
Prehistoric Painted Rock Shelter or Chalukyan Workshop? New Discovery of a Rock Art Site near Aihole and Its Examination in Context

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Abstract: *We report the discovery of a hitherto unreported rock art site in the neighbourhood of a recently uncovered single-celled shrine at Benakanawari, near Aihole. The shrine is located deep inside a cleft of the sandstone ranges near Benakanawari, between Pattadakal and Aihole, at the foot of an escarpment. The painted rock shelter, which is roughly at a height of 25m in the cliffs above the temple, is formed by two large slabs of sandstone, collapsed and resting against a natural overhang, and contains a painted image as well as painted inscriptions in ochre and white. The inscriptions are in 8th century Kannada script as well as modern Kannada script, the former being definitely of Early Chalukyan provenance. In this paper, we describe the newly discovered site as well as the context in which it is located, and attempt to understand the possible use(s) it might have been put to.*

Keywords: Aihole, Badami Chalukyas, Rock Art, Pictograph, Megaliths, Early Temples, Painted Inscriptions

Introduction

The sites of Aihole, Badami and Pattadakal, as well as several smaller sites like Naganathana Kolla, Mahakuta, Hale Mahakuta and Siddhanakolla, well-known for early temple architecture in stone, are located in Badami and Hundgund Taluks of the Bagalkot District of Karnataka, in the Valley of the River Malaprabha. The ancient city of Vatapi, capital of the Early Chalukyan dynasty, was located where the modern town of Badami is currently located, to the north of where Malaprabha enters the Valley. The Early Chalukyan dynasty, which controlled a large part of southern India during the sixth to eighth centuries CE from Vatapi, pioneered the construction of monuments in stone – both rock-cut and structural. Aihole, which is situated at the north-eastern exit of the river from the valley, is the centre for location of a large number of temples, from the Early Chalukyan as well as subsequent periods. Apart from the large, prominent temples discussed in most studies of temple architecture in the Malaprabha Valley

(Michell 2014, Gupte 1967), there is a profusion of shrines on smaller scales scattered among the larger monuments (Menon 2015), ranging from votive shrines (Figure 1), tiny single-celled shrines under a metre in each direction (Figure 2) and larger single-celled shrines (Figure 3). One such single-celled shrine of the larger variety (Figure 4) came to light in early 2016 near Benakanawari, off the road leading from Pattadakal to Aihole, when local residents were clearing vegetation from a cleft in the sandstone hills nearby.



Figure 1: A votive shrine at the rock shelter of Huligyemmanna Kolla, Pattadakal



Figure 2: A small shrine, possibly memorial in nature, at the main temple site of Pattadakal



