
A Reappraisal of Pictographs from Pathipara, Marayoor, District Idukki, Kerala

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Abstract: *The pictographs at Pathipara have been known to connoisseurs of rock-art for over 44 years now. It is the most enigmatic shelter from the Marayoor region both in terms of its nature and motifs. Some of the largest anthropomorphic figures and cattle representation occurs in this shelter. The dates assigned to pictographs in the shelter by scholars in the past range from Mesolithic to Historic. In the wake of new evidences emerging from Dstretch photos, a reappraisal of the rock-art from the shelter deemed necessary and hence attempted in this article.*

Keywords: Pictographs, Pathipara, Superimposition, Bichrome, Anthropomorphic Figure, Shamanistic, Theyyam

Introduction

Pathipara/Ezhuthpara/Ezhuthala shelter is 2 km west of the DFO's office, Marayoor, on the pathway to the hamlet of Koodakkad. It was first brought to academic light by Padmanabhan Thampi (1976) and subsequently referred to in his PhD thesis (Thampi 1983). This site cannot be called a shelter in the true perspective as it is a large boulder rising 12m high and 10m wide like a projecting hood of a cobra hence called by the locals as Pathipara (Pathi-hood and Para-stone) (Figure 1). The projecting hood in the rock and the concavity beneath it are sufficient to shelter the pictographs from direct rain. Ezhuthpara/Ezhuthala is a common term in Kerala to denote rock shelters or caverns with Petroglyphs or Pictographs, which are considered as an ancient writing.

Environmental Settings

The site is located amidst the forested tracts of the Marayoor hill ranges. The projecting gneiss granite rock has developed a concavity and within it was a projecting ledge which has now given away.

Motifs

The concavity of the rock roughly measures 10 sq. m and contains a large number of painted motifs. The landscape and the concavity in the rock possibly carried some

animistic sacredness, and hence the paintings were done consecutively over various periods of time, as gleaned from the superimpositions or overlaps. There are at least five phases noticed in the paintings and the last phase is represented by white paintings followed by red painted English names. The paintings are found very high in the concavity of the rock surface and it would not have been possible to create them without the help of a bamboo pole, ladder or scaffolding. It is quite possible that the projecting rock ledge, now broken, also facilitated in creating the paintings.



Figure 1: General View of the Shelter

The motifs observed in the shelter are done in monochrome and bichrome, generally in the flat-wash technique (Figures 2a and 2b). The most popularly used monochrome colours are red-ochre and its variant shades. The dark reddish-brown or burnt sienna the bottom, one is to the left. They have 'v' shaped horns, elongated bodies, slightly upraised tail and stylistically demarcated hooves. The stylistic similarity noticed colour used in painting the bulls is apparently the earliest. Paintings are also noticed in bichrome (combination of red and white) as in the anthropomorphic figures and in white colour as well. Ithyphallic bulls are the most popular motif. These bulls are painted in three different styles. There are four bulls in dark reddish-brown colour (Figures 3a and 3b). Three bulls towards the middle are oriented to the right and, one to the left and it is inferred that they are contemporaneous execution. These bulls are overlapped by the anthropomorphic figures. There are two more bulls almost in level with the shoulder of the central anthropomorphic figure, in the same style and facing opposite directions (Fig. 4 a and 4b).



Figure 2a: View of Pictograph in the Rock Shelter



Figure 2b: View of Pictograph in the Rock Shelter
(Digitally Enhanced Image with DStretch)



Figure 3a: The Main Anthropomorphic Figure



Figure 3b: The Main Anthropomorphic Figure
(Digitally Enhanced Image with DStretch)



