CHAPTER VII

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF RITUAL

The megalithic structures obviously came into being out of the execution of a range of activities and rituals, only some of which, need leave a "direct archaeological signature" (Kinnes 1981 : 84).

The burial sites\(^1\) were no doubt the foci of funerary (and maybe ancestor rituals\(^2\)) but the presence of such is difficult to trace in archaeology because ritual comprises action. Therefore, it is difficult to talk in archaeological terms, of a 'ritual object'. The places where rituals may be enacted and the artefacts used will also have been encountered in daily routines of life (including the avoidance of sacred ground). This makes the task of the archaeologist difficult. Therefore "we have to allow for the ambiguities which run through the material world than attempt to recover a single meaning for some elements of archaeological research" (Barrett 1996 : 396).

In an attempt to thrown light on the mortuary practices of the megalithic builders of Vidarbha, I attempt to briefly look at the archaeologically visible aspects of funerary structure, types of burials, arrangement or orientation of the corpse and grave goods.

(1) In Vidarbha, there are a number of methods of disposal of the dead visible: primary burials\(^3\), secondary or fractional burials\(^4\); as well

\(^1\) It is certainly true that a mound is not an invariable feature of mortuary activity.

\(^2\) Ancestor rituals establish the presence of ancestors in rites concerned with the living. Amongst the places and symbols used may be funerary architecture and the bones of the dead. Ancestor rituals may also play a part in the rites of burial (Kinnes 1975 : 17).

\(^3\) Here we can distinguish between individual and multiple burials.

\(^4\) The skeletal data provide evidence of fractional or secondary mode of burial. Evidence of skeletal remains being exposed to fire (for example, skeletal remains in megalith 7 at Raipur) could be post-crematory fractional burials.
as symbolic burials. The mortuary rituals would no doubt have differed accordingly. Secondary burial would have involved a lengthier procedure or "liminal period" (Van Gennep 1960) with the corpse first being buried/stored/burnt/cut before being recovered and reinterred. The stone circles represent the final stage of the mortuary rituals\(^1\)-- of creating a permanent abode of the dead. The rites involved in secondary burial also involve a "topographical separation" (Barrett 1996 : 398) between the rites of liminality and the final rites of incorporation. A good example of this is the pit circles and cists at megalithic Brahmagiri. According to the excavator (Wheeler 1947 : 197) the former were used for primary excarnation where as the latter functioned as depositories of post-excarnation remains. The Vidarbhan stone circles too, were the place of only the final rites with rites prior to that in all probability being performed elsewhere.

Different modes of disposal of the dead do not necessarily imply different groups of people(s). Kroeber (1927) had discussed random methods of disposal of the dead and how different practices had nothing to do with arrival of new groups in an area. According to him, death rituals conform neither to the geographic spread of other culture traits, nor to enduring culture traditions, nor yet with material / economic factors.

(2) The selection of the sites for burials were, in all probability, not arbitrary but located in a landscape already structured by routine and ritual cycles. Britnell and Savory (1984) [as mentioned in Barrett 1996: 399] give the example of Guernvale, South Wales, where on a terraced area was an area of cleared ground which was repeatedly visited by hunting parties moving along the upper reaches of the valley. And it was precisely this area where later a megalithic cairn structure was built.

\(^1\) "rites of incorporation" as Van Gennep (1960) put it.
In the case of Vidarbha we find that the places selected for burial complexes like Raipur-Hingna, Mahurjhari-Junapani etc. were located on important routes of communication from ancient times to the present. They also lay on the seasonal routes of pastoral nomadic communities (and were no doubt, regularly visited at certain parts of the year). This probably explains why these particular sites were selected for the building of burial structures.

(3) As far as funerary structures go, most of the burials are evidenced within stone circles. The boulders forming the circle ranged from medium to very large. And some of them had cup-marks on them (i.e. small circular shallow depressions on the rock surface). The significance of these marks is not clear. The views range from them representing a system of writing (Rivett Carnac 1879 : 66), denoting the age of the dead person (ibid.) or the number of enemies slain by a warrior (ibid.) or relating to the status of the deceased (Deglurkar and Lad 1992 : 142) or being 'musical stones' (Paddayya 1970 : 35-38).

The stratigraphy of the filling inside the circles is uniform. The lowest layer on the murrum was always that of sticky and compact black clay, over which were heaped pebbles and loose soil. Interestingly, the skeletal remains and grave goods are always recovered from immediately underneath the black clay or embedded in it.

There was no specific or marked space for the body within the stone circle. Only the outer circle of stones marked the boundary between the sacred and the profane; the living and the dead. The few examples, of chambers and cists within stone circles that we have from Bhagi Mahari and Raipur did not reveal any mortal remains. And the megaliths 2 and

1 According to Paddayya cup-marks on the boulders in the Shorapur Doab (also associated with grave sites) produced clear metallic or ringing sounds on being struck with a fist-sized stone. I find it likely that these 'musical stones' served some kind of a symbolic function relating to the death ritual(s) even in my region of study i.e., Vidarbha.

2 Deglurkar and Lad (1992 : 142) presume that the presence of black clay, in all stone circles to seal the burial equipment and skeletal remains might have had some kind of a ritualistic significance.
(chambered ones) at Raipur also did not reveal any grave goods from within the chambers except for a solitary iron lamp in one and a muller stone in the other. Topological deviants such as these may be symbolic burials or may be they were being used for the purpose of certain rituals involving the lighting of a lamp or placing of a muller stone or the breaking of a coconut.

(4) A fairly large space is demarcated with boulders to form the stone circles. The houses at habitation sites are, as far as we know, not so large. For example, at Naikund (habitation-cum-burial site), the diameter of the stone circles ranged between 12.80m to 21.50m. Whereas the diameter of a circular hut (mound II) was found to be only 4.9m. Similarly, at Bhagi Mahari (habitation-cum-burial site) whereas the diameter of stone circles ranged from 9m to 17.75m, that of excavated houses was between 3.25m and 3.80m. Thus 'sacred enclosures' for the dead were larger than the living space of a domestic unit.

(5) There appears to be no fixed orientation of the body. For instance, at Mahurjhari at megalith 3 (locality III) the orientation of the skeleton is northeast-southwest with its head to the north-east. At megalith 6 (locality III) the skeleton is oriented west-east with its head to the

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1 At Kamptee, as referred to earlier Pearse (1869 : 428-29) recorded an oval shaped barrow within a stone circle. This cairn besides recording some 'trough-like stone things' (mullers?) also recorded perfectly preserved coconut husks.