Figure 3: A single-celled shrine at the Ramalingeshwara group of temples, Aihole



Figure 4: The recently uncovered single-celled shrine near Benakanawari

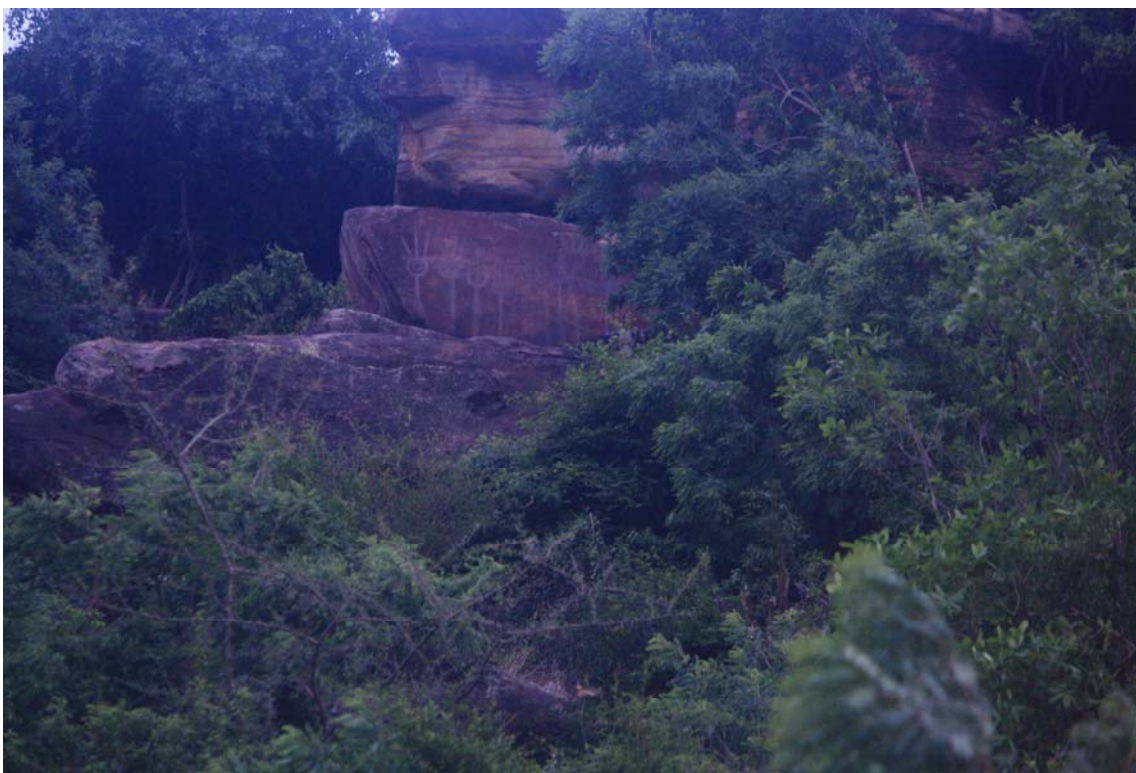


Figure 5: The paintings on the cliff face photographed from the vicinity of the shrine



Figure 6: The shrine in its setting in the valley

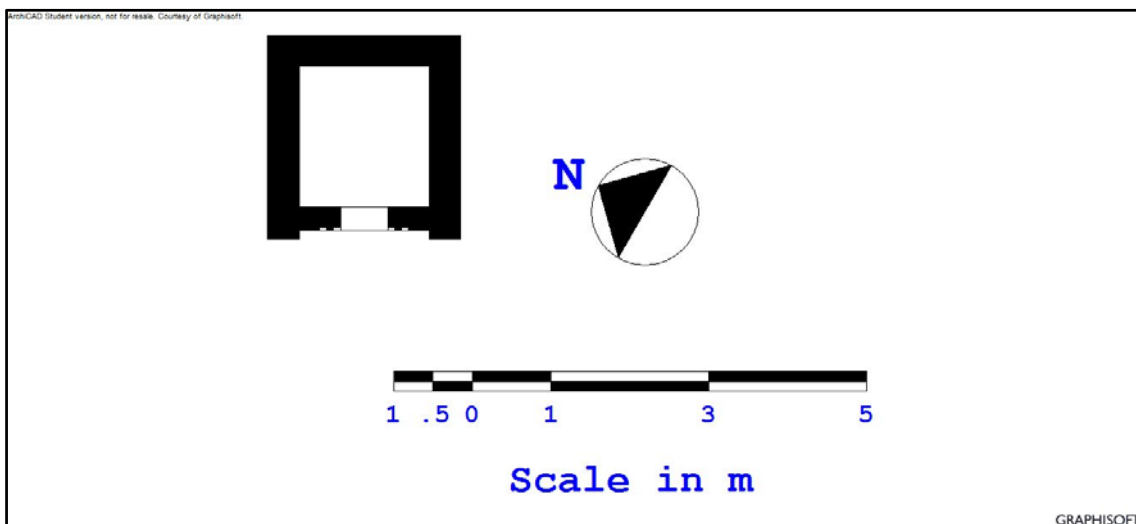


Figure 7: Ground plan of the single-celled shrine near Benakanawari

During a visit to study the newly noticed shrine in June 2016, a few paintings in white, of symbols commonly encountered in megalithic contexts, were noticed on a cliff face on the southern wall of the narrow valley in which the shrine is situated (Figure 5). In January 2018, this rock art site was visited and studied in detail. We present below the details of this hitherto unreported rock art site and the context in which it is located.