Figure 4a: Ithyphallic Bull Figurines

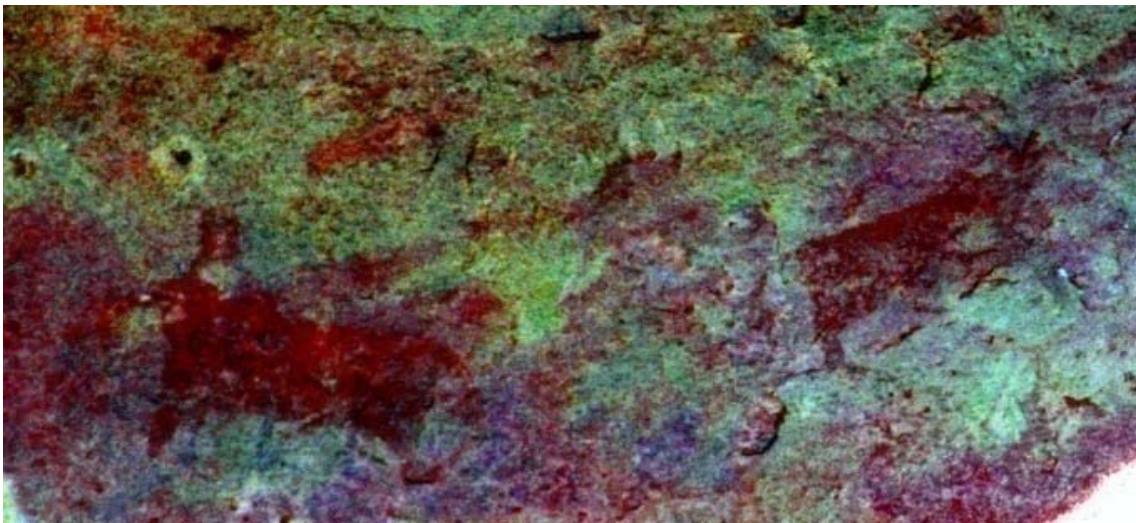


Figure 4b: Ithyphallic Bull Figurines
(Digitally Enhanced Image with DStretch)

Painted in red ochre in the flat wash technique, is a faded representation of a Nilgiri Tahr (*Nilgiritragus hylocrius*) (above the deer and behind the bull) (Figures 5a and 5b). Mathpal, in his work, has a reproduction of this Tahr (Mathpal 1998: Pl. 1A and 2A). It can be clearly seen in DStretch photographs (Figures 3b and 5b). The horns of the Tahr are oriented backwards and the hooves are stylized. It is seen in shades of pink in the DStretch photograph (Figure 5b). Superimposed on this animal figure is a faded anthropomorphic figure in white outlines with a body filled with a series of white meandering lines (Figure 5a and 5b). The feet of the anthropomorphic figure overlap the vertically drawn Sambar deer (*Rusa unicolor*). The Sambar deer is outlined in red ochre colour and very naturalistically depicted. Further right is another incompletely drawn deer and some hand prints (Figure 6a and 6b).



Figure 5a: Sambar Deer and Tahr



Figure 5b: Sambar Deer and Tahr
(Digitally Enhanced Image with DStretch)



