, such as during the Last Glacial Maximum (LGM), it was merged with neighbouring Pantar, Pura, Marisa, Rusa, Ternate and Treweng islands, forming a single landmass of approximately 3800 km² ([O'Connor et al., 2017](#)). Alor has a Pleistocene occupation record ([Samper Carro et al., 2017](#); [Samper Carro et al., 2016](#)); thus there is the potential for Pleistocene rock art on this island.

Earlier regional syntheses of painted rock art have included Timor, Alor's neighbouring island to the south, as within the ‘western Pacific’ ([Ballard, 1992:94](#)). [Wilson \(2002:10\)](#), for example, defined the western Pacific as including the area from Timor in the west to Tonga and Samoa in the east. [Wilson and Ballard's \(in press\)](#) recent synthesis of the rock art of Oceania is the geographically broadest yet undertaken, and includes both pigment art and engravings. They define Oceania as encompassing the islands from Island Southeast Asia in the west, to Micronesia and Hawai'i in the north, Australia and Aotearoa (New Zealand) to the south, and Rapa Nui (Easter Island) to the east. In order to allow for the greatest cross-regional comparison, we follow [Wilson and Ballard \(in press\)](#) in considering Alor as geographically part of Oceania. However, we include discussion of engraving sites in southern

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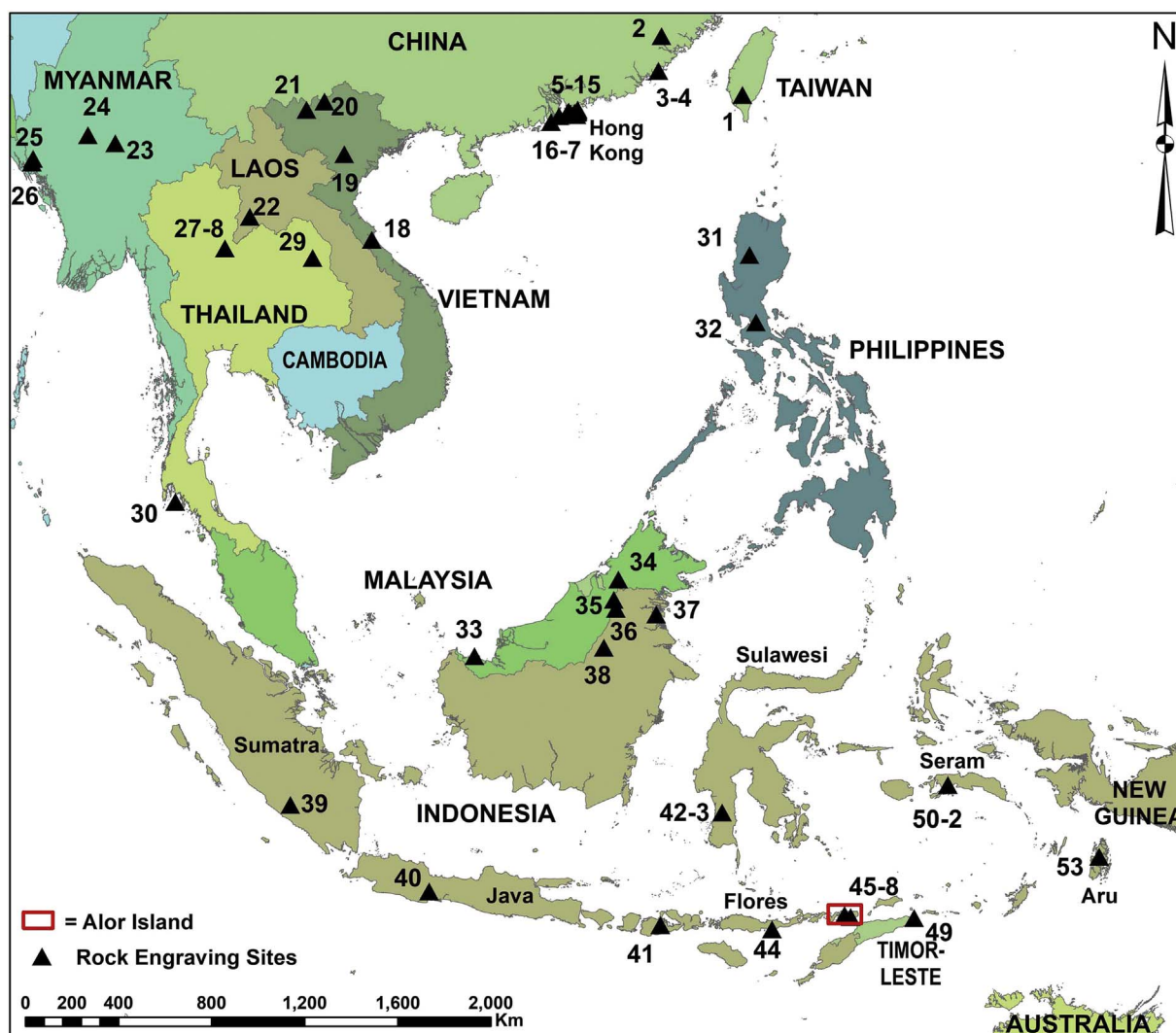


