

# Edakkal cave and it's engravings

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## **Introduction**

Kerala is a tiny stretch of land situated to the south-western tip of the peninsular India. Diverse yet distinct environmental and cultural factors make this land unique. Rock-art of the region is represented by pictographs and Petroglyph and the latter has a wider distribution. Edakkal rock-shelter probably has the richest variety of petroglyphs in the world. These petroglyphs are mute cultural vestiges of a bygone society, now perceived and assessed as 'art'. Behind the art lie unfathomable seminal religious beliefs of its practitioners and creators. The belief and meaning envisaged by its creators will never be truly explicit to us. There are some primitive religious practices and belief still lingering in the ethnic society, the meaning of which is never pondered but continued merely as traditions. Analyzing the still lingering primitive religious ideas and practices, an attempt is being made in this paper, to decode the history, meaning and beliefs associated with petroglyphs in Edakkal rock-shelter.

Edakkal rock shelter is the most unique and the earliest rock art site to be discovered in Kerala with large number of engravings or etching. This shelter was discovered by Fawcett just 15 years after the historic discovery of the Altamira paintings. The report on the shelter and its engravings by Fawcett is of exemplary nature and there is hardly any facet he left unrecorded or without interpretation (Fawcett 1901). Yet, it happens to be the most discussed rock shelter in academic circles and have been subjected to various studies and interpretations.

Edakkal shelter is located on a hill known as the Ambukuthimala at the elevation of about 4, 600 feet above MSL. The shelter has a lower and upper story. The lower story has no engravings and flowing through it is a perennial water stream. The upper story is reached after a steep climb that opens into a landing and to the right of it is an opening leading into a cleft between two rock formations. Between the cleft, on the top, rests a large boulder sheltering the cleaved rock formation, the further end of the cleft to the south is open to the sky. The rock surface on either side of the entrance is engraved or etched with strange looking stylized anthropomorphic figures, animals and other symbolic representations. These anthropomorphic figures though linear in delineation are quite articulate in execution. To attain coordination and best results it appears that the outline of the figure was first drawn and then subsequently etched or grooved out deeper. There are also a few inscriptions in the cave. Among the rock engraving or etchings in Kerala, apart from those at Edakkal, there is nothing much to discuss. There has been much speculation about the Edakkal engravings and their methodology, meaning and dates, from the time that these were first reported. It has been stated that Neolithic celts or iron implements were used to execute the engravings. The rock is comparatively soft, so engraving with any sharp flake can derive the required results. That not much effort is required to etch into this relatively soft rock is vouched for by numerous modern graffiti engraved by visitors. The artist who created the engravings did not attempt it as a work of art as we perceive it today' It was a reflection of his beliefs and practices. Conjecturing and infusing meaning to these enigmatic creations is a challenging and satisfying pursuit for researches.

## **SCOPE OF STUDY**

The scope of study is very limited because the Edakkal Cave is one of the tourist place in Wayanad, Kerala. The main reason is they don't even considering that the importance of Edakkal Cave. These kind of issues making limited the scope of study, not only that the lack of evidence also discourage this study. The availability of materials and studies about Edakkal Cave are in very low level but at the same time different kinds studies are still going on.

## **LIMITATIONS**

On the basis of this topic " EDAKKAL CAVE and its ENGRAVINGS", it is very difficult to get data about this. The officials don't have much records about this Edakkal cave because no one have the proper data about this. On the basis of this topic it is very difficult to collect the required information. These all are the limitations faced in this project.

## **SOURCES FOR THE STUDY**

The secondary sources consists of:

1. Published Reports.
2. Books
3. Articles
4. Journals

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF EDAKKAL CAVE**

### **Structure and the location of Edakkal Cave**

Edakkal Caves are two natural caves at a remote location at Edakkal, 25 km (15.5 mi) from Kalpetta in the Wayanad district of Kerala in India's Western

Ghats. They lie 1, 200 m (3, 900 ft) above sea level on Ambukutty Mala, near an ancient trade route connecting the high mountains of Mysore to the ports of the Malabar Coast. Inside the caves are pictorial writings believed to date to at least 6, 000 BCE, from the Neolithic man, indicating the presence of a prehistoric civilization or settlement in this region, The Stone Age carvings of Edakkal are rare and are the only known examples from South India.

Although they are called the Edakkal Caves these caves are more of a cleft or a rift which are approximately about 96 feet by 22 feet fissure which is said to have been caused by a piece of rock which was split away from the main body of rock. The symbols on these caves are carved out and have figures of animal and also the tools used by humans back then. Some of the symbols are yet to be deciphered.

There are mainly 3 kinds of carvings that are found inside the caves. It has even been said that the oldest of the carvings may even date back to about 8000 years which suggests that the caves were inhabited by different tribes at different points in time.