Figure 8: The roof of the shrine



Figure 9: Another view of the shrine, with the *pitha* removed from within and kept beside the door frame



Figure 10: The interior of the shrine

The Single-celled Shrine near Benakanawari

The newly uncovered shrine near Benakanawari is situated before the settlement at Benakanawari, some 150m to the east of the road (SH-14) leading from Pattadakal to Aihole. The shrine is located deep within a V-shaped cleft flanked by the walls of the sandstone hills of the Siddhanakolla range (Figure 6), and it is easy to see how it escaped detection with the profusion of undergrowth present. Though it is recently discovered, the villagers have named it Korammanna Gudi (Shrine to Koramma – a local goddess), and, less popularly, Mallikarjuna Gudi. There is no idol extant within the shrine, but the local people offer green glass bangles at the shrine in the local tradition of goddess worship. Since it is likely that this newly uncovered shrine is not reported, we are describing it in detail below.

The shrine encloses a chamber 1.6m x 1.85m in extent (Figure 7), with the height from the floor to ceiling being 1.85m. There is a doorway, 60cm in width and 1.3m high set in one of the shorter walls. The shrine faces WSW (azimuth 240°). The roof is made of stone slabs with rounded edges laid across the shorter span, with recessed grooves near adjacent edges to house the stone “logs” usually employed to render the roof water-tight (Figure 8). Few of the roofing slabs are missing. There is no idol within the shrine, but a *pitha* which must have held an icon, is seen just outside the doorway (Figure 9). There is a “shelf”, 30cm high, running along the base of the wall opposite the doorway (Figure 10), which might be the only surviving one of the slabs which constituted the floor of the shrine. The wall with the doorway is slightly inset from the adjoining walls and jambs have been carved in shallow relief to frame the doorway. A mutilated loose image of Nandi is located outside, facing the shrine (Figure 11).