Fig. 1. Map showing the location of Alor Island and other engraving sites discussed in the text. Numbers refer to Table 1.

parts of continental Asia such as southern China, the islands of Taiwan, the Philippines, Hong Kong and Macau, as well as mainland Southeast Asia as this geographic region is potentially highly relevant in terms of cultural and/or stylistic transmissions into the islands of Indonesia. We have limited our discussion to engravings on boulders and shelter/cave walls and have excluded carvings in the round such as statuary, and engravings on megaliths which are humanly placed rocks.

2. Results: the Alor engravings: context, geology and description of the motifs

The engraving sites described here were identified during two separate reconnaissance surveys of Alor in 2014 by the authors (SO, M and SB) near the central southern coast of Alor and in 2016 by the authors (JL and SK) in the central-northern region of Alor Island (Fig. 1).

2.1. Mademang engravings

The 2014 survey was carried out by boat and covered the coastal villages between Kalabahi, the capital of Alor and Mademang on the central south coast. The site known locally as Du Bloing is in a small overhang about 1.5 km from the coastal village of Mademang, and at an altitude of about 120 m above sea level. Although the rock engravings have not been previously published, the site is registered by Badan

Pelestarian Cagar Budaya [BPCB], [Indonesian], (English translation, Organization for Conservation of Cultural Resources/Sites) and contains a sign which states “The greatness of Indonesian national culture is evident from the grandeur of this prehistoric site, so let us conserve it together with sustainability” (English translation).

The Du Bloing shelter is formed in a fine-grained andesite outcrop in the Alor formation. The floor area is approximately 4 m in length \times 2 m depth with some evidence for occupation such as pottery sherds and marine shellfish evident on the floor. The base of the shelter walls is actively eroding in places. The engravings cover most of the surface area of the walls of the overhang beginning about 40 to 50 cm above the shelter floor (Fig. 2) with a horizontal panel of closely spaced cupules¹ that run the length of the wall (Fig. 3). Above this and in some areas overlapping the cupules are two panels of closely spaced vertical lines separated by a deep horizontally engraved line. Figurative engravings include three boats (Fig. 2), one is a simple craft shown in engraved outline that can be seen at the left of the panel on the west side of the wall (Figs. 2, 4:1). It has been accentuated by red pigment infill, however, this may have been done subsequent to the engraving. A

¹ A cupule is defined here as a concavity made by percussion of the rock surface. They are usually circular, often small (2–5 cm in diameter) and occur on horizontal and vertical surfaces. Cupules are sometimes positioned in clusters to form dense panels although here we also use the term ‘cupule’ to describe the small round concavities that form parts of other motifs, such as the circular eyes in face motifs.

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