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Neolithic Petroglyphs of Edakkal Caves

Harish Subramaniam

Undergraduate Student,

Department of History,

Amity Institute of Social Sciences (AISS),

Amity University, Noida (Uttar Pradesh, India)

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Abstract:

This research paper examines the petroglyphs (images carved on rock surfaces as a form of rock art) of the Edakkal cave in Kerala, which have been traditionally traced back to as early as 6000 BCE. The paper highlights the importance of these petroglyphs and emphasizes the need to draw greater attention to historical sites like Edakkal through further archaeological research. Through motif analysis, archaeological context, stylistic examination, and ethno-archaeological comparison, this study reassesses both the cultural meaning and the chronological placement of the site.

The paper focuses on the rock engravings and analyses the symbols, even when they are repeated multiple times, to interpret their meanings from the perspective of the community that created them. These carvings may have served ritualistic or other social purposes. Differences in the size, shape, and characteristics of each motif help determine whether they represent important individuals such as ritual performers, leaders, or ancestors. Animal motifs are also examined to understand whether they reflect ritual symbolism or everyday life.

The central debate of this paper concerns whether the petroglyphs should be dated to the Neolithic or the Megalithic period. Using methods such as motif analysis, archaeological context, stylistic study, and ethno-archaeological comparison, the paper argues that the petroglyphs are more likely associated with the Megalithic period rather than the Neolithic period.

Keywords: *Petroglyphs, Prehistoric religion, Ethno-archaeology, Symbolism, Pictographs*

Introduction:

The Edakkal Cave (the literal meaning of the word “Edakkal” means “a stone in between”), is located on one of Kerala’s hills known as “Ambukuttimala” belonging to the western ghats, about 4,600 feet above the sea level and situated about 10 km south-west of Sultan Battery in the Wayanad district of Kerala. It is a naturally formed prehistoric rock shelter, created by three large boulders, where one rests on the other two, with its overhanging base forming the roof. The ironical natural alignment of this cave makes its shape in such a way that it provides a two storied natural split, gap, or hollow

space in the rock formation.

The lower storey can be entered through an opening of 5x4 feet into the interior; measuring about 18 feet in length, 12 feet in width and 10 feet in height, which has a trickle at the corner opposite to the entrance. The lower-storey has no engravings and flowing through it is a perennial water stream. A passage upward leads to a small opening on the roof through which one climbs up to the next storey whose entrance is about 7x5 feet. Its interior is about 96 feet long, 22 feet wide and 18 feet high. The shelter lies between two rock formations and is covered by a large boulder forming a canopy, while its far end remains open to the sky. The rock surfaces on both sides of the entrance are engraved or etched with unusual, stylized anthropomorphic figures and other motifs (Fig. 1). Although these figures are linear in form, they show a high level of precision in execution. To achieve balance and symmetry, the outlines appear to have been sketched first and then deeply incised or grooved. Most figures are carved using single grooved lines, though examples with double grooved lines are occasionally found.

There is a big opening at the right-turn corner of the roof since the roofing boulder does not touch the facing wall, allowing enough light into the cave.

The discovery of the cave and its recognition as a prehistoric site occurred accidentally during colonial-period British game hunting. F. Fawcett, then Superintendent of Police of the former Malabar district, first encountered evidence of the site in 1890 when, during a hunting trip to Wayanad, he noticed a Neolithic celt recovered from the coffee estate of Colin Mackenzie. An enthusiast of prehistoric studies, Fawcett subsequently explored the high ranges of Wayanad, which led to the discovery of the Edakkal rock shelter in 1894. He identified the site as a Neolithic habitation based on the nature of the wall representations, which he interpreted as engravings produced using Neolithic stone tools.

Apart from brief references by various scholars of prehistory, the Edakkal cave has not been subjected to any comprehensive archaeological investigation. Despite its exceptional representational richness and apparent uniqueness, with few parallels elsewhere, the site attracted limited archaeological attention. The Edakkal cave is located along an ancient route linking the Mysore plateau with the Malabar ports, a route known to have been in continuous use across several historical periods. Nevertheless, much of the site's historical significance remains insufficiently explored.



(Fig.1:- Inscriptions on the left side of the cave).

