Iron Age-Early Historic Graffiti and Symbols in South India and Edakkal Rock Art: A Few Observations *

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Abstract

Graffiti are post-firing marks found on the Iron Age-Early Historic megalithic ceramics deriving from burial and habitation contexts of South India. These graffiti were perhaps used as symbols of visual communication and pictography. It is not certain if they had any phonetic value or represented a form of writing, but it is certain that they had communicative value. This paper suggests that they had multiple symbolic functions. In the context of graffiti occurring in isolation, i.e. without any link with Tamil-Brahmi inscription, they might have signified the ownership and/or clan identity. In the context of their association with Tamil-Brahmi inscription they might have meant the clan identity. Interestingly, some of the symbols appear to be pictographic in nature. An interesting symbol of bullock cart on megalithic pottery resembles the engraving at Edakkal rock shelter of Kerala. This occurrence helps to date the Edakkal engraving to the Iron Age megalithic context.
Keywords: *Megaliths, Iron Age, Early Historic, Graffiti, Edakkal,,Rock Art.*

I. Introduction

In India, graffiti are found on pottery from the Harappan times (Lal, 1975). They are very common on the Iron Age-Early Historic megalithic ceramics and there are debates on their exact function. In this paper, I discuss the significance of graffiti on the Iron Age-Early Historic material remains, mostly ceramics, of Tamil Nadu, with a few cross references to the similar finds from the Edakkal cave of Kerala.

Cognitive Development and Rock Paintings

The ability to mentally observe and visualize the physical features, organisms, and their activities of the real world in three dimension and draw them on two-dimensional media and to conceive and

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create new imaginary symbols was acquired by the modern humans from the late prehistoric times (Mithen, 1999). Prehistoric people could visualize pictures and images, of realistic and imaginary entities in their minds and they drew such images on the walls of rock shelters and caves, bodies and trees or on any other objects through engravings and/or paintings. Through these paintings or engravings, they conveyed certain messages or represented the perceived realities or imaginary concepts for a specific purpose or just as a mode of artistic, creative expression, without any specific utilitarian function. The idea of early paintings might have emerged due to the human observation of landscapes, impressions of animal tracks, foot and hand prints and shades of objects on surfaces. The pictograms developed first and they represented visual narratives of events or images created as part of magico-religious functions. The second transformation was symbolic meaning to the images. Symbols began to represent anything and everything that people or the creator wanted to mean. These symbols are sometimes culture-specific and may be universal in some contexts, but their meaning could be mostly distinct and context specific, with occasional and accidental similarity. Symbols were used for simple communicative, ritual and magico-religious purposes, and for a number of socio-economic and cultural functions. Symbols are found in various forms such as paintings and engravings on rocks and objects and graffiti on ceramics.

Iron Age-Early Historic-Megalithic Burials

The megalithic burials were built for the dead and also for warriors who were killed during battles in the Iron Age-Early Historic South India (Leshnik, 1974; Mohanty and Selvakumar, 2001). These burials are generally dated between 1300 BCE and 500 CE in South India. While the Iron Age is placed between 1200 BCE and 500 BCE, the Early Historic period, between 500 BCE and 500 CE, in South India (Morrison et al., 2015; Rajan et al., 2021). The so-called "megalithic" burials at many contexts may not be truly megalithic in nature, i.e. they were made without the use of large stones; but in general their material culture is identical and hence, all the burials are treated as megalithic, irrespective of their diminutive nature, as a cultural expression. These burials and monuments were not only created in the Iron Age and they were also built during the Early Historic period. There is a possibility that some of them were continued to be made even in the early medieval period. The megalithic burials have black-and-red ware, coarse red ware and black ware pottery vessels which were placed as grave

goods within the burials. These burials also produce etched-carnelian beads, quartz beads and pendants, lapis lazuli beads, spacers, gold beads and ornaments, copper-bronze artifacts such as bells, vessels and rings and diverse varieties of iron objects, animal bones and plant remains, which were placed as offerings for the dead, perhaps for their use in afterlife. Some of the megaliths are virtual treasure troves with a lot of artifacts which were deposited as offerings. The interesting symbolic vestiges found in the megaliths are the graffiti drawn on the ceramics in post-firing condition and they are very commonly found across South India.