Figure 11: A mutilated image of Nandi, facing the shrine



Figure 12: A view of the painted rock shelter from the north-east

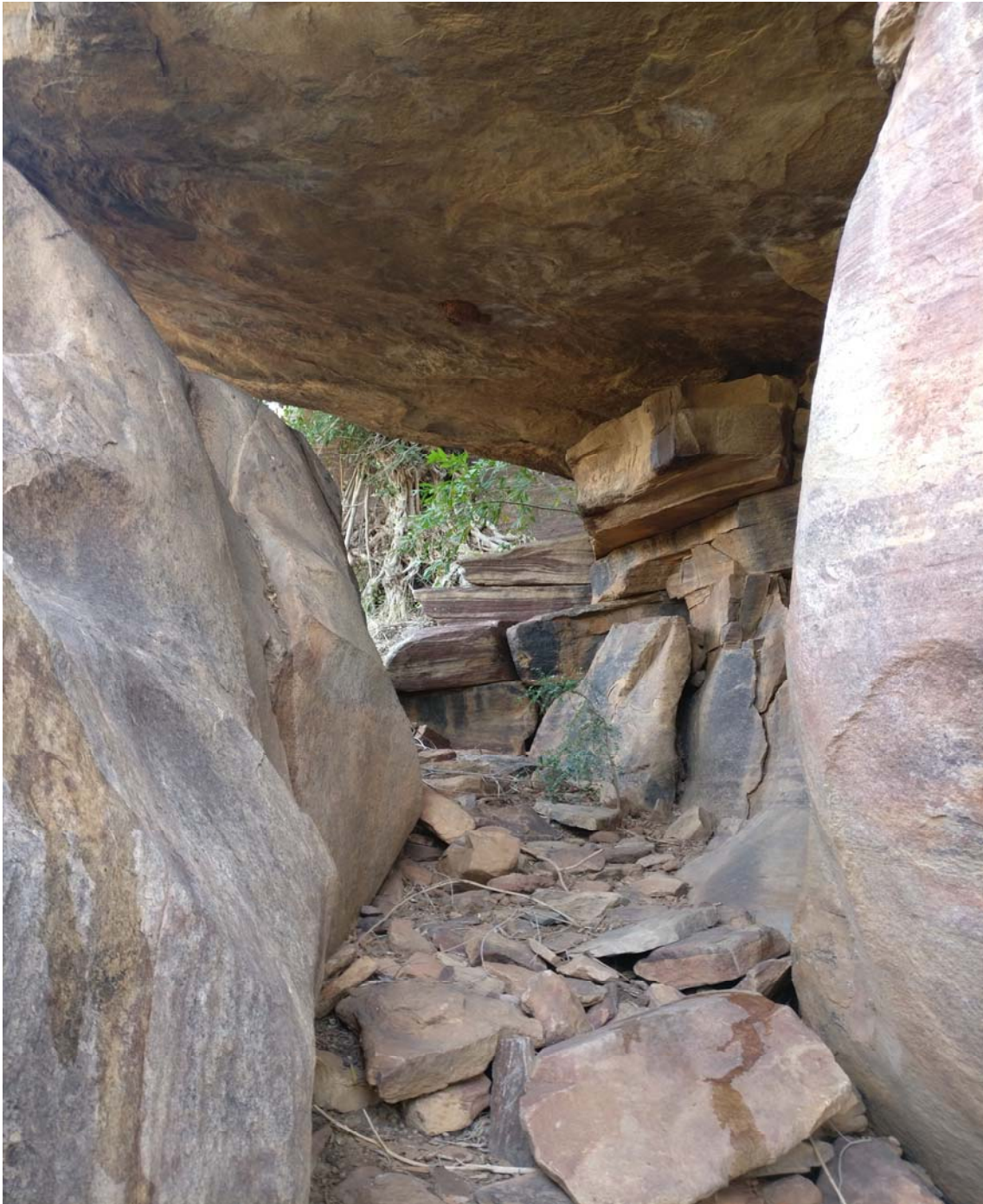


Figure 13: A view of the interior of the rock shelter

The Painted Rock Shelter near the Shrine

The rock art site is situated about 85m SSE of the single-celled shrine, and roughly 25m above it. The cliff face runs approximately NE to SW to the south of the shrine, and a gentler slope of talus fallen from the cliffs leads up till the level of the rock shelter. The rock shelter is created by two large chunks of sandstone which had cleaved off the bluff in the geological past (Figure 12), creating a space approximately 2.25m wide

between the inner chunk and the cliff face (Figure 13), sheltered by an overhang above. The outer chunk is roughly 2.9m high; and the inner chunk of sandstone measures 8.5m in length, and stands 4.5m high from the floor of the shelter. The outer slab leans against the inner slab, and the roof of the overhang is about 6.6m above the lower end of the outer slab.



Figure 14: The rock art panel on the outside of the rock shelter



Figure 15: Faint outline of the figure of a bull executed in red pigment within the rock shelter



