

MODULE-1
GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING AND EARLY SETTLEMENTS
TOPIC-ROCK SHELTERS IN KERALA

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Discover the 124-Year-Old Enchanting
Edakkal Caves in Kerala, India



EDAKKAL ROCK SHELTER

- The Edakkal rock shelter is a unique petroglyph site in Kerala and also happens to be the earliest rock art site discovered.
- The shelter is located on a hill known as the Ambukuthimala at an elevation of about 4,600 ft MSL.
- The shelter was discovered in 1894 by F. Fawcett
- Though appointed as the District Superintendent of Police at Calicut (Kozhikode), he took keen interest in studying the indigenous and prehistoric cultures.
- Along with ethnographic work that he carried out in Malabar, he studied the rock engravings meticulously.
- While on tour to document the tribal practices in the Wayanad region, he noticed the Edakkal rock shelters and visited the site with the help of his friend McKenzie, who owned a coffee estate in Wayanad

- He visited Edakkal three times from 1894 to 1896. In the study and understanding of Edakkal rock shelter and its archaeological legacy, Fawcett was assisted by Bruce Foote and Hultzsch
- Fawcett's work was meticulous as he painstakingly made a detailed sketch of all the carvings in the shelter. Interestingly, he had given photographs of the carvings which appears to be the first photographic documentation of a rock art site in India
- Apart from the engravings, the Edakkal cave also yielded inscriptions of the historical period
- In the later period, many scholars attempted to analyse the rock engravings of Edakkal and offer interpretations

Marayur Group of Rock Shelters

- After Fawcett's remarkable discovery of Edakkal rock engravings, not much archaeological research was undertaken in Kerala in the first half of the 20th century.
- In 1970's, a research student from Deccan College, Pune stumbled upon three rock shelters, namely, Ezhuthala at Koodakkad, Attala at Pallanad and Purachi Ala at Champakkad in the high ranges of the Anjanad Valley in Idukki district— all decorated with paintings.
- Out of the three, Champakkad is the largest shelter, while the Pallanad has the maximum number of paintings .
- At these sites, evidence for superimposition of paintings of various cultural periods is noticed.
- also found microliths of chert-chalcedony from the floor of these caves and the region abounds with 'megalithic' dolmens of the Iron Age Early Historic period

Tenmala

- Another petroglyph site is located at Tenmala in Kollam district.
- The Mesolithic deposit at this rock shelter was excavated by Rajendran.
- The site is significant due to the dating of the stratified mesolithic deposit, thus giving the only scientific date to a rock art site in Kerala.
- The cave yielded a few geometric pattern carvings of square, circles and triangles.

Tovarimala

- Located at Wayanad district, the Tovarimala is a hilly plain of the Malavayal in the same region where the Edakkal cave is located.
- The site called Ezhuthupara yielded rock engravings very similar to the Edakkal engravings but less in terms of the volume and theme.
- However, the technique appears to be same

Ankode

- Located at Perumkadavila, the site of Pandavampara at Ankode in Tiruvanthapuram district is adorned with deeply engraved motifs.
- The rock engravings here are believed to have been made using sharp stone tools similar to the 'neolithic' stone celts.
- The rock art site yielded stratified Mesolithic deposit. Though similar in style to the Edakkal engravings, the Ankode drawings are much smaller in theme and volume

Ettukudukka

- In recent years, engravings were noticed on the lateritic surface of a road at Ettukudukka, situated 12 km east of Payyannur in Kannur district
- They can be called geoglyphs and similar engravings on laterite have been found in Goa
- Though the local villagers reported the presence of such engravings along the road, they were destroyed due to human activities.
- When the state archaeology Department attempted to intervene to protect the site, the local people opposed the move

Themes and Techniques

- In Kerala, as elsewhere the rock engravings deal with the common themes such as hunting and dancing scenes, and geometric designs.
- A few of these engravings might have been associated with some unknown ritual aspects of the past people.
- Most of the rock art in Kerala are petroglyphs, while at a few places they are pictographic in nature.
- The Edakkal carving belongs to a class of its own. Though the carvings depict the figures of humans and animals, they are made in such a manner that it requires extended vision to view and understand them.
- Fawcett reproduced the engravings with photographs and illustrations, and also studied them from an ethnographic point of view.

- He (1901) had noted the presence of swastika pattern, sun symbol and magic square among the designs. Most of the human figures are shown with massive headgears and raised hands.
- While describing the nature of execution of the engravings, Fawcett endorsed the observation of Robert Bruce Foote that they were made by scraping the surface and not by cutting or chipping out.
- The figure of a circle with a cross pattern inside is treated as sun symbol by Fawcett while the later scholars have identified it with wheel, and thereby signify movement of people and goods .
- Neumayer views the symbol as a wheeled cart .
- Varier equaled the presence of wheeled cart with that of “an advanced stage of economic production and distribution”

- Gurukkal (1995) analyzed the morphological evolution of engravings at Edakkal and identified six basic signs, namely, canoe, cross, triangle, square, circle and volute.
- According to him from these primary (canoe), secondary (cross, triangle, and square) and tertiary signs (circle and volute), all the drawings had emerged
- Mathpal (1998) who undertook a detailed study of the rock art sites in Kerala presents a comprehensive statistical analysis: 28 human figures, 19 animal figures and 400 abstract motifs among Edakkal engravings.
- He observed that most of the human figures are drawn in frontal posture while that of the animals in profile. He viewed them as distinct independent figures, lacking the idea of composition