II. Graffiti

Megalithic Graffiti

An interesting component of the symbolic and cognitive spheres of the megalithic culture is the graffiti found on the burial pottery more frequently, and those from the habitation sites (Yazdani, 1917). However, the meaning and significance of these graffiti could be different in the contexts of those found in the burials and habitations. The graffiti mostly occur on the exterior surface of the pottery, near the rim, neck and body. These graffiti are post-firing marks, perhaps scratched on the pottery with a sharp iron or metal tool. The scratches are often not very deep and they are just up to the surface of the burial pottery, and in most cases only the slip coated on the pottery has been scratched. This aspect indicates that they were made by the users or consumers, i.e. the people who buried the dead, and not by the potters who were the producers of the ceramics. These markings seem to have been made in a hurry, through a very fast movement of hand), as part of the rituals associated with the creation of the burials and funerary practices.

The exact nature and purpose of the megalithic graffiti are uncertain. An interesting aspect of the graffiti is their common occurrence. Certain megalithic burials have only one specific type of graffito, which may convey some idea related to the affinities of the buried individual. Their origin is uncertain, and they occur in the Harappan sites and also reported in a few Neolithic sites. Many of these graffiti have similarities with the symbols on the Harappan/Indus seals (Lal, 1960). Probably, these markings indicate the identity of the people who were buried. It could be their ethnic symbol representing a particular clan or group. It is not clear if these graffiti represented a form of pictographic or ideographic writing.

Previous Research

Megalithic graffiti have attracted the attention of several scholars, including Yazdani (1917), B.B. Lal (1960), Leshnik (1974), K. Rajan (1994, 2015), S. Gurumurthy (1999), and Boivin et al. (2003). B.B. Lal (1960) has found a high percentage of similarity between the megalithic burial graffiti and the Indus script. Iravatham Mahadevan finds parallels between the graffiti from the megalithic burials and the Indus script. The graffiti on pottery from Sulur near Coimbatore have similarities with the symbols from the Harappan/Indus script (Mahadevan n.d.). Mahadevan tends to link the language of the megalithic people and the Indus people. He adds that "I suggest that such close resemblances are possible only if the South Indian Megalithic script is related to the Indus script." Hunt studied the graffiti on pottery and said that they are not potter's mark as they were post-firing in nature (Hunt 1924). According to him, similar marks are found in the same burials in a few instances, and they also appear in different burials, and hence, they cannot be owner's marks.

Fig. 1. Graffiti on pottery from Sembiyankandiyur, Mayiladuturai, excavated by Tamil Nadu State Archaeology Department

As mentioned earlier, the megalithic graffiti were drawn in a hurry, just before the pottery vessels were placed in the burials. Hence their orientation is not uniform, with the orientation of the vessels. The Fig. 1 shows double arrow symbols sometime facing the mouth of the vessels and sometime in the opposite side. Probably, the orientation in which the person, who marked them, held the vessel, while marking the symbols, was the reason for the variation in the orientation of the graffiti. This reveals that the person who marked them was doing it mechanically, and was not bothered about the orientation of the marking. The markings found on the megalithic pottery from Sanur (Banerjee and Soundararajan, 1959) show inter-mixture of several individual graffiti in different combinations (Gurumurthy, 1999: 294). It is not clear if this was intentional or they just wanted to draw all the symbols without any specific order.

Mark of Clans

Were these symbols marks of specific clans? It appears that, in

many cases, each burial has separate, distinct set of graffiti markings. This pattern has been noticed at many sites including the excavated burial site of Sanur in old Chingleput district of Tamil Nadu.

A Rare Bullock-Cart Symbol

Sometimes pictorial representations are found on the mega-lithic pottery. For example, a burial excavated at Anakkara, Palakkad district in Kerala by M.G. University, Kottayam under the direction of Rajan Gurukkal, interestingly, produced a bullock-cart symbol (Fig. 2) (Shajan et al., 2013-14) and the same symbol appears on the Edakkal rock shelter (Fig. 3) in Kerala (Fawcett 1901). The same symbol appears at Kodumanal (Gurumurthy, 1999: 115). Gurumurthy has interpreted this symbol as a temple tower and such subjective in-terpretations are inevitable in the study of symbols (1999: 115). This symbol very much matches with a bullock cart. Similar bullock carts are found in Central India (Fig. 4) and the bullock carts of the Kota community exhibited at IGRMS, Bhopal. This bullock cart design is much different from the bullock cart models found at the Indus valley. In this context, the bullock mainly indicates the similarity in design and suggests that Edakkal engravings are dateable to the Iron Age period. However, their meaning at Edakkal and megalithic pottery could be different and context specific.

Perhaps such artifacts became symbol of a clan or group of a group of people or traders. Like the manner in which the term Katalan or Meenavan refers to the Pandyas, the bullock cart might have re-ferred to the name of a clan. Symbols of fish are found on the ceram-ics in several contexts (Figs. 5 and 6) and their meaning could be different and it cannot be argued that the fish symbols always signi-fied the Pandyas. Fish being a symbol of fertility, it is found carved on many temples of later period and similarly they could have been used as symbol of fertility or prosperity without connection with the Pandyas. However, the symbol occurring on the Pandya coins could signify the Pandya identity.