Motifs and Meanings: Religious Symbolism in the Rock Art of Edakkal Caves:

The prehistoric rock engravings of the Edakkal caves, located at Ambukuttimala near Ambalavayal in the Wayanad district of Kerala, constitute one of the most significant archaeological and visual archives of early human symbolic activity in South India. Discovered accidentally in 1894 by F. Fawcett, then Superintendent of Police of British Malabar, the site was later confirmed as prehistoric through the nature of its carvings and the discovery of Neolithic celts from the shelter. The Edakkal formation consists of two rock chambers situated at an elevation of about 1500 feet above the surrounding landscape. The lower chamber, measuring approximately 18×12 feet, offers limited prehistoric association, whereas the upper chamber, extending nearly 96×22 feet, contains an extensive concentration of engravings. The elevated location may have played a role in its selection, as large animals such as elephants could not easily access the site, lending it a sense of protection and sanctity. Subsequent scholarly attention by researchers such as Colin Mackenzie, Bruce Foote, Hultsch, and H. D. Sankalia has firmly established Edakkal as a key prehistoric site.

The engravings are primarily confined to the northern and southern walls of the upper shelter and comprise signs or symbols, human figures, animal figures, and later inscriptions. Among these, geometric and abstract signs form the foundational layer of the visual system (Fig. 2–4). These include crosses, triangles, circles, spirals, arrowheads, cruciform signs, Y-shaped forms, cross-hatching, and combinations of straight and slanting strokes. The repetition of specific signs and their variants suggest intentional meaning rather than random scribbling. An evolutionary pattern is clearly visible, moving from simple, independent signs to more complex combinations that anticipate proto-script forms. Several of these symbols resemble motifs found on megalithic pottery, early Punch Marked Coins, Early Uninscribed Copper Cast coins, and even the undeciphered Indus script. Similarities such as the swastika-like motif, Ujjain symbol, and Y-sign indicate shared symbolic tendencies rather than direct

cultural transmission. (Kumar 2013; Vinod V; Gurukkal).

A noticeable shift can be observed in the way the figures at Edakkal are composed. Earlier engravings appear more segmented, with individual elements placed side by side rather than integrated into a unified form. In contrast, later compositions display greater continuity, with lines flowing more seamlessly across the surface. This progression suggests not merely a stylistic refinement but a change in the conceptual organisation of imagery. The increased uniformity of incision and smoother execution in certain panels may also indicate improved tool technology, possibly reflecting interaction with communities familiar with iron implements. Rather than representing a sudden cultural break, the variation in carving techniques points to gradual transformation within the same ritual landscape. (Kumar 2013; Gurukkal).

Anthropomorphic representations dominate the Edakkal gallery and display remarkable diversity in posture, scale, and articulation (Fig. 5–7). Approximately thirty-five human figures have been identified, depicting both males and females in standing, seated, and dynamic poses. Female figures are predominantly shown in dancing or ritual postures with raised arms and curved legs, suggesting ceremonial performance. Several towering male figures with elaborate headgear and spiral motifs on the chest appear to occupy central and authoritative positions. Their scale, clarity of execution, and symbolic attributes indicate their possible identification as deities, chiefs or ritual specialists. (Kumar 2013; Gurukkal).

The anthropomorphic figures at Edakkal exhibit dramatic posture, enlarged scale, and elaborate headgear, suggesting that they were not intended to represent ordinary individuals. Their raised arms and dynamic stance evoke the visual grammar of ritual performance. In this context, certain formal similarities may be observed with later Kerala traditions such as Theyyam, where exaggerated costume and gesture communicate sacred authority. However, such parallels should not be interpreted as evidence of uninterrupted continuity. Rather, they indicate that performative embodiment has long been an important mode of expressing ritual power within the region. (Gurukkal; Kumar 2019).

Animal motifs form another important category of representation at Edakkal (Fig. 8). Both wild and domesticated animals such as elephants, deer, hunting dogs, goats, and peacocks are depicted in varied postures and directions. These figures reflect the ecological environment of Wayanad and suggest the symbolic and subsistence-related importance of animals in prehistoric life. In many early societies, animals functioned as totemic beings or spiritual mediators, reinforcing the ritual dimension of the engravings. (Kumar 2013; Vinod V).

The Edakkal assemblage also includes later inscriptions in Tamil Brahmi script, including the inscription reading “sree vazhumi.” These inscriptions are chronologically distinct from the prehistoric carvings and attest to the continued cultural significance of the cave in historical times. References to donors, rulers, and place names indicate repeated visitation and re-appropriation of the site by later

communities, without erasing its earlier Symbolic value. (Kumar 2019; Gurukkal).