Figure 16: Painted inscriptions in red and white pigments on the overhang

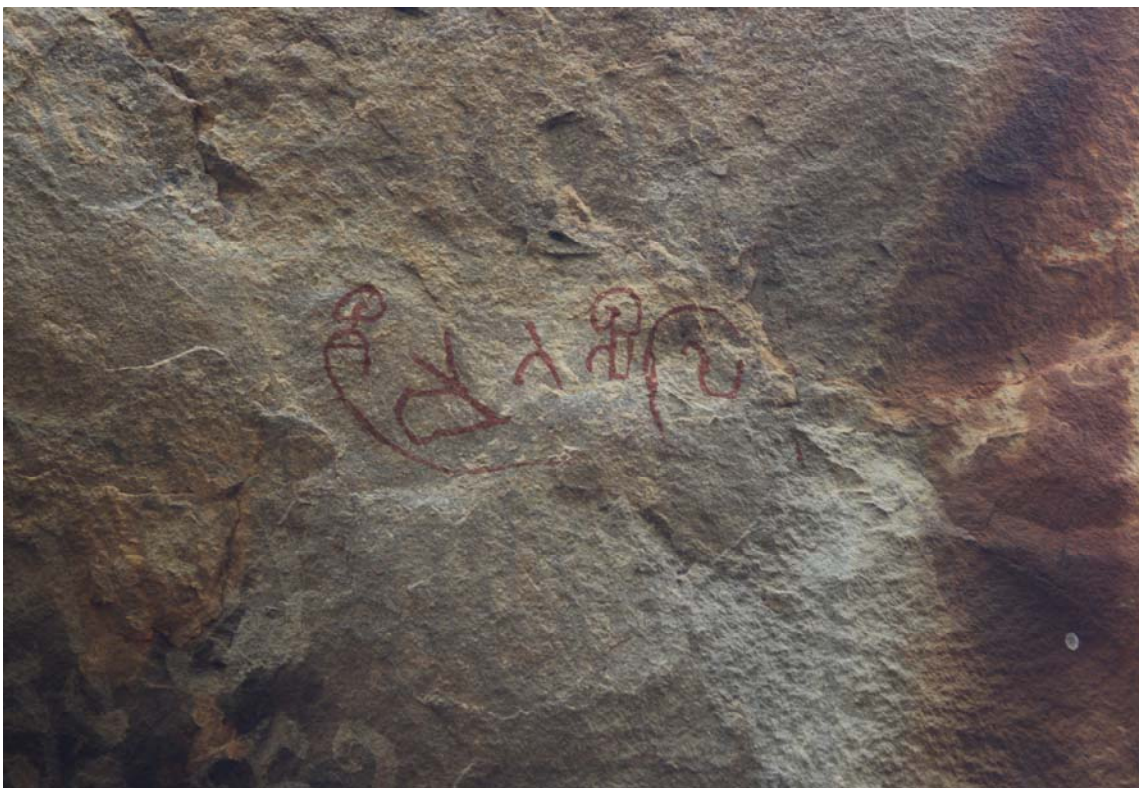


Figure 17: Closer view of the inscription in red



Figure 18: Closer view of the inscriptions in white



Figure 19: A view of the inscriptions in white at the centre of the overhang



Figure 20: Inscriptions in red, as well as white, in the north-east part of the overhang

The panel of rock art noticed initially is painted on the outer surface of the inner slab of sandstone (Figure 14), above the top level of the outer slab, in white pigment. It consists of six symbols commonly encountered at several rock art sites, for instance, at Onake Kindi (Menon 2012), consisting of a circle or two concentric circles on a long vertical stalk, with three spikes projecting up from the top of the circle, with what appears to be two projections like leaves protruding out from either side of the spikes. At least four other similar symbols seem to be partly obliterated.

Apart from this there are five other locations in or near the shelter where paintings are seen. A faint outline of a standing bull in red ochre can be discerned on a bounding wall of the shelter in the SW (Figure 15). The wall on which the painting is located is 2.6m high, and its width tapers towards the floor of the shelter, being widest at the top. The width of the wall where the painting is located is 1.6m.

On the underside of the overhang, towards the SW, at a height of 3.9m above the floor of the shelter, are two painted inscriptions in white as well as red pigment (Figure 16). Both appear to be Early Chalukyan inscriptions, in 8th century Kannada characters. The inscription in red ochre (Figure 17) reads “srImatasIla[n]”, the letter “srI” being written as mirror image. The inscription in white pigment (Figure 18) reads “srI guNa[pa]” (the intended reading may be “srI guNapAlan”, assuming that latter part is eroded). Another inscription in white pigment above this is not clear, though some letters like “ya”, “da”, “va”, “ra” and “ba” can be identified. All these seem to record epithets of certain individuals, probably craftsmen.