Figure 6a: Sambar Deer and Hand Imprints

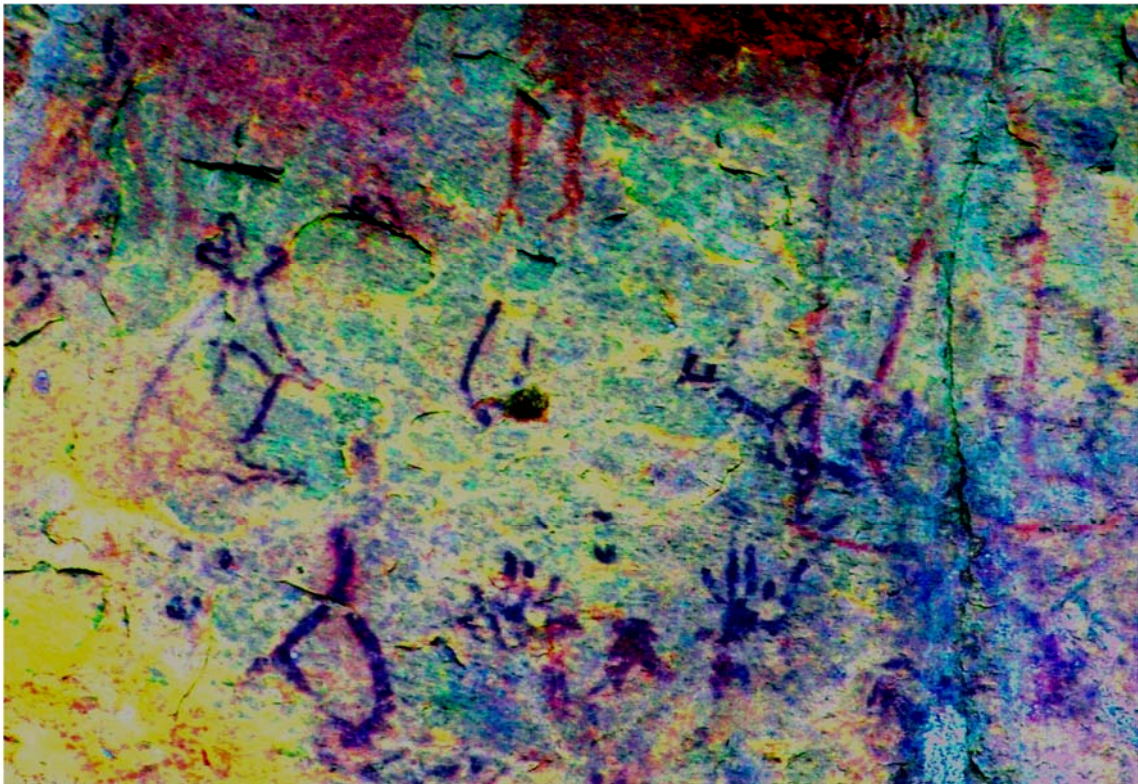


Figure 6b: Sambar Deer and Hand Imprints
(Digitally Enhanced Image with DStretch)