When examined collectively, the human, animal, and geometric engravings at Edakkal form a coherent symbolic system rather than isolated artistic efforts. The repeated use of certain motifs and their deliberate placement on selected rock surfaces indicate structured meaning. These carvings appear to have operated within a shared framework of belief, possibly linked to ritual practice, social hierarchy, and interaction with the surrounding landscape. The imagery does not merely depict life; it encodes relationships between humans, animals, and unseen forces within a ritualised worldview. (Kumar 2013; Kumar 2019; Gurukkal; Vinod V).

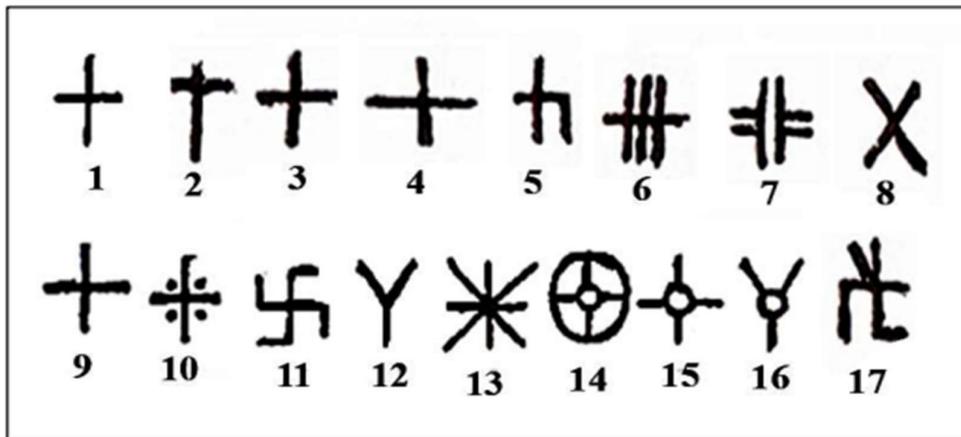


Figure 2: Geometric motifs depicted in the rock engravings of Edakkal

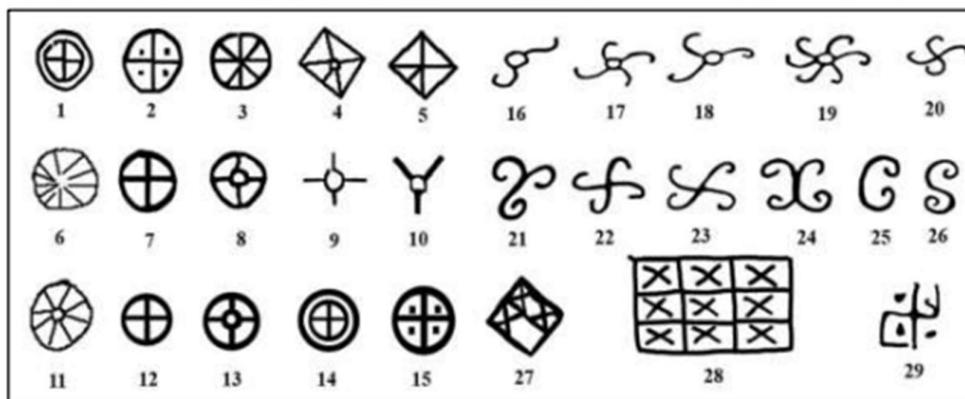


Figure 3: Collection of abstract and symbolic signs from the Edakkal cave art

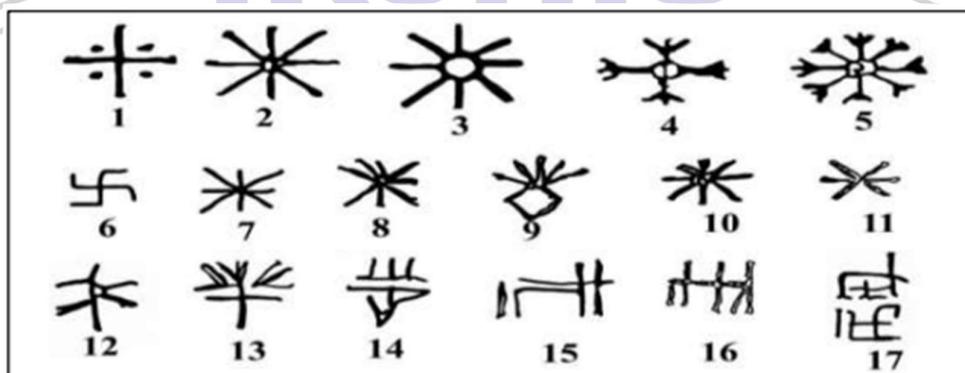


Figure 4: Series of signs from Edakkal indicating the emergence of proto-script forms