- The paintings and engravings at Marayur group of rock shelters are varied in nature. For the paintings, red ochre, pinkish buff, black, saffron and brownish yellow were preferred .
- At Ezhuthuala, three-fourth of the 12-metre high cave shelter is covered with paintings, most of which are superimposed. The human figures are shown with arms raised and the animal figures consist of horse, bull, bison, elephants with and without riders.
- Nearly 100 figures are drawn, with the maximum height of a figure is 1.5 m and the smallest is 3 mm. The most important figure is that of a standing human with tiger stripe motif in the body

- At Ankode, deep engravings of geometric designs, human figures, and decorative floral motifs occur
- The site yielded microlithic tools, based on which it can be surmised that the engravings are made with microliths, according to these authors.
- The Tenmala rock shelter is devoid of any representation of human and animal figures. Only the geometrical motifs such as triangles, circles, and squares are noticed as incisions.
- The Mesolithic deposit found at the rock shelter pointed to the use of microlithic tools for execution of the incisions

- The Tovari engravings depict mainly a few geometric designs. One such symbol demonstrates a square divided with lines in it and an extended stick with a tip, which was identified as a tool tipped with iron mentioned in the Sangam Tamil literature as ‘irumputtalai yaatta netunkanai vizhukkol’ .
- To enhance the power of the tool, the ritualistic mandala like square could have been engraved. The engravings could also be taken as the stylized version of the female reproductive organ, an interpretation based on the identification of a similar type found at a rock art site in South Africa by Glyn Daniel
- The engravings could have been made by smaller stone blades, as most of them are narrow and shallow, while a few are made with the use of large tools.

Antiquity of the Rock Art in Kerala

- The antiquity of the rock art in Kerala is shrouded in mystery.
- No clear-cut dating method has been adopted, except in Tenmala that yielded a C14 date for the archaeological deposit.
- In all other sites, dates are arrived at based on stylistic features and the nature of motifs. However, they are not reliable. In some sites, evidence of superimposition is seen.
- At Edakkal, over the carvings are noticed the later inscriptions in Tamil Brahmi and Sanskrit
- While at Ankode, there is superimposition of paintings over the engravings. At Marayur group of rock shelters, there is an evidence for the superimposition of paintings stretching over three cultural periods.
- Hence, arriving at absolute date for the rock art in Kerala is elusive, though a relative dating is possible. The authors of the rock art also remain faceless.

- Fawcett never categorically assigned any cultural period for the execution of the engravings at Edakkal
- However, many scholars in the later period have stated that Fawcett assigned Neolithic age to the Edakkal rock art

- Rajan Gurukkal (1995) viewed the wheel sign found at Edakkal as an indication of the movement of goods and people and had taken that as an indicator for the antiquity of the carvings and placed it in the post Neolithic period.
- As the theme is comprised of complex human and animal figures, he argued that the engravings could be dated to the transition period from the Neolithic to the post-Neolithic.
- He placed the main engravings of the Edakkal to the Neolithic period and the periphery images that have been later added to the Iron Age Early Historic (megalithic) period.
- Mathpal (1998) assigned a date of 3500 years for the Edakkal engravings based on stylistic features.

- The many layers of paintings at Marayur group of rock shelters are dated to various periods.
- Thampi (1976) assigned paintings of antelope, cattle and horse to the mesolithic (7000 BC); human figures to the Chalcolithic (2000 BC) and armed rider on elephant to the early historic (300 BC).
- However, as there is no evidence of Chalcolithic culture in Kerala, the second phase is assigned to the Neolithic and third phase to the Iron Age.
- A painting of a human figure with wavy patterns inside is quite akin to designs on the russet coated painted pottery that are found in the early historic period, which is presumed to be of that period

Interpretations

- Fawcett made preliminary observations about the engravings that he had studied at Edakkal.
- As most of the human figures are adorned with huge headgears, he identified them as the performers of devil dance that are widely popular in the regions of Kerala, Karnataka and South Tamil Nadu. The artists wear huge headgears and also decorated masks .
- The artists are basically from the communities of the Vannans, Malayans, Velans, Koppalans and Pulayans, who are classified as scheduled tribes of the region.
- Fawcett's view that the engravings could be the works of the ancestors of the modern day tribes of the region cannot be ruled out either.

- Gurukkal (1995) viewed the engravings at Edakkal as the outcome of the contradictions in a society that witnessed the transition from the Neolithic to the Iron Age.
- Gurukkal (1995) argued that the Edakkal engravings with massive decorative headdresses are the products of the society which faced insoluble problems and the communal need to overcome the issues with aesthetic imaginary art forms.
- He further argues that the earlier engravings were that of the Neolithic people, who under tremendous pressure from the metal- using Iron Age people resorted to gratuitous art forms to get adjusted to the transition from one cultural component to another cultural module

- As the massive engravings at Edakkal are mainly done with patient scraping of surface with a tool, it must have involved the participation of a community.
- As the artists had left no marks on the practice they must have acquired anywhere in the vicinity, Gopi (2004) observed that the Edakkal cave artists could have used it as transitory shelter and he attributed them to have come from Tamil Nadu where such engravings are found at Perumukal.
- While commenting on the Tovari paintings, Varier (2006) stated that the painting are loaded with abstract ideas compared to those of Edakkal, where the themes are ritualistic in nature.
- The theme of the Tovari engravings is specific centric. He compared the magic square symbols with that of the tantric mandalas of the later period. The engravings could have been used as representations of fertility cult laden with ritual meanings.