Figure 21: An unfinished painting in red pigment on the cliff face near the shelter



Figure 22: A quern on the rock surface near the shelter



Figure 23: A cairn burial at the megalithic site near Benakanawari



Figure 24: A crude dolmen at the megalithic site near Benakanawari



Figure 25: View towards the cluster of temples at Siddhanakolla from the eastern part of the megalithic site



Figure 26: The Lakulisa Temple at Siddhanakolla



Figure 27: The image of Lajja Gauri carved into the floor of a cavern, Siddhanakolla



Figure 28: The cave with rock art at Huliphadi



Figure 29: A view of the rock art at Huliphadi



Figure 30: Depictions of 3-spiked motifs in ochre and white pigments at Onake Kindi, a rock art site close to the megalithic site at Hire Benakal



Figure 31: A motif at Huliphadi, which could be a version of the 3-spiked motif

On the underside of the overhang, roughly in the middle of the length of the shelter, is another painted inscription in white pigment and in multiple lines (Figure 19). The characters of this inscription, though identifiable as belonging to 8th century Kannada script, are not clear, but the last two letters of the last line can be read as “lita”. Towards the NE end of the overhang, on a small vertical panel is another painted inscription, in red pigment (Figure 20).

This inscription, in modern Kannada characters, reads “rAmappata”. On the horizontal overhang above this is seen a fragmentary inscription, painted in white pigment, in 8th century Kannada characters. On the cliff face to the SW of the shelter, a single unfinished vertical line in red pigment is to be seen (Figure 21). A single quern is noticed on the rock surface near the shelter (Figure 22).

The Monumental Landscape near the Painted Rock Shelter

The plateau above the cliff face is a spur that extends east-west from the main sandstone range south of Aihole. This plateau contains several megaliths, as reported by Padigar (2004). The megaliths are distributed all over the plateau of this spur, and most of them are in very dilapidated state. The main megalithic types encountered are the cairn (Figure 23) and rough dolmens (Figure 24). The eastern extent of this megalithic site is just north of the well-known cluster of temples at Siddhanakolla (Figure 25), built around a spring-fed natural water source. Siddhanakolla is a centre of temple architecture from the Early Chalukyan period, though tradition of worship may pre-date even this. A temple to Lakulisa built during the Early Chalukyan period is the

earliest monument at Siddhanakolla (Figure 26), and an image of Lajja Gauri carved in the floor of a rock shelter (Figure 27) is also believed to date to this period (Kadambi 2011). Siddhanakolla is located at an aerial distance of approximately 1.15km, SSW of the newly discovered painted rock shelter.



Figure 32: Signs of quarrying near the temples at Huligyemmanna Kolla



Figure 33: Incised sketches of sculptural themes by artisans at the quarry at Huligyemmanna Kolla



Figure 34: An inscription at Huligyemmanna Kolla, reading "Sri Selebhutu" in early Kannada characters



Figure 35: Depictions of a bull and a conch at an Early Chalukyan quarry near Pattadakal

On the southern cliff face of the same sandstone range described above, and at an aerial distance of approximately 2.5km SSW of the newly discovered painted rock shelter is another painted cave (Figure 28), known as Huliphadi (Mohana 2017). The cliff here is higher, being at least 80m higher than the level of the newly discovered shelter. The ceiling of the cave, which is only about 1.5m high is covered with paintings in red and white pigments (Figure 29).

Discussion

Could this have been a prehistoric painted rock shelter, subsequently occupied by Early Chalukyan artisans? The only clues pointing to the prehistoric rock art are the 3-spiked motifs in white and the faded red painting of the bull. The motif is a very commonly encountered symbol, especially associated with phases of megalithic activity at several sites, such as Onake Kindi (Figure 30), near the well-known megalithic site at Hire Benakal, in North Karnataka. Another seemingly 3-spiked motif, albeit quite different and more crudely depicted (Figure 31), can be seen at the rock art site at Huliphadi nearby. It is difficult to guess the age of these paintings.