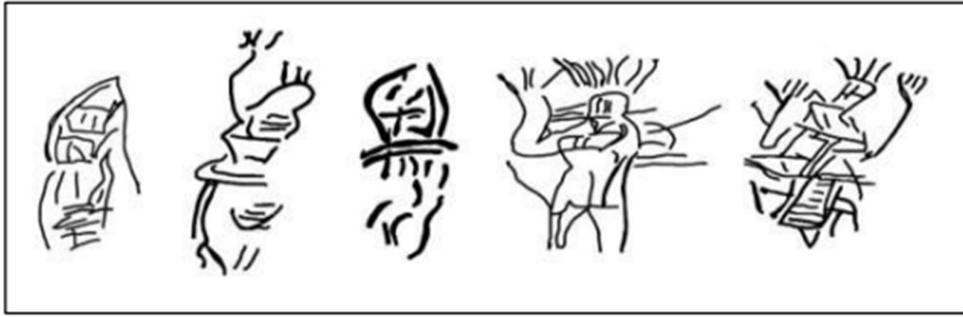


Figure 5: Dancing human figures, both male and female, represented in the Edakkal engravings

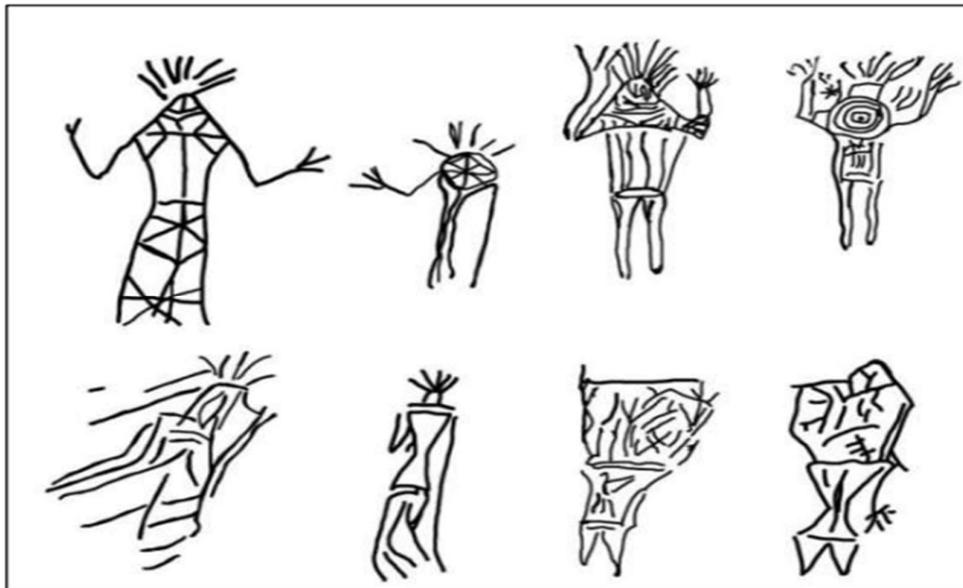


Figure 6: Large-scale human figures shown with uplifted arms and spiral motifs on the chest

