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News Release

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Analysis provides clearer picture of rock art's significance

Archaeologists have shed new light on the possible meaning of mysterious rock markings found in Neolithic tombs in Europe.

Researchers say a distinctive carved symbol commonly found in tombs built by early farmers was an emblem of wealth and status – rather than a religious motif.

A team from the University of Edinburgh examined more than 100 Neolithic tombs in Sardinia, Italy, thought to have been built around 4000-2000 BC.

The latest digital techniques enabled researchers to examine carvings of cattle heads and horns – known as bucrania – which commonly cover the interior walls of rock-cut-tombs.

Leading edge 3D photographic techniques made it possible to identify faint markings – previously unseen – to examine the location of the motifs inside the monuments.

Researchers studied ancient animal remains previously found in the area, and depictions of cattle heads on food vessels to assess the cultural significance of cattle in Neolithic Sardinia.

They also looked at similar examples of bucrania art in the tombs of three present traditional societies in Southeast Asia to see if parallels emerged.

Analysis revealed the motifs were related to buffalos which were seen as special animals that are important symbols of wealth and status and are associated with feasting, rather than religious ritual.

The team says it is likely the motifs in Neolithic Sardinian tombs were used to display status and challenge competing social groups within the community.

The findings help the understanding of the role of architectural art in Neolithic societies, they added.

Lead researcher, Dr Guillaume Robin of the University of Edinburgh's School of History, Classics and Archaeology, Dr Robin said: "When we uncover art in a non-domestic archaeological context such as a tomb, we are prompt to interpret this art as religious. This research, through a specific case study shows that art is not just about illustrating beliefs or worldview, it can be about status."

The study, funded by the European Commission (Marie Curie programme) is published in the *European Journal of Archaeology* : <https://doi.org/10.1017/ea.2017.12>.

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