In contrast, the characters of the inscription are definitely from the Early Chalukyan period, as attested by the Early Kannada characters they comprise of. So, did Early Chalukyan artisans use the shelter, say, while they built the single-celled shrine at the foot of the scarp? This is definitely possible. Though many of the major Early

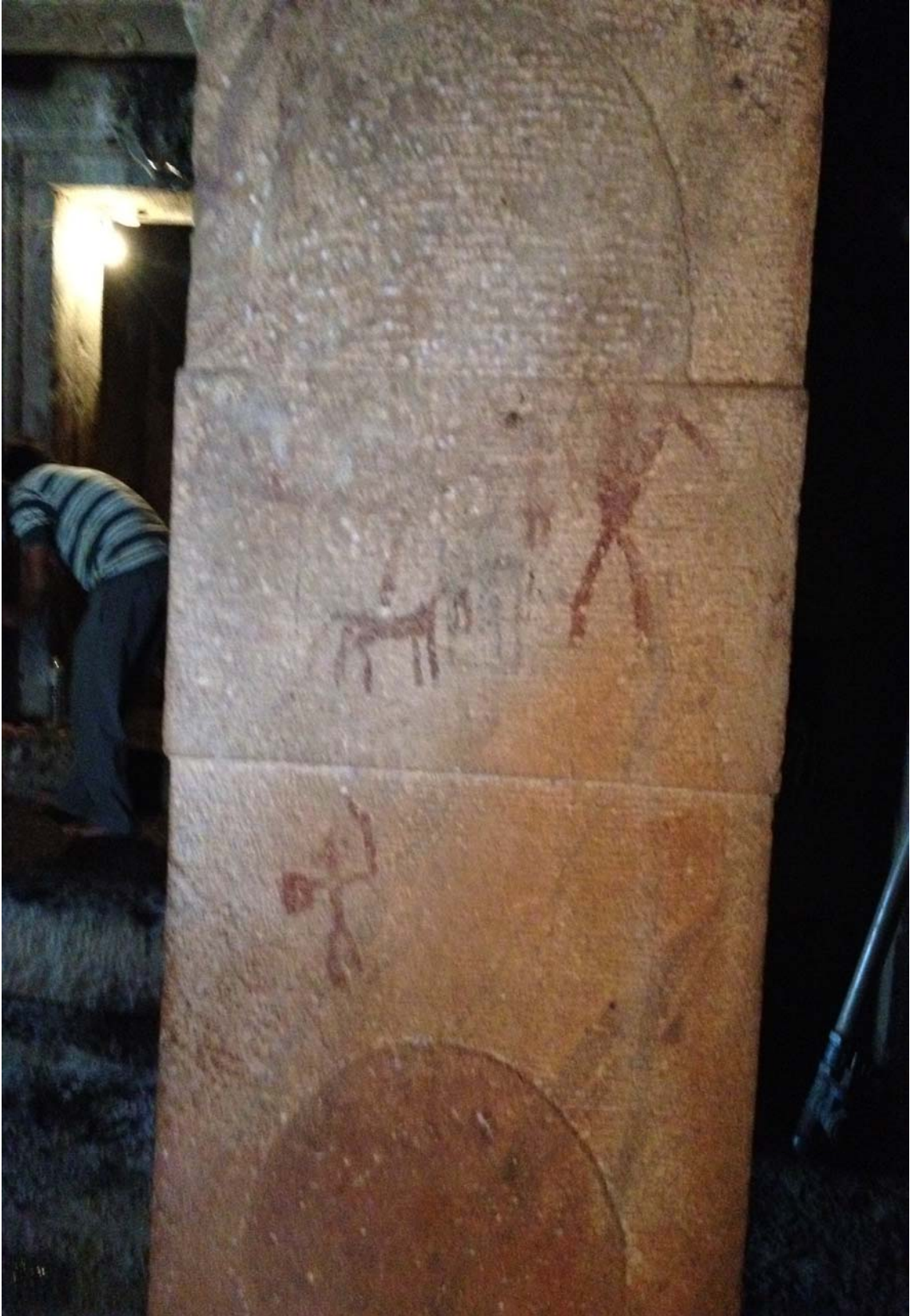


Figure 36: A painting in red pigment on a column within the Malegitti Sivalaya at Badami