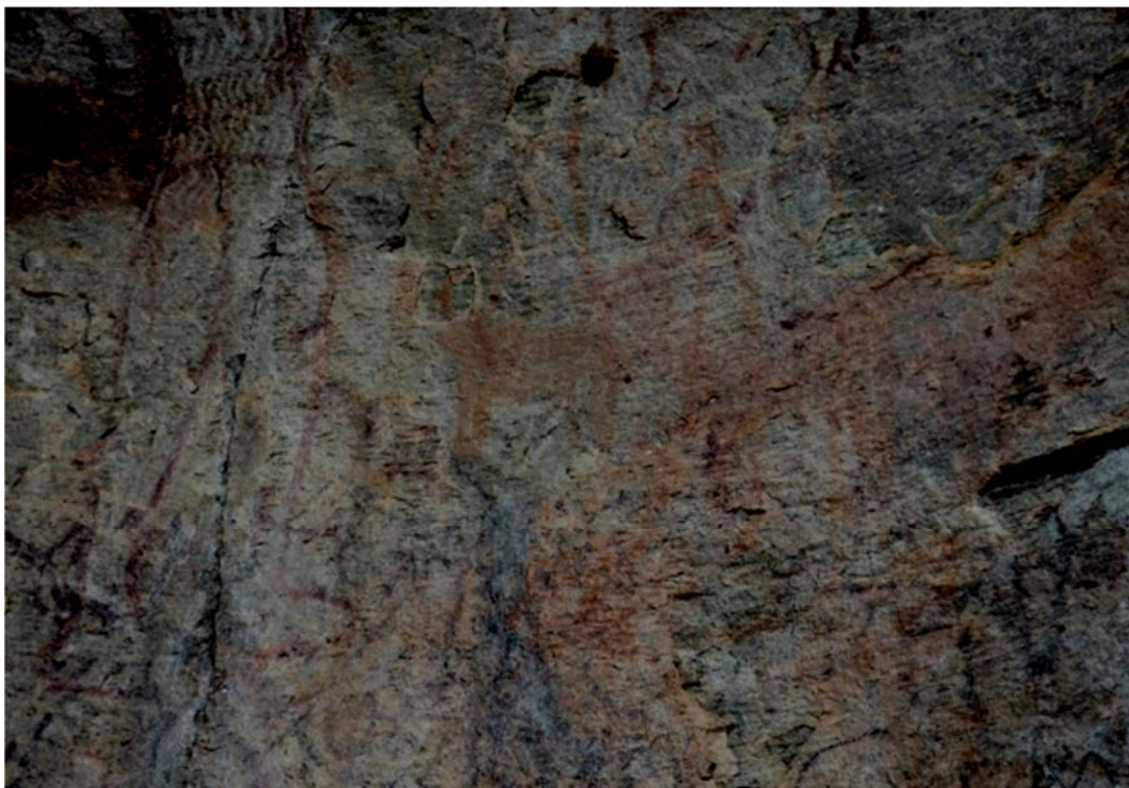


Figure 7a: Bull, Deer etc to Lower Right of the Main Figure



Figure 7b: Bull, Deer etc to Lower Right of the Main Figure
(Digitally Enhanced Image with DStretch)

To the right of the large anthropomorphic figure's knee, is an ithyphallic bull to the left in a reddish-orange hue and possibly done later than the reddish-brown bulls (Figures 7a and 7b). A Nilgiri Tahr or deer is noticed behind the bull, but it is almost indistinct while viewed directly. It is observed in DeStretch photos with a pinkish-red hue (Figure 7b). The bull and the Nilgiri tahr (*Hermitagus hylocrius*) are overlapped by the third anthropomorphic figure to the extreme right (Figure 8a). To the right of this anthropomorphic figure is a vertically drawn bi-conical shaped capsule with a median line (Figure 8b).

A third anthropomorphic figure is faded and depicted facing left, with raised right hand and the head as a roundel (Figure 8a). It is the largest of the three anthropomorphic figures in the shelter. The raised hand is seemingly in a conflict with the anthropomorphic figure in the centre. There are some detached vertically flowing lines depicted over his torso.



Figure 8a: Anthropomorphic Figure



Figure 8b: A bi-conical Capsule

(Digitally Enhanced Images with DStretch)

The most clearly visible anthropomorphic figure among the three is the one in the centre (Figures 3a and 3b). The striated white lines within the figure's body draws similarity with paintings noticed on Russet Coated Ware associated with megaliths in south India. This anthropomorphic figure has a narrow waist and broad shoulders; and his right hand is raised up and the left lowered. The face looks beastly or like a bird. These anthropomorphic figures are apparently the largest Pictographs in the rock-art of Kerala. These anthropomorphic figures apparently carried some totemic or magico-religious significance. They could be an ancestral or a protective spirit perpetuated and invoked for successful hunts, or for the safety or for the wellbeing of

humans and live-stock. Petroglyphs of anthropomorphic figures associated with bull figurines and spirals have been reported from Buddhana Jeddu in coastal Karnataka region (Murugeshi 2015: 430-433).

The Kani tribesman in Thiruvananthapuram district offer prayers before hunts to ancestors and forest spirits for a successful hunt. They believe that after the prayers are offered to animistic gods, the hunter would be lead to the place of the destined hunt, and they believe that the animal offers itself to be hunted.

To the extreme right of the shelter is an elongated bi-conical saucer shaped object with a median line. A similar object noticed close to shamanistic figures has been reported from Kurugode in Karnataka (Mahadevaiah and Kumar 2015: 412, Fig. 22).



Figure 9a: Writing in Red to the Bottom of the Shelter



Figure 9b: Writing in Red to the Bottom of the Shelter
(Digitally Enhanced Image with DStretch)

To the bottom of the shelter there is a series of symbols in red colour running almost in a line. It is not clear to the naked eye and vents an alphabetical character (Figure 9 a). The photograph when subjected to DStretch, reveals names 'Kala' 'Bharath' and 'Bhayan' or 'Bhayam', written in English (Figure 9 b). English education must have reached the common masses in the Marayoor valley only in the latter half of the 20th century CE. This graffiti can be considered vandalism but given the secluded and protected nature of the site, and the colour used, it was apparently done by educated kids from the tribal habitation close by. It is faded and not fresh and hence apparently at least one or two decades old. This evidence clearly indicates that rock-art tradition in Marayoor valley continued to modern times. There are similar indications also from Attala, Vayumala etc., which will be discussed below.



