

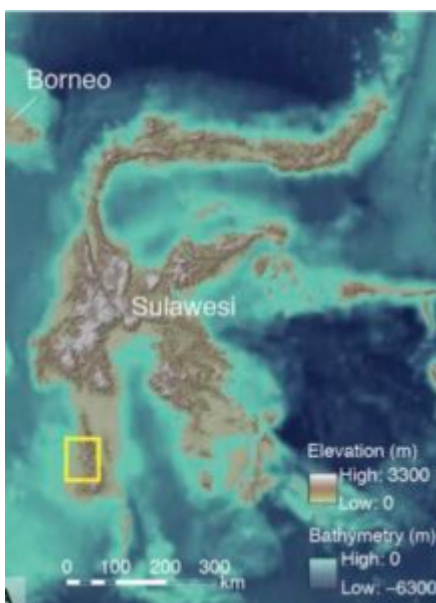
Cave art of Sulawesi

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In news- Researchers have reported that Pleistocene-era rock paintings dating back to 45,000-20,000 years ago in cave sites in **southern Sulawesi, on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi**, are weathering at an alarming rate.

More about the caves-

- The area is known to be home to over 300 cave paintings, and more are being discovered with further explorations.
- A team of Australian and Indonesian archaeological scientists, conservation specialists, and heritage managers examined 11 caves and rock-shelters in the **Maros-Pangkep region** in Sulawesi.
- The artwork in the area includes the **world's oldest hand stencil** (almost 40,000 years ago), created by pressing the hand on a cave wall, and spraying wet red-mulberry pigments over it.
- A nearby cave features the **world's oldest depiction of an animal, a warty pig** painted on the wall 45,500 years ago.
- The cave art of Sulawesi is **much older than the prehistoric cave art of Europe**.



Findings of the study-

- The researchers studied flakes of rock that have begun to detach from cave surfaces to find that salts in three of the samples comprise **calcium sulphate and sodium chloride**, which are known to form crystals on rock surfaces, causing them to break.
- The artwork made with pigments was decaying due to a process known as **haloclasty**, which is triggered by the growth of salt crystals due to repeated changes in temperature and humidity, caused by alternating wet and dry weather in the region.
- As Indonesia has also experienced several **natural disasters** in recent years, it has quickened the process of deterioration.
- Hence the researchers have recommended **regular physical and chemical monitoring of the sites**, akin to the preservation efforts at the French and Spanish prehistoric cave art sites such as Lascaux and Altamira.