Figure 37: An arrangement of rubble which could have been the base for a residential structure at the Early Chalukyan quarry at Motara Maradi

Chalukyan sandstone quarries are located some distance away from the temples they sourced material to, such as Motara Maradi and Shankaralingana Gudda, located roughly 5km north of the Pattadakal group of temples (Menon 2015), there are some source quarries which are very close to temple sites. Such quarries adjacent to temples constructed using stone from them usually cater small undertakings, unlike the grand architectural conceptions like the Pattadakal temples, and do not employ stone of the best quality as used at Pattadakal. An example of this is the Early Chalukyan quarry at Huligemmana Kolla, which has quarry marks (Figure 32), sketch studies (Figure 33) as well as inscriptions (Figure 34, reads “srI selebhutu”, meaning stone craftsman ‘Bhutu’) attesting to its role in supplying stone to create the nine minor shrines located in front of the rock shelter there.

Interestingly, the faded depiction of the bull in red pigment (Figure 15) is very similar to a depiction of a bull at another Early Chalukyan quarry near Pattadakal (Figure 35), though in the latter case the figure is incised into the rock, in the manner of other sketch studies encountered at quarries. This quarry has several inscriptions, two of which designate sections the quarries as belonging to individual artisans, as well as sketch studies for sculptural themes, quarry marks etc. Could it be possible that the bull depicted in this particular manner was the symbol of a particular guild of artisans?

The 3-spiked motifs painted on the vertical face suggests that the shelter was probably occupied during the phase of megalith-building on the trail leading from Benakanawari to Siddhana Kolla. The painting of the bull could even be from the period of Early Chalukyan rule, as suggested by the similar motif in the quarry. Painting in ochre pigment seems to have been in vogue even during Early Chalukyan time, as evidenced by such paintings on a column within the Malegitti Sivalaya at Badami (Figure 36). Hence the painting of the bull at the shelter cannot be confidently assigned to any period of prehistoric occupation.

The shelter could have been used by Early Chalukyan artisans while the single celled shrine was being constructed. At quarries like Motara Maradi, formations of rubble masonry could have been the bases of sheds using temporary materials where the quarry workers stayed (Figure 37). The single celled shrine being a small construction, would have required very few workers, who could have stayed at the shelter during the period of construction of the shrine. The painted inscriptions could refer to the individuals owning the quarry and constructing the shrine. Painted inscriptions from the Early Chalukyan period are found on Meguti Hill at Aihole, too (Kadambi 2011). Confirmation of this shelter being a workshop for artisans could come from the discovery of evidence of quarrying of rock for the shrine, which our limited explorations nearby could not locate.

Conclusion

The newly discovered painted rock shelter near Benakanawari definitely saw a period of occupation during the Early Chalukyan period, when the single celled shrine at the foot of the hill was constructed. It is possible that the shelter marks the site of a workshop of Early Chalukyan artisans who lived and worked there to construct the shrine.

Whether the painting of the bull within the shelter dates to this period or a previous phase of occupation in prehistoric times cannot be decided with certainty. The 3-spiked motifs on the exterior face of the shelter could have been created during the time when the megalithic site above the cliff was in use. It is not certain whether the shelter had any connection with the nearby rock art site at Huliphadi.

The recent uncovering of the single celled shrine and the discovery of the painted rock shelter with the Early Chalukyan inscriptions suggest that there could be many more similar small sites hidden in the sandstone ranges of the Malaprabha Valley, which could help shed light on occupation during different phases of history in the Valley. A programme of thorough exploration could lead to discovery of many more such sites.

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