Figure 10: To the Left Wall, A Man Toeing a Horse



Figure 11: Anthropomorphic Figures as Though Running

Towards the bottom right are some paintings in white done in flat wash style. One of the depictions is a man toeing a horse (Figure 10). There is a large shamanistic figure and further to the right of it are two men running towards each other (Figure 11). Along the same surface, further right though faded in white, are some magical squares with some sort of alphabet like formations within it (Figure 12a and 12b). Mathpal has a painted version of this faded motif in his work (Mathpal 1998 Plate 3B).



Figure 12a: A Fading Large Magical Chart

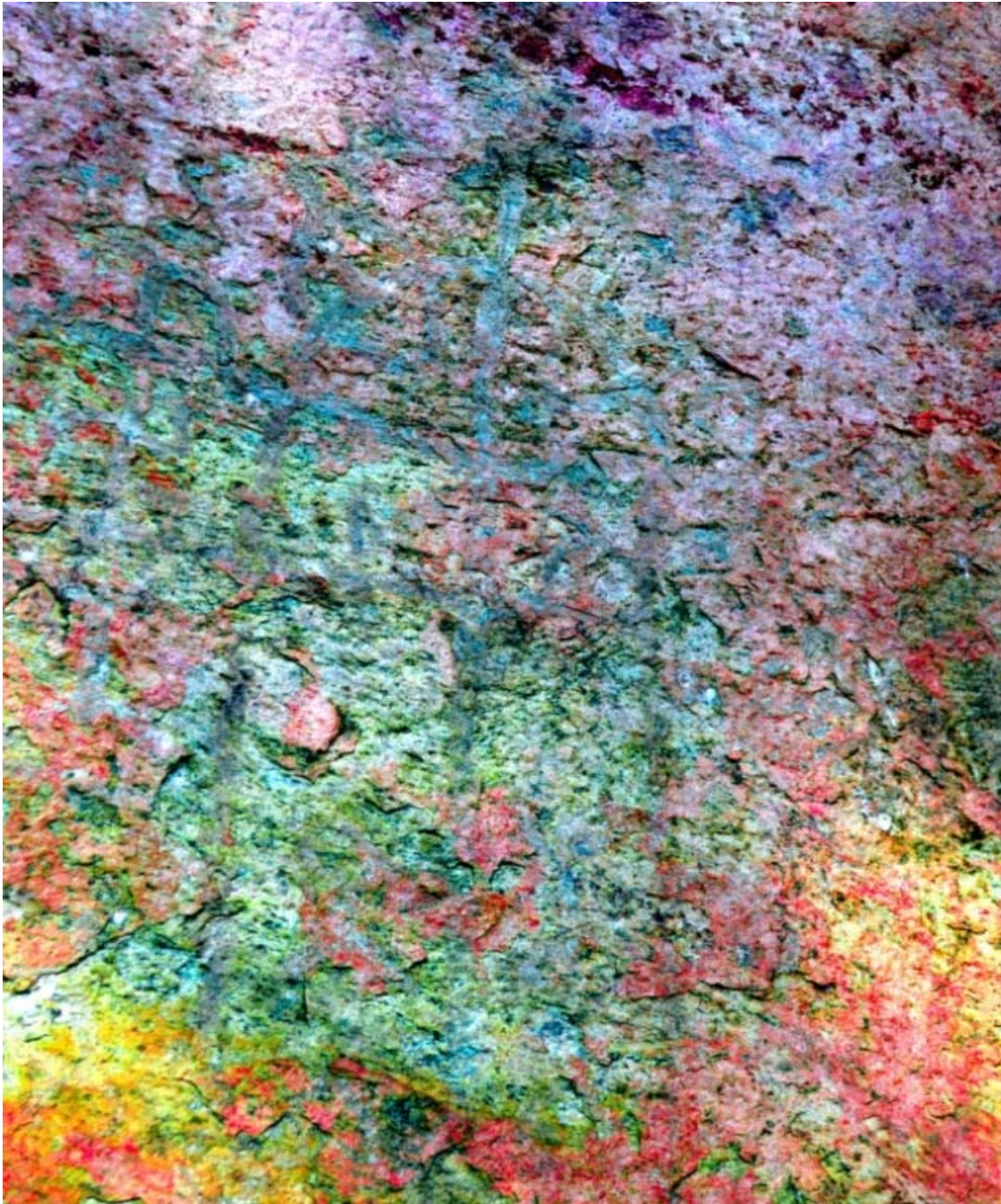


Figure 12b: A Fading Large Magical Chart (Digitally Enhanced Image with DStretch)

Observations

In a way, the Pictographs from Ezuthuala / Ezuthu para are symbolic writing, possibly with spiritual / ritualistic undertones. Ezuthala appears to contain some of the earliest pictographs from the Marayoor region. Among the animal representations in red colour, bulls predominate compared to other endemic wild species like Nilgiri tahr and deer. Among the white coloured pictographs, horses find depictions. No carnivorous animal is found depicted. Among the other major and largest depictions are the

anthropomorphic figures. The three large anthropomorphic figures, with their red outlined body and white serrated lines within, appear to carry animistic/ shamanistic/ protective/ divine/ exorcizing character. In ancient and prevalent ethnic/ tribal religious beliefs, all illness and malady in life are believed to be caused by evil spirits. Eradication of evil spirits and keeping them pacified was the essential duty assigned to shamans. Shamans using chants accompanied by drums, bells and sacrifices, and solicited help from ancestral spirits or animistic gods to eradicate evil spirits or keep them satisfied.