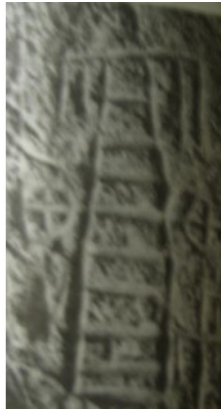Fig. 2. Bullock cart graffito on a bowl excavated at Anakkara, Photo:Author

Fig. 3. A representation of bullock cart at Edakkal Engraving in Kerala.
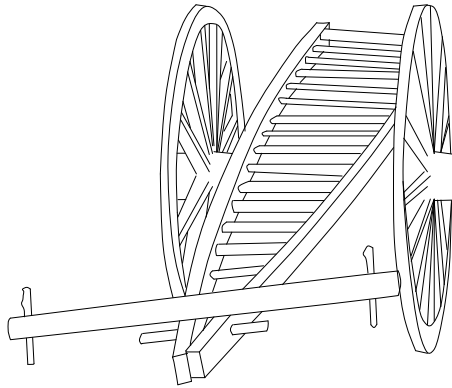Source: Rajan Gurukkal

Fig. 4 Line drawing of a bullock cart from Bhopal.
Source: canstockphoto.com, image 15896805, Line drawing by T. Thangadurai.

Fig. 5. Pottery with Fish Symbols from Keezhadi.
Courtesy: The Hindu and Archaeological Survey of India

Fig. 6. Pottery with Fish Symbols from Keezhadi.
Courtesy: Archaeological Survey of India

Script/Personal Names

Were the symbols of the megalithic graffiti part of a script? Could these graffiti refer to the name of individuals? What was the importance of these symbols to the megalithic people? A graffito at Porunthal excavated by K.Rajan is interpreted to reads as "va ya ra" (Fig. 7). It could be a rare case of graffiti appears to be mentioning the name of an individual from the megalithic burials of South India. Most of the Tamil-brahmi inscriptions are found from the habitation contexts. It is a surprise find, since such script is not normally found in the burials. Interestingly, there is a graffito in the end of this inscription (?) as noticed at Kodumanal and in some rock shelters with Tamil Brahmi. A solitary Brahmi script claimed to have been found at Adichanallur inside an urn is not considered authentic. Perhaps, it was an erroneous observation (Subramanian, 2005)

Fig. 7. A Brahmi inscription (or graffito?) from a burial reading
"va ya ra," with a graffito in the end (Porunthal).

Early Historic Brahmi script and graffiti

Script was thought to have appeared in the Tamil region of South India from ca. third century BCE, and recently it is argued that script developed earlier context around sixth or fifth century BCE There are serious debates on the beginning of writing in Tamil region. K. Rajan has proposed, based on recent C-14 dating of the sites of Porunthal and Kodumanal, that script was introduced in the fifth century BCE (Rajan and Yatheeskumar, 2013; Rajan et al., 2021). Iravatham Mahadevan (2003) and Y. Subbarayalu (2008) place the introduction of script in Tamil region around third century BCE. Govindaraj from the Museum Department of Government of Tamil Nadu has noticed similarity between these symbols and those from the Indus Script, and he has attempted to assign phonetic value to some of the graffiti from Kodumanal (Personal Communication).

On several megalithic pottery sherds (mostly from the habitation site) from Kodumanal, symbols are found at the end of the Tamil Brahmi inscriptions. Similar pattern is also found on one pottery inscription found at Pattanam in Kerala (Shajan et al., 2004; Cherian et al., 2007).

The pottery graffiti found along with Tamil Brahmi inscriptions at Kodumanal are discussed below (Subbarayalu, 2008: 211) (Fig. 8):

No. 5 reads "…Na n" and has with a diamond shape within a "Brahmi Ma" like symbol in the end.

No. 11 reads "kA vE" with multiple vertical lines (broken) in the end.

No. 21 reads "kOn" with Brahmi "Ma" like symbol within U symbol with double strokes on the top right, in the end.

No. 31 reads "kuviran Atan" with an arrow-like symbol (broken) in the end.

No. 79 reads "santatan" has double U symbols in the end.