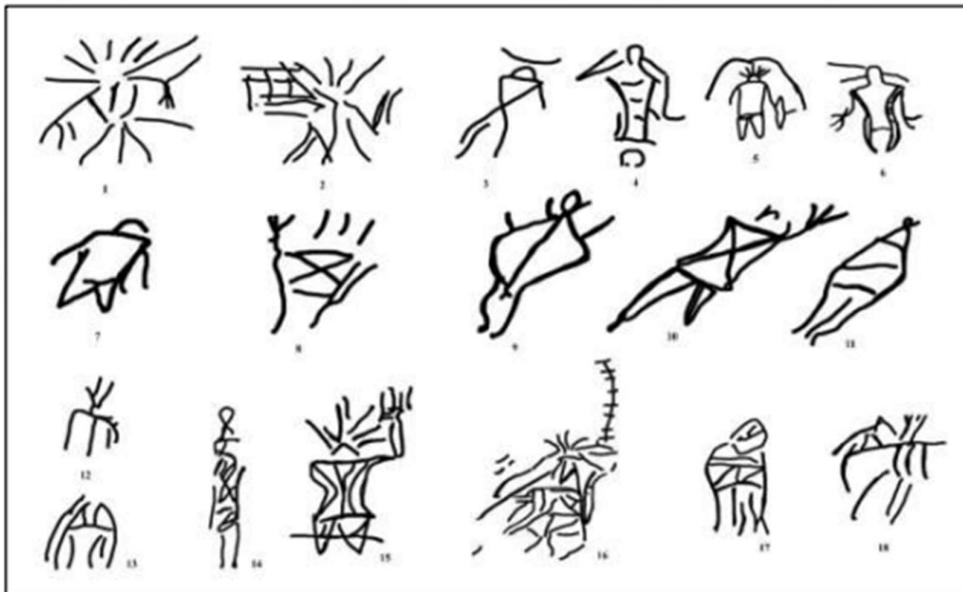


Figure 7: Human figurines from Edakkal illustrating a range of postures and expressive moods

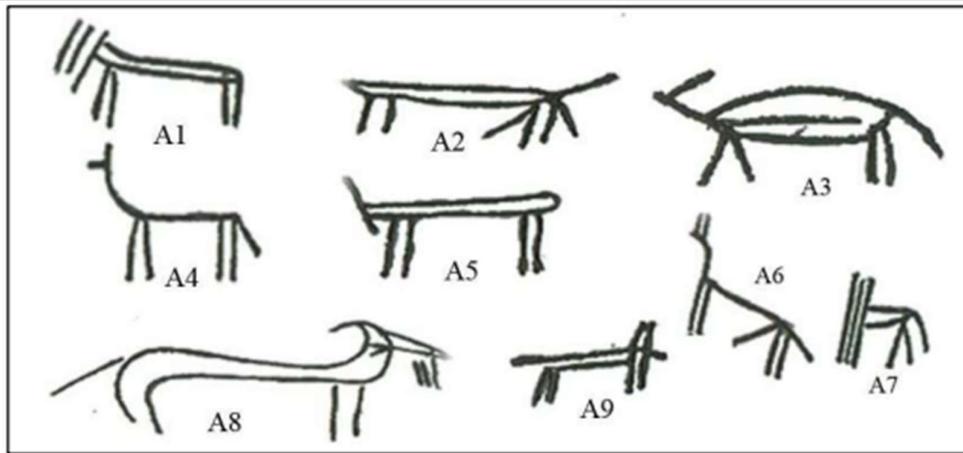


Figure 8: Animal figures from the Edakkal carvings displayed in varied orientations and postures

Belief Systems and Ritual Symbolism in the Petroglyphs of Edakkal Caves, Kerala:

The Edakkal petroglyphs were not mere artistic expressions but formed part of a symbolic and ritual landscape. Their naturalistic origins, deliberate placement, association with megalithic burials, and long-term reuse suggest belief systems centred on nature, ancestors, and sacred space. These features find close parallels in surviving indigenous religious practices of South India, making an ethno-archaeological approach suitable for interpreting their meanings. The engravings at Edakkal consist largely of abstract, geometric, and anthropomorphic figures, executed through deliberate incision on selected rock surfaces. The choice of walls and the nature of execution indicate intentionality rather than casual or decorative activity. The permanence of these engravings suggests that they were meant to endure across generations, pointing toward symbolic, ritual, or belief-oriented motivations. Such deliberate preservation of imagery is a feature commonly associated with sacred or socially significant spaces in indigenous cultural settings.

The Edakkal engravings are best understood as components of a ritualised landscape rather than decorative expressions. Their deliberate incision on selected rock surfaces and their continued visibility across multiple phases of occupation suggest sustained symbolic importance. Ethno-archaeological comparison with indigenous traditions of South India offers interpretative insight, particularly in relation to ancestor veneration and sacred landscape practices. However, such parallels must be approached with caution. Contemporary tribal traditions cannot be treated as direct survivals of prehistoric belief systems. Instead, they reveal long-term cultural orientations in which landscape, memory, and ritual performance remain deeply interconnected. The combination of abstract signs, anthropomorphic imagery, and animal motifs indicates a shared communicative system through which cosmological ideas and social identity were expressed and reinforced.