Shamans nearly all over the world, while practicing their craft, disguise their faces using masks. They also use colourful straps of vegetation or cloth to adorn their body, and often their hands hold weapons or strips of cloth or vegetation. The disguise is probably for two reasons. One is to lend the shaman a divine status, overlooking his physical and social status, and the other, possibly for his own safety and wellbeing. In Kerala most of the Theyyam and Thirra performers hail from the Malayan, Velan, Vannan, and Peruvannan communities were considered as the so called 'lower caste'. They adopt elaborate, makeup, costumes and masks to transform into the gods and goddesses which the so called 'higher communities' worship. The costume, masks etc., definitely plays an important role in dispelling the so called 'caste' factor of the performers. To probe this facet further, the author discussed the issue with some practitioners of Theyyam and Thirra in Kerala. They could not offer any reasonable explanation for coiffure and costumes used and could only state that it was part of an ancient tradition. Shamans' world over use masks and costumes possibly to disguise their true persona before god. There is belief that a person who sees god face to face would not survive, also finds reflection in the Bible, (Bible, Exod. XXXIII.20).

The large shamanistic anthropomorphic figures painted in this shelter do seem to carry a protective character. The superimpositions of pictographs in the snake hood like shelter indicate that the space was reused over varied periods of time, and possibly carried some animistic importance. In the rock paintings at Vellarikombai, shamanistic anthropomorphic figures were exclusively painted in red. The local Kurumba tribe now residing there believes that it was created by their ancestors. They attribute various names to the figures and hold them in reverence. Annually, shamans from the community conduct ceremonies to enhance the vitality of the painted divine forms, so that their kith and kin, resources and livestock remain protected. It is quite possible that anthropomorphic figures here carried a similar quotient. Evidences from Ezuthala also indicate that colour cannot be used to demarcate age. It also emerges from analysis that it is rather impossible to date/place all the pictographs in red-ochre colour to a period earlier than the white coloured ones, as the English names clearly reveal the use of red colour up to modern times.