No. 168 reads "…kani" and a triangle with double horns within a U symbol, in the end

Why did they place the symbol in the end of an inscription? Was it a marker of their family identity? Perhaps symbolism was strong in the Iron Age when there was no regular script and perhaps, such pictorial elements continued even after the introduction of script in the Early Historic period. They could indicate the family name or clan name or their occupation or guild to which they belonged.
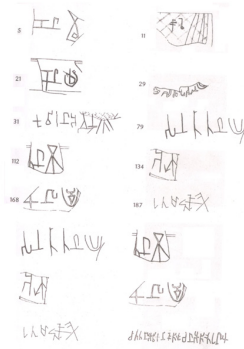
Fig. 8 graffiti found along with Tamil Brahmi inscriptions at Kodumanal
(After Y. Subbarayalu 2008)

Symbols along with the Brahmi script from the Rock shelters

The Tamil Brahmi inscriptions of Tamil Nadu bear certain rare symbols (Fig. 9). And they show similarities with the markings on the pottery from the megalithic sites.

Symbol A: Circle with Hook

Iravatham Mahadevan's Symbol A (Mahadevan, 2003: 205) is found at three sites in 10 times in 9 inscriptions. These Tamil Brahmi inscriptions are found at Vikkiramangalam, Kongarpuliyankulam and Azhagarmalai near Madurai. The symbol has a circle with one hook each above and below. In some cases, three strokes extending from a central circle are found. These symbols could indicate about a particular group of merchants. It is also identified as a symbol representing gold. The symbol might be a representation of a ring. Sometimes, it has two and five strokes. It has been found at Kodumanal on a pottery as a graffito.

Symbol B: Four square

A symbol found along with Brahmi inscription has four squares/ rectangles within a square or rectangle. This symbol is found at the site of Kongarpuliyankulam and on pottery at Kodumanal.

Symbol C: Trident or tree

A symbol resembling a trident is found along with a Brahmi inscription at Edakkal along with a Cera inscription and Mahadevan (2003) relates this symbol with a palm tree, the totem tree of the Cheras. It also occurs on the seal from Anakkodai.

Symbol D: Bow and arrow

The Bow and arrow symbol is found on pottery as well as on the rock surface (along with early Vattezhuttu inscription) at the site of

Sittannavasal. The link to the Cheras is not clear here. It is a symbol of the Cheras and interestingly, it has been found at Kodumanal which was under the territory of the Cheras.
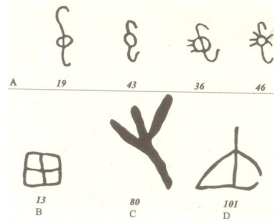

Fig. 9 Symbols Occurring along with Tamil-Brahmi Inscriptions.
Source: Mahadevan, 2003.

Symbol on Seals

A rare seal from Sri Lanka has both Tamil Brahmi and graffiti (Fig. 10). Similar combination of Brahmi and graffiti has been found in Tamil Nadu as well as Sri Lanka (Rajan and Bopearachchi, 2002).

Fig. 10. Inscription read a "kO ve ta" (left to right)
and graffito found on Anaikkodal Seal of Sri Lanka

Symbols on Coins

The coins of Chera have the symbol of bow and arrow; the Pandyas, the fish and the Cholas, the tiger. These symbols suggest the adoption of a unique symbol for each dynasty and these symbols could have been part of the clan identity in the early times. Similarly each dynasty adopted a tree and a plant as their symbol. This could have been meant for identifying the clan or sides of a warrior in a battle and for several purposes. The punch-marked coins found in South India also have several symbols and they are not discussed here.

III. Discussions

Clan identity

The symbols on the megalithic burials have cognitive signific-

ance. The graffiti appear to be pictograms in certain context and they could indicate the occupation or the rare possession of the person. Anakkara (Kerala) burial graffito could suggest that the burial belonged to the owner of a bullock cart and or the individual was doing some occupation related to bullock cart or at least the person owned a bullock cart or the person who offered the object had bullock cart as a clan mark. There is a possibility that the people adopted certain symbols as part of their group identity and several families might have had same symbols, as we find the repetition of symbols on the megalithic burials. It is common to find people or family named after the objects they own or by occupation and it becomes their identity. Many of the house names of Kerala reflect the natural features or the localities in which their house was originally located. The people might have used one symbol to represent their house name or clan name. It is possible that the bullock cart at Edakkal represented the actual object and a pictogram, while at Anakkara it could have had symbolic meaning. The graffiti could have related to the identity of the clan to which an individual belonged. They could be some kind of pictographic writing intended to be read. There is an interpretation that the Edakkal bullock cart represents the vehicle of Sun god. Here too it could have represented the symbol of movement.

Professional Identity

The adoption of certain symbols could have emerged out of the profession (occupation) of an individual or a group. Bullock-cart might have been adopted by those who possessed it or who did some kind of activities (commercial) using the bullock cart.

