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Quest for Extinct Giant Rats Leads Scientists to Ancient Face Carvings

Ancient stone faces carved into the walls of a well-known limestone cave in East Timor have been discovered by a team searching for fossils of extinct giant rats.

The team of archaeologists and palaeontologists were working in Lene Hara Cave on the northeast tip of East Timor.

"Looking up from the cave floor at a colleague sitting on a ledge, my head torch shone on what seemed to be a weathered carving," CSIRO's Dr. Ken Aplin said.

"I shone the torch around and saw a whole panel of engraved prehistoric human faces on the wall of the cave".

"The local landowners with whom we were working were stunned by the findings. They said the faces had chosen that day to reveal themselves because they were pleased by the field work we were doing."

The Lene Hara carvings, or petroglyphs, are frontal, stylised faces each with eyes, a nose and a mouth. One has a circular headdress with rays that frame the face.

Uranium isotope dating by colleagues at the University of Queensland revealed the 'sun ray' face to be around 10,000 to 12,000 years old, placing it in the late Pleistocene. The other faces could not be dated but are likely to be equally ancient.

Lene Hara cave has been visited by archaeologists and rock art specialists since the early 1960s to study its rock paintings, which include hand stencils, boats, animals, human figures and linear decorative motifs. The age of the pigment art in Lene Hara is currently unknown but a fragment of limestone with traces of embedded red ochre was dated previously by Professor Sue O'Connor of The Australian National University to over 30,000 years ago.

Although stylised engravings of faces occur throughout Melanesia, Australia and the Pacific, the Lene Hara petroglyphs are the only examples that have been dated to the Pleistocene. No other petroglyphs of faces are known to exist anywhere on the island of Timor.

"Recording and dating the rock art of Timor should be a priority for future research, because of its cultural significance and value in understanding the development of art in our past," Professor O'Connor said.

Source: Sue O'Connor, Ken Aplin, Emma St Pierre and Yue-Xing Feng. Faces of the ancestors revealed: discovery and dating of a Pleistocene-age petroglyph in Lene Hara Cave, East Timor. *Antiquity*, Volume: 84 Number: 325