Dates

Paraphrasing the pictographic activity at the Ezuthala site into different cultural periods and understanding the meaning of the creations is a knotty issue. Thampi, who

studied them first, assigned the antelope, cattle and horse to the Mesolithic period, dating back to around 7000BC, the anthropomorphic figures to the Chalcolithic period of about 2000BC and others to the early historic period of 300BC (Gurukkal 2010 107). Following the classification adopted for rock- art at Bhimbhettka, Mathpal divided the rock art at Ezuthupara into four phases. In his opinion, Phase I, represented by the deer, tahr etc., date to the late Mesolithic (10,000-4,000 BP), Phase II represented by the bulls are of Neolithic period dating to around 3500 BP and paintings of Phase III, IV and V respectively go to 2700, 2500 and 2200 BP, during Megalithic period. Recently, some scholars have questioned and expressed dissent to the Mesolithic-Neolithic association and feel that the whole corpus of Kerala's rock-art can only be dated from Megalithic to succeeding historic phases (Chandramaouli 2014 47).

The dates deduced / assigned are often on the basis of animals depicted, or the style in which they are depicted. This method, however, is not foolproof, but neither can it be totally done away with. In this shelter, none of the local and wild species of animals (deer/Tahr) are shown being hunted. A domestic scene depicts a person tending a horse; this, however, appears to be a very late creation. Bulls/cows depicted in the pictographs are definitely domesticated species. Rock-art depiction and faunal remains of cattle have been reported from a host of sites in the Deccan Plateau region, and the earliest may date to Neolithic/Megalithic times. There is no authentic habitation site dating to Neolithic/ Megalithic reported/excavated within the boundaries of Marayoor region or even Kerala state as such. Within the confines of Kerala, the Neolithic period is represented by a few accidentally found Neolithic Celts, and the widely spread Megalithic period is characterized by varied types of burial erections. In Idukki region, Celts have been reported from megalithic urn burials (Sandra et al. 2017 524-525). In the Marayoor valley, the most noticeable and abundant cultural vestiges are of the megalithic period.



Figure13: Feral Cattle in Chinnar Wildlife Sanctuary

It is very difficult to date rock art with accuracy. Relying on colour, nature of attritions and overlaps, five phases of pictographic activity are postulated at Ezuthala shelter. The earliest pictographs of Phase I are possibly the four bull figurines done in flat wash technique using dark brownish-red or burnt-sienna hue. Cattle depicted in the paintings need not date to the Neolithic period as previously assumed. Even today, feral cattle similar to the ones depicted in the paintings can be seen freely roaming in the forested tracts of Anjanad valley and Chinnar sanctuary (Figure 13).

Phase II is possibly represented by the pictographs of the Sambar deer, Nilgiri tahr (now faded). The deer is outlined naturalistically in brownish red-hue and the Nilgiri tahr is painted in hue of orange-red ochre in flat wash technique.



Figure 14: Horse in Marayoor



Figure 15: Gamalla Muggu

Phase III is represented by the three anthropomorphic figures that overlap or superimpose the bulls and other animal figurines, and hence are, obviously later than these. It has been suggested that the serrated lines seen on the body of the anthropomorphic figure draws parallel to the Russet Coated Pottery associated with the Megalithic period, dating largely to early historic times (Gurukkal 2010 107). Similar seriated lines are observed while representing deceased ancestors / spirits in death ceremonies practiced by the Gamalla community of Andhra (Figure 15) (Thurston 1909 vol.2.257). Hence, serrated lines noticed need not exactly be a practice limited to megalithic period. Given the large number of megaliths that lay scattered in Marayoor region, the possibility of these anthropomorphic figures being painted during Megalithic-Historic times has a strong possibility. The animals overlapped by the anthropomorphic figures are definitely earlier than them but do not seem to go beyond the megalithic-historic times in the region.



