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Ancient History of Kerala

Prehistoric Kerala

Prehistoric Kerala is a fascinating chapter in the history of India, showcasing a timeline of human activity dating back to the Stone Age. This period reflects early human life, tools, and settlement patterns, transitioning into the culturally rich Megalithic era. The region's geographic isolation and tropical climate preserved archaeological evidence that sheds light on human adaptation and cultural evolution.

Stone Age Tools and Habitation Sites in Kerala

Early Stone Age (Lower Paleolithic Era)

- **Time Period:** Approximately 2.5 million to 200,000 years ago.
- **Characteristics:**
    - Early humans in Kerala were primarily hunter-gatherers.
    - Stone tools discovered in this period include hand axes, cleavers, and flakes.
    - The tools were often made from locally available quartzite and laterite rocks.

Middle Paleolithic Era

- **Time Period:** 200,000 to 40,000 years ago.
- **Key Developments:**
    - Introduction of smaller, more refined stone tools.
    - Evidence of flake-based tools such as scrapers and blades.
    - Early signs of social structures and collective hunting practices.

Habitation Sites

1. **Attirampakkam (Adjacent Evidence):**
    - While much prehistoric activity in Kerala is inferred, sites like Attirampakkam in Tamil Nadu offer clues to regional overlap in habitation practices.
2. **Edakkal Caves:**
    - Located in the Wayanad district, these caves contain petroglyphs, indicating human activity dating back to the late Stone Age.
    - The carvings depict primitive symbols, humans, and animals, reflecting early communication methods.

Transition to Neolithic Age

- **Time Period:** Around 10,000 to 2,000 BCE.
- **Cultural Shifts:**
    - Emergence of settled farming communities.
    - Domestication of plants and animals.

    - Polished stone tools, including axes and grinding stones.
- **Significant Sites:**
    - **Marayur and surrounding areas:** Evidence of early agricultural settlements.

Megalithic Culture in Kerala

The Megalithic culture in Kerala marks a distinct shift toward advanced societal structures, characterized by unique burial practices and monumental architecture.

Time Period

- Approximately 1000 BCE to 300 CE.

Key Features

- **Megalithic Monuments:**
    - **Dolmens:** Stone structures consisting of two or more vertical slabs with a horizontal capstone. Found in Marayur and Idukki.
    - **Cists:** Rectangular burial chambers constructed with stone slabs.
    - **Menhirs:** Tall, upright stone monoliths often erected as commemorative markers or ceremonial sites.
    - **Rock-cut tombs:** Intricate burial chambers carved into laterite rocks.

Cultural Practices

- **Burial Rituals:**
    - Secondary burials were common, where bones were placed in urns or cists.
    - Associated grave goods included pottery, iron tools, and ornaments, indicating belief in the afterlife.
- **Material Culture:**
    - Use of iron for weapons and agricultural tools.
    - Pottery, both plain and decorated, reflecting an evolving aesthetic sense.

Notable Megalithic Sites in Kerala

Marayur

- Located in Idukki district, Marayur is one of the richest Megalithic sites in Kerala.
- Known for dolmens and cists that provide insight into burial customs and social hierarchies.

Wayanad

- Dolmens and urn burials are prevalent, showcasing the regional variation in Megalithic practices.
- Edakkal Caves continue to provide overlapping evidence of prehistoric and Megalithic cultures.