

**Paths, Places and Voids: some thoughts on a prehistoric symbolic
representation recovered from a cave in
Sabaragamuva Province, Sri Lanka**

R. Somadeva¹, A. Wanninayake, D. Devage, J. Ambalampitiya, R. Fernando

Abstract

Symbolism is one of the major cognitive advances that had been prominently developed by anatomically modern humans. It involved a complex web of biological, ecological and social qualifiers acquired through the evolutionary pathways. Dealing with isolated disembodied symbolic expressions created by the non-literate communities in an archaeological perspective, poses a number of theoretical and methodological problems at the interpretative level. This paper discusses about a symbolic manifestation registered on a natural rock boulder situated in a rock shelter occupied by the prehistoric communities during the mid/late-Holocene (5000-3500 BCE). This symbolic register contains 659 individual minuscule cupules hewn into the rock surface which are scattered in an irregular pattern. This register was reproduced on a 1:1 scale on a paper and carefully documented, each and every character traceable in its physical appearance, for analysis. The regional distribution pattern of the prehistoric sites and the archeological materials excavated from five prehistoric cave shelters in the area, situated in the proximity of the present location were taken as proxy data to contextualize the social and ecological fabric of this symbolic register. Excavated food residues including charred floral residues and faunal remains of the hunted animals were carefully sorted to search for any changes which may have occurred in the subsistence strategy which was structurally coupled with the idea of territoriality. It is hypothesized that the rugged terrain in the surrounding area was inadequate to maintain an increased population within a limited area, thus compelling the decision makers in the prehistoric groups to share their memories and experiences on the landscape they utilized in order to control the competition for food quest. The preliminary analysis allows to formulate a working hypothesis which proposes that this symbolic representation manifests the imaginary landscape of the immediate surroundings of prehistoric communities of the area. This essay attempts to devise a method and framework of inference which will, in practice, allow the archaeological evidence to be used to make a contribution to the debate which goes beyond the general speculations while working with such symbolic artifacts.

Key Words: *Cognitive archaeology, Prehistoric symbolism, Landscape archaeology*

¹ Postgraduate Institute of Archaeology, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka
rajpgiar@kln.ac.lk