One of the most significant aspects of the Edakkal caves is their evidence for multi-phase occupation. The site preserves engravings and material remains belonging to different chronological

phases, with observable breaks between them. Despite these interruptions, the caves continued to attract human activity from the Neolithic, Chalcolithic period through later historical phases, as indicated by the presence of early Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions. Such long term reuse of a site is characteristic of sacred or ritually significant landscapes. In many indigenous traditions, specific locations retain religious importance over centuries, even as belief systems evolve. The continued engagement with the Edakkal caves suggests that the site functioned as a focal point for cultural memory and ritual practice, reinforcing its interpretation as a sacred space rather than a purely domestic or utilitarian setting.

The presence of anthropomorphic figures at Edakkal adds another important dimension to the interpretation of belief systems. Human figures in prehistoric art are often associated with ritual performance, ancestral representation, or mythic narratives. At Edakkal, these figures appear alongside abstract and geometric symbols, forming a composite symbolic system rather than isolated images. In many indigenous religious practices, symbolic representations of humans serve as visual stand-ins for ancestors, spirits, or culturally significant individuals. Abstract signs, meanwhile, often function as protective symbols, clan markers, or ritual indicators. The coexistence of these forms at Edakkal supports the interpretation that the petroglyphs were embedded within a belief system that structured social and ritual life.

The archaeological context surrounding Edakkal further strengthens the ethno-archaeological interpretation. The presence of megalithic burial monuments in the surrounding landscape, along with stone tools and sculptures recovered in and around the caves, points to a cultural setting where mortuary practices and ancestor veneration played an important role. Megalithic traditions in South India are widely understood as being associated with ritual commemoration of the dead and ancestor worship. Many surviving indigenous belief systems retain similar practices, such as memorial stones and ancestor focused rituals. The spatial association between the Edakkal petroglyphs and megalithic remains suggests that the engravings may have been part of a broader ritual landscape connected to ancestral memory and religious practice.

Although the symbols at Edakkal do not constitute a formal writing system, they demonstrate an early form of visual communication. The combination of abstract, geometric, and anthropomorphic signs suggests an attempt to convey shared ideas or meanings within the community. In indigenous religious contexts, symbolic communication often replaces written texts, transmitting ritual knowledge through images, signs, and performance. Viewed through an ethno-archaeological lens, the Edakkal petroglyphs can be understood as visual media through which belief systems, ritual practices, and social values were communicated and reinforced across generations. The Edakkal petroglyphs represent more than prehistoric artistic expression; they form part of a complex symbolic and ritual landscape. Their naturalistic origins, deliberate placement, multi-phase reuse, association with megalithic contexts, and

symbolic coherence indicate belief systems centred on nature, ancestors, and sacred space. The continuity of symbolic expression, sacred landscape use, and ancestor-oriented practices indicates that Edakkal petroglyphs can be meaningfully interpreted through surviving indigenous belief systems using an ethno-archaeological framework.

The Edakkal Petroglyphs and the Question of Chronology: A Megalithic Perspective:

The Edakkal rock shelters in Wayanad, Kerala, constitute one of the most important prehistoric rock art sites in South India, particularly in discussions concerning the chronology of early symbolic expression. For a long time, the engravings at Edakkal were broadly assigned to the Neolithic period, mainly on the basis of early assumptions rather than firm archaeological evidence. Recent scholarly studies have questioned this traditional view by closely examining the stylistic features, technological aspects, and archaeological context of the engravings. The lack of diagnostic Neolithic materials, the regional dominance of megalithic remains, and epigraphic indicators suggest that the petroglyphs may belong to a later cultural phase. This reassessment seeks to evaluate the chronological position of the Edakkal engravings and to determine whether they are more accurately associated with megalithic traditions than with the Neolithic period. (Gurukkal; Vinod V).

The early classification of the Edakkal engravings as Neolithic was largely based on circumstantial evidence rather than stratified archaeological data. The discovery of a Neolithic celt in the broader region encouraged the assumption that similar tools were used to produce the carvings. Yet the cave itself has not yielded habitation debris, tool-manufacturing waste, or other diagnostic materials that would securely anchor the engravings within a Neolithic context. In the absence of controlled excavation directly associating the carvings with Neolithic occupation layers, the traditional dating must be regarded as provisional rather than definitive. (Gurukkal).