Figure 16a: Chenganperu, Dolmen with Masonry Wall (Courtesy Nikhil Das)



Figure 16b: Kundiapallam, Dolmen with Masonry Wall

The megalithic monuments/ culture in Marayoor region does not appear to be very early. There are many dolmens here with cairn packing and a stone masonry wall around it. In Tamilakam, dressed stone masonry work came to be used for temple and other constructions largely from the Pallava period (around 7th CE). No dressed stone masonry works dating prior to this have been reported. The well-maintained alignment of the masonry walls and well set cornerstones of the enclosure wall around the megaliths in Marayoor indicate of their being erected possibly only posterior to 7th century CE (Figure 16a and 16b). The habitation site at Nachivayal, excavated by Nikhildas, also yielded potsherds possibly dating from the historic period to modern

times (Nikhildas 2018 109-112; Pl.6.22, 6.25). There is also an inscription on a monolith which mentions a Pallavaraya (Pallava king), all indicating that much of the habitation and megalithic dolmens in the region were possibly perpetuated only the early historic/medieval period.

Phase IV is represented by the horse, anthropomorphic figures and some abstract motif in white colour. The horse depicted here are similar to the ones noticed in Attala. The horse represented closely resembles the ones currently used for transporting goods to habitations unconnected by proper roads in the hilly terrains of Anjunad valley (Figure 14). These white pictographic representations may date between the late medieval and modern times, considering Tamil writings are observed along with white pictographs in some of the cave and dolmen sites in the Marayoor region.

Phase V will be represented by the modern graffiti paintings in red and white colour and recording names in English alphabets as at the Ezuthuala, Vayumala etc.

Conservation Issues

The rock-art site of Ezuthpara, located within the reserved forest, is a protected monument of the Archaeology Department; Government of Kerala. Though protected, the Department has not been able undertake adequate measures towards its conservation and preservation. The protected area has not been demarcated nor is there a protection notice board declaring its status.

The rock where the paintings are found is a granite gneiss rock formation which might date back to 2,500 million years. Some of the oldest paintings in the concavity of the rock may go back to Megalithic-Historic times. As cited above, the megalithic dolmens in this area are apparently very late and may go only to the early historic/medieval period and possibly continued to almost modern times. The paintings in the concavity of the rock are better preserved than those on the outer surfaces. There are environmental and human factors affecting the paintings at the site.

Environmental factors include, a) water seeping from the top which also drains with it salt and minerals present in the soil. Salt encrustations in white colour can be seen dripping over the paintings in the concavity of the rock (Fig.5.1.1b). During summer months the evening sun from around 2PM to 5.30PM directly falls on the paintings (Fig.1). Despite the use of natural colours in the execution of the paintings, ultraviolet rays contained in the sunlight are causing discoloration and obliteration. Some paintings are hardly visible these days. The human indulgence factor is obviously vandalism. There are visitors scribbling their names on the rock surface close to the paintings and sometimes on the paintings itself.

Conservation Measures that could be Applied

The seepage of water from the top needs to be checked. After examining the upper portions of the rock, measures may be taken to remove the accumulated mud, if any,

and water channeling with matching cement concreting, without being obviously visible from the below may be done. There is an urgent necessity to check the excessive sunlight directly falling on the paintings. A screen or curtain matching the environs and made of eco-friendly material like split bamboo or grass may be hung from the top of the shelter to the middle level to shade the paintings from direct sunlight.

The shelter is in the reserved forest area and hence cannot be approached without the permission of the forest officials. This in fact restricts tourist movement to the site, and hence in a way protects the site from the day to day nuisances created by inflow of visitors. To familiarize the importance of the rock art at the site, a trilingual cultural notice board in English, Malayalam and Tamil need to be affixed at the site. A protection notice board needs to be installed at the site to make vandals aware of the legal consequence if damages are caused to the rock art. The immediate vicinity the rock art site needs to be barricaded or fenced using timber so that people do not get access to the rock surface bearing paintings to scribble their names.

Concluding Remarks

Some of the earliest pictographs from Marayoor region are almost certainly from Ezuthuala/ Ezuthu para. However, even the earliest Pictographs in this shelter does not seem to go beyond the megalithic period which itself seems to date only to historic times.

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