Identity of the Chiefs

Based on the evidence from the Sangam literature as well as the coins of the early historic period, it is clear that each chief or Vendar had his own insignia. The Pandya had fish symbol; the Chola, tiger; and the Chera, bow and arrow. In the inscriptions Meenavan is used to refer to the Pandyas and Villavan to refer to the Cheras. Here just the depiction of fish would mean the Pandyan or Meenavan. Therefore Ship can also be taken to represent the term Katalan (Samutaha Sri Lankan Brahmi from Alagankulam= Samuthiri of later times). It appears probable that the meaning of the South Indian megalithic graffito can be explained from the use of symbols by the chiefs.

In addition, various trees and flowers served as the identity of the chiefs. Having a symbol or tree or animal for group identity was

essential for various purposes. It helped them to identify themselves during the battles. Since script was not evolved during the Iron Age, symbols or pictographs became the markers of a clan or ethnic group. These symbols might have evolved from their original clan symbol of the early period.

The Pandyas had fish symbols and they are called Meenavan, one who possess fish as symbol and it could also mean fisher-folk. Why did Pandyas choose fish symbol? Kadalan (person related to sea) was also their title. They might have originally associated with the sea or coast or profession related to the coast.

The site of Keezhadi near Madurai excavated by Archaeological Survey of India under the direction of Amarnath revealed several graffiti with fish motifs and it is amazing that such motifs are found more frequently on the pottery from this site. Probably these symbols refer to Pandyans as Meenavan (Fisher folk or the one who had fish as symbol). Perhaps the Pandyas originally derived from the coastal region and hence they adopted fish as their symbol. However the fish symbols here could have been a symbol of fertility.

Cholas had tiger as their symbol. And they were also known as Kozhiyar (Kozhi in Tamil means cock or rooster). Tiger was generally a ferocious animal and they might have chosen it, due to its fierce characteristics. It was adopted perhaps to symbolically assert their domination.

The Cheras had bow and arrow. They might have adopted the bow and arrow, since it was essential for their warfare. Did they adopt bow and arrow technology in a later context? Was it a rare artifact? More than bow and arrow, the technology of digging roots and setting traps was essential in the hilly region with rich resources, unlike the open-air landscapes of Tamil Nadu where bow and arrow would have been essential from an early period.

Individual Creativity

The solitary marks, i.e. those occurring individually, from the habitation sites could be related to individual pastime and creative activities, without any other specific purpose, as in the case of the ship graffito from Alagankulam. They could have been produced out of human creativity and the interest in symbol or image making, a type of individual behavior.

Practice Pieces

The pictorial graffito from the Early Historic sites could have

been for the practice activities of the artists who wanted to execute them on some other media (Begley, 1996). Such examples have been found at Arikamedu. Especially the fine rouletted ware sherds have been chosen for this purpose.

Graffito as Group Identity

It is also possible that people had objects, for example ships, as their clan identity; however, not many instances have come from archaeological contexts in South India.

Conclusions

Symbols were used for several belief oriented as well as other activities in the ancient societies. Therefore one common function cannot be suggested for the use of several kinds of symbols. Like the way an individual's village name, family name and his/her own names are mentioned in the later inscriptions, the symbols marking clan, family or group might have been used by the megalithic people. In Tamil Nadu, certain communities have various clan groups (koottam, e.g. Kongu Vellalar, Singh, 1996: 1980) within. The graffiti might represent similar clan identities of the early period. The symbols of early period need to be studied holistically with rock paintings and all the symbols found in other media (Selvakumar, 2011) for a better understanding. It is difficult to assume that a symbol used in one part of South India had the same meaning in other part of South India. Sometimes some symbols might have been associated with certain names. For example, cattan is a personal name appearing in the Sangam Age and it might have been represented by one or two symbols. Perhaps these symbols represented the broader clan or occupational or professional identities. The meaning of the South Indian megalithic graffito can be explained from the use of symbols by the chiefs (Cholas, Cheras and the Pandyas) of the Sangam Age. Most probably the symbols represented the clan identities. The occurrence of Tamil-Brahmi with symbols could be explained as the Brahmi script representing the personal or individual names and the graffito as representing the clan identity. It is not clear if the clan identity is reflected in the material culture. The similarity between the Edakkal engraving and the megalithic graffito of bullock cart may suggest the similarity of design and it helps to date the Edakkal engravings to the Iron Age period, and since the Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions at the Edakkal caves date to early centuries of the common Era, and they were written over the engravings i.e. after the engravings it is safe to assume that Edakkal engravings belong to the Iron Age.

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