Fred Fawcett, a police official in the 1890 was the man who first discovered the caves and he understood the historic importance of the caves who then wrote an article about it bringing the cave to public notice and for all the scholars back then. Since that time the cave has been a sight for many historians through time.

Though the paintings come from about 5000 to 10000 BC the youngest paintings come from the era of the Indus Valley Civilization. Mr M. R.

Raghava a historian of the Kerala state archaeology department first identified “ a man with a jar cup” which led him to believe that those carving came from the time of the Indus Valley Civilization. There are also makes of the Harappa civilization and also marks of the Dravidian culture that are found in the caves. This leads us to believe that the caves were habited by different tribes and civilization over the years.

The republication of an article on Edakkal caves written by F. Fred Fawcett, a former Superintendent of Police who served British government in Kozhikode, comes as a welcome addition to the small body of literature on what is considered by scholars to be a glorious tribute to the greatness of human civilisation. It was Fred Fawcett who first discovered its anthropological and historical importance. Fawcett, like many other officers of the British government posted in India, had a keen interest in places and structures that had strong links with the culture and history of indigenous people and took time of his official duties to write about them. Fawcett came across Edakkal cave by accident. He had gone to Wayanad on an invitation from Colin MacKinzie, a planter who wanted him to join him on a hunting expedition. The planter showed him rock engraving in a cave and some very old implements which were found in his estate in 1890. Fawcett, it seemed, was quick to understand these were “ pre-historic”. On his next visit to the cave in 1894 and in 1895 he was able to throw more light on the importance of the cave and the drawings found there.

**The 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 was discovered in 1894 by F. Fawcett just 15 years after the historic discovery of the Altamira paintings. The report on the cave by Fawcett is of an exemplary nature and there is hardly any facet he left unrecorded or without an interpretation (Fawcett 1901). Yet it happens to be the most discussed rock shelter in academic circles in India and has been subject to various studies and interpretations.

The shelter is located on a hill known as the Ambukuthimala at an elevation of about 4,600 ft. The shelter has lower and upper storeys. The lower storey has no engravings and flowing through it is a perennial water stream. A steep climb opens on to a landing and to the right side of it is a passage leading into the upper shelter. This shelter is between two rock formations with a large boulder canopied at the top. The further end of the shelter is however open to the sky (Fig. 1). The rock surface on either side of the entrance is engraved or etched with strange-looking stylized anthropomorphic figures and other images (Fig. 2). These anthropomorphic figures, though linear in delineation, are quite articulate in execution. To attain coordination, symmetry and best results it appears that the outline of the figure was first drawn and subsequently etched or grooved out deeper. These figures are generally represented in single grooved lines and rarely figures with grooved double lines also occur.

There are also a few inscriptions in the cave. The left wall almost in the centre has a very prominent anthropomorphic figure with a strange face, headgear and arms (Fig. 3). Adjoining it is another equally large figure with a queer circular design at the chest. There are a few more anthropomorphic figures adjoining these, some small and some large. There are also some figures above the larger images in shallow depths compared with the larger figures. Animals like the dog, elephant, deer, blackbuck and peacock, plants and flowers, and a human figure with a hand shaped like a jar are among the depictions (Fig. 7). A wheeled cart (?) with a figure above on the extreme left (Fig. 5) and a lady with a square head-dress on the right end are interesting representations (Fig. 6). Spoke wheels and some geometric motifs are also noticed at many places along both the walls. There are also three inscriptions on this wall towards the upper empty space at the far end, which opens to the sky. On palaeographic grounds the earliest inscription is datable to the early historic period (Fig. 8). The inscriptions are away from the etching and at an elevated portion where sufficient natural light is available. On the right wall too there is a large anthropomorphic figure adjoining some smaller ones. Towards the far end opening to natural light is a ladder (?) with an anthropomorphic figure above it. There are a few other female figures elegantly carved, apart from animals like blackbuck, a queer bird with a long neck (peacock?) and some inscriptions with early palaeographic characters.

The location of Edakkal shelter is awe inspiring and bestows mystic feel even today. Nearly 4 feet of debris from the cave was cleared from the rock shelter soon after its initial discovery by Fawcett. He does not report of any stone artifact of prehistoric context from it. The debris of nearly two feet was



also removed from this cave recently in 2010-11 and during the process too no prehistoric stone artifact was found. This clearly shows that the rock shelter was never habited in the true sense but possibly was a place worship and veneration, like a temple by the aboriginals who once inhabited the region as stated by Fawcett. In general, it has been observed that rock art bearing shelters do not yield cultural materials indicating that they were rarely used for habitation and possibly had religious overtones and habited shelters tend to have fewer paintings and engravings.