Neolithic culture in South India is generally characterised by settled village life, the use of pottery, polished stone celts, microlithic tools, and the domestication of animals. These features are considered essential indicators for identifying Neolithic occupation. At Edakkal, none of these defining characteristics have been found in association with the petroglyphs. There is no evidence of permanent habitation, domestic pottery, or Neolithic tool assemblages either within the caves or in the surrounding landscape. The absence of such material remains suggests that the engravings were not produced by Neolithic communities and do not reflect a Neolithic cultural setting. (Gurukkal).

Iconographic evidence further challenges the Neolithic interpretation of the Edakkal petroglyphs. In many Neolithic sites across South India, domesticated bovines, particularly bulls, appear frequently in terracotta figurines and painted representations, reflecting the agrarian and pastoral economy of the period. At Edakkal, however, no representation of domesticated cattle has been identified among the engravings. This absence is significant, as bovine imagery is a prominent feature of Neolithic symbolic expression. The lack of such motifs suggests that the belief system

reflected in the Edakkal engravings differs fundamentally from that of Neolithic societies. (Gurukkal). In contrast to the lack of Neolithic indicators, the region surrounding Edakkal contains a large number of megalithic monuments. These burial structures demonstrate that megalithic communities occupied and used the landscape extensively. Studies have indicated that some of these megalithic monuments can be attributed to the Kurumba tribal group, whose cultural traditions are deeply rooted in the region. The strong presence of megalithic remains around Edakkal provides an important cultural and chronological framework for understanding the petroglyphs, suggesting that they were created within a megalithic cultural environment. (Gurukkal).

The technical execution of the Edakkal engravings offers further evidence supporting a megalithic association. Many of the petroglyphs display considerable depth, smooth finishing, and precision, qualities that are difficult to achieve using stone tools alone. These characteristics imply the use of iron implements, which became widespread during the megalithic period in Kerala, generally dated to around 1000 BCE. The apparent application of iron technology in producing the engravings supports the view that they were created during a period when such tools were available, further distancing them from a Neolithic context. (Gurukkal).

Epigraphic evidence from Edakkal provides additional support for a later chronological placement. Inscriptions found on the cave walls, located away from the main engraved panels, have been dated on palaeographic grounds to the second or third century CE. The spatial relationship between these inscriptions and the petroglyphs indicates that the engravings were already in existence at the time the inscriptions were made. Even if the petroglyphs are assumed to predate the inscriptions by several centuries, their production would still fall within the fifth or sixth century BCE, corresponding to the megalithic or early historic period rather than the Neolithic. (Mahadevan 1998; Gurukkal).

The symbolic themes represented in the Edakkal petroglyphs also align more closely with megalithic belief systems than with Neolithic religious practices. The anthropomorphic figures do not resemble formalised temple deities but instead appear to embody ideas related to death, ancestors, and the afterlife. Such themes are central to megalithic ritual traditions, which often emphasised funerary practices and the veneration of ancestral spirits. The engravings can therefore be interpreted as symbolic expressions connected to rituals surrounding death and protection rather than as depictions rooted in Neolithic ideology. (Gurukkal; Vinod V).

Several of the symbols carved alongside the main anthropomorphic figures appear to have votive significance. Motifs resembling stretchers and spoked circles have been interpreted as references to death and the journey of the soul after death. Animal figures oriented toward the central icons suggest reverence and may represent totemic symbols associated with different clans or families. These interpretations resonate strongly with indigenous belief systems, particularly those of the Kurumba

community, among whom elements of megalithic ritual traditions continue in modified forms. This cultural continuity further reinforces the argument that the Edakkal petroglyphs belong to the megalithic period. (Gurukkal; Vinod V).

A careful evaluation of archaeological, iconographic, technological, epigraphic, and symbolic evidence demonstrates that the Edakkal petroglyphs cannot be convincingly assigned to the Neolithic period. The absence of Neolithic material culture, the lack of domesticated animal imagery, the strong presence of megalithic monuments in the surrounding region, the technological sophistication of the engravings, and the chronological indicators provided by inscriptions collectively support a megalithic or early historic origin. The petroglyphs of Edakkal appear to reflect a ritual and symbolic tradition rooted in megalithic belief systems, particularly those associated with ancestor worship and indigenous practices, making it necessary to abandon the long-standing Neolithic attribution. (Gurukkal; Vinod V; Mahadevan 1998).

Discussion:

This study set out to examine the symbolic meaning and chronological placement of the Edakkal petroglyphs through motif analysis and ethno-archaeological interpretation. The findings suggest that the engravings represent a structured ritual system embedded within a megalithic cultural landscape rather than isolated artistic activity.

