

A PRELIMINARY REPORT ON TENMALAI ROCKSHELTER - A LATE MESOLITHIC SITE IN KERALA, SOUTH INDIA.

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Prehistoric research since 1974 in Kerala, south-western India, has yielded rich Stone Age cultural evidence (Rajendran 1979, 1981, 1983a, 1983b, 1985; Joshi and Rajendran 1976). Mesolithic assemblages have been recovered from various physiographical situations, ranging from the midlands at about 30 metres above sea-level to the spurs of the Western Ghats at high elevations. They occur as surface finds, in stratified contexts, and also inside rock-shelters.

The Tenmalai rock-shelter was discovered in 1982, and is situated in the foothills of the Chendurni Hills at Tenmalai in Quilon District (Lat. 8° 58' N. Long. 77° 4' E). Stone tools were found inside the shelter as well as on the sloping ground in front. Another open-air site was also discovered nearby, and the implements from both sites are mostly made on locally available quartz.

The inside of the Tenmalai shelter is about 8 x 4 metres, and its greatest height is nearly 4 m. It is formed beneath a huge rock which has fallen from the mountain behind and which rests on an outcrop of bedrock. The ceiling of the shelter is flat and slopes back into the ground. The site is situated 150 metres above sea-level on a spur of the Western Ghats in tropical evergreen forest.

Squares of one by one metre were excavated inside and outside the shelter in April 1984 to reveal the stratigraphical potential and cultural sequence. The square which intersected the drip-line yielded artefacts and charcoal, but no cultural materials occurred inside the shelter. The charcoal occurred between 10 and 30 cm in depth, with bedrock at about 35 cm. The charcoal was found with the quartz artefacts, and no stratigraphical changes were observed. There were no indications of discrete hearths.

The charcoal sample obtained has been radiocarbon dated at the Birbal Sahni Institute of Palaeobotany, Lucknow, to 5120 ± 120 B.P. (BS -525). This is the first radiocarbon date for a Mesolithic site in Kerala, and also the first date for any Indian coastal Mesolithic assemblage.

Although the Tenmalai rock-shelter thus appears to be a relatively late habitation site, the industry does not include geometric forms. It is pertinent to mention here that no geometrics have been found so far in any of the Mesolithic industries of Kerala, or anywhere else in the coastal regions of south India. The percentage of implements made on blades at Tenmalai is greater than at other Mesolithic sites in Kerala, and the tools are smaller in