The Edakkal petroglyphs clearly reflect a structured system of ritual and symbolic expression rather than isolated or decorative artistic activity. The repeated depiction of anthropomorphic figures, animals, and geometric motifs points to a shared visual language through which beliefs, rituals, and social values were communicated. The deliberate placement of these engravings on selected rock surfaces, their careful execution, and the continued use of the caves over long periods indicate that Edakkal functioned as a sacred and socially meaningful landscape.

Anthropomorphic representations occupy a central position within this symbolic system. These human figures are not portrayed as ordinary individuals but appear to represent ritual performers, ancestral beings, or spiritually empowered figures. Their dynamic postures, exaggerated scale, distinctive headgear, and association with abstract symbols suggest ceremonial roles connected to protection, authority, or communication with the spiritual realm. Such features indicate that ritual performance and belief were central concerns of the community that produced the engravings.

Animal motifs add another important layer of meaning. Rather than serving as simple depictions of the surrounding environment, animals appear to have held symbolic and ritual significance. Their positioning alongside anthropomorphic figures suggests relationships of reverence, mediation, or offering. In many early belief systems, animals function as totemic symbols, clan markers, or spiritual intermediaries, and the Edakkal representations align well with such interpretations. The absence of commonly depicted domesticated animals associated with Neolithic

agrarian life further strengthens the argument that these motifs relate primarily to ritual ideology rather than economic activity.

Geometric and abstract symbols form a coherent and recurring component of the Edakkal engravings. These signs are not randomly placed but appear in repeated patterns and combinations, indicating shared meanings within the community. Ladder-like forms, linear designs, and composite symbols likely conveyed ideas related to transition, protection, movement, or the passage between life and death. When viewed together with anthropomorphic and animal figures, these motifs create a unified symbolic framework that structured ritual communication and collective memory.

Ethno-archaeological comparison provides valuable insight into the interpretation of these motifs. Surviving indigenous and tribal religious practices in Kerala offer meaningful parallels, particularly in their emphasis on ancestor worship, sacred landscapes, ritual performance, and nature-based belief systems. While these traditions cannot be treated as direct survivals, they reveal long-term cultural orientations that help illuminate the symbolic logic of the Edakkal petroglyphs. The continued ritual significance of specific landscapes in indigenous belief systems supports the interpretation of Edakkal as a sacred site rather than a domestic or utilitarian space.

The evidence also strongly supports a reassessment of the chronological placement of the petroglyphs. The traditional classification of the Edakkal engravings as Neolithic is not supported by archaeological data. The absence of permanent habitation remains, domestic pottery, and other defining features of Neolithic culture undermines this attribution. Moreover, if Neolithic stone tools had been used extensively for engraving, associated tool debris would be expected within or near the caves, yet such evidence is lacking.

In contrast, the cultural and symbolic context of the Edakkal site aligns closely with megalithic traditions. The surrounding landscape contains numerous megalithic burial monuments, indicating that communities practicing megalithic rituals actively occupied the region. The strong emphasis on ancestors, death, and ritual commemoration reflected in the engravings corresponds closely with known megalithic belief systems in South India. The technical quality of the engravings—particularly their depth, precision, and smooth finishing—suggests the use of iron tools, which became widespread during the megalithic period. This technological evidence further distances the petroglyphs from a Neolithic context.

While the cumulative evidence strongly favours a megalithic or early historic attribution, the absence of systematic excavation means that the chronology must remain open to future reassessment. Epigraphic evidence adds further support to this interpretation. Early historic inscriptions found within the caves indicate that the petroglyphs predate these texts, placing their creation within a timeframe consistent with the megalithic or early historic period. The continued reuse of the site across different cultural phases suggests that Edakkal retained its sacred character over centuries, even as belief systems

and social structures evolved.

Taken together, the archaeological, iconographic, technological, and ethnographic evidence supports the interpretation of the Edakkal petroglyphs as expressions of megalithic ritual ideology rather than Neolithic artistic activity. These engravings embody belief systems centred on ritual performance, ancestor veneration, symbolic communication, and sacred space. Re-examining the site through motif analysis and ethno-archaeological perspectives not only clarifies its cultural meaning but also challenges long-standing assumptions about its chronology. The Edakkal caves thus emerge as a significant visual record of megalithic religious thought and long-term cultural continuity in South India.

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