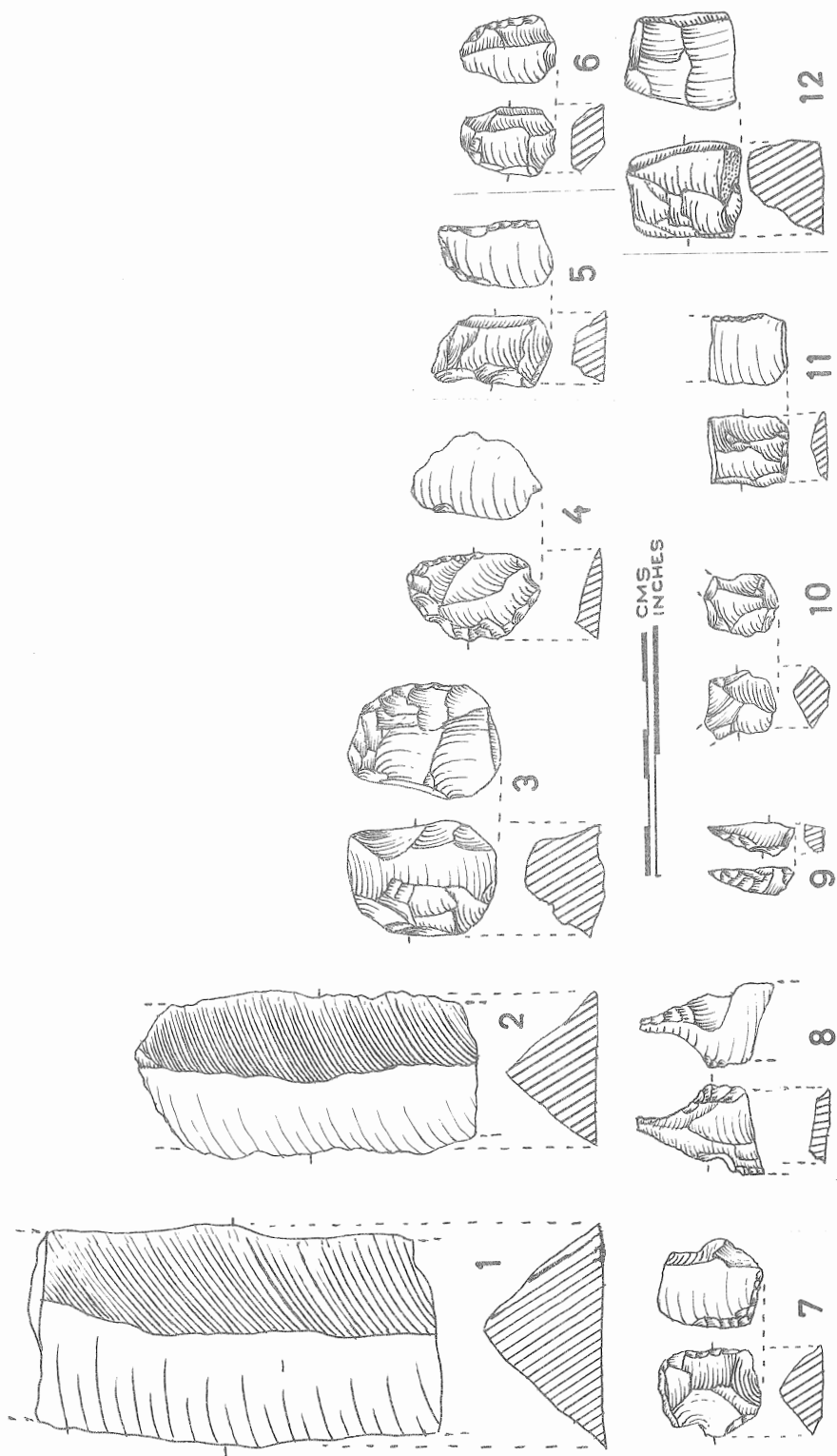


Figure 1. Stone Age Artifacts from Tenmalai. Quilon District, Kerala.

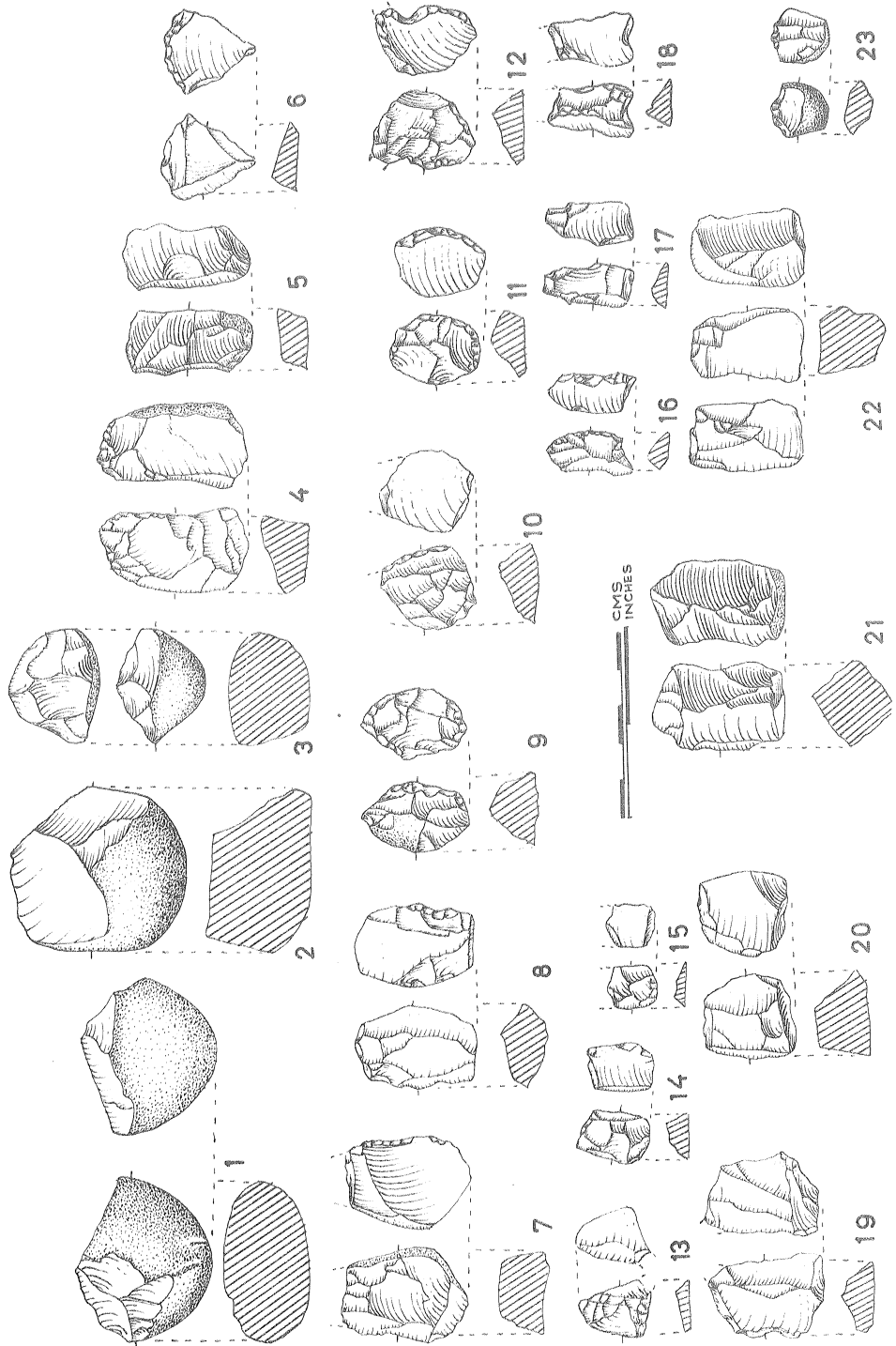


Figure 2. Stone Age Artifacts from Temmalai, Quilon District, Kerala.

size. The industry includes various types of scrapers, blades, pointed tools, flake cores, and blade cores, and most of the implements are retouched along their working margins (Fig. 1). Another Mesolithic industry found 2 kms away from the shelter site on the right bank of the Tirtakarai Ar also includes similar types of tools (Fig. 2).

The Tenmalai shelter also has an incised motif on its exterior surface. The incisions were cut into a prepared shallow surface about 180 cm long and 25 cm wide (Fig. 3). The motif appears to have been left unfinished, and the linear pattern resembles that found in other Mesolithic paintings (Mathpal 1978; Neumeyer 1983). It is possible this carving is contemporary with the dated Mesolithic assemblage.

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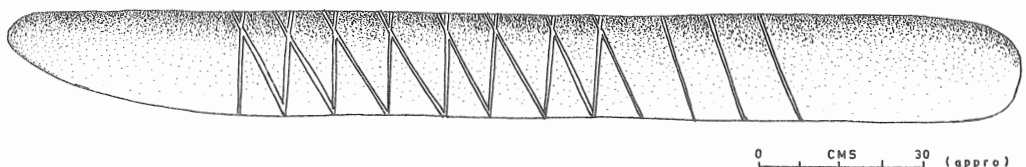


FIG.3. MESOLITHIC CARVINGS ON TENMALAI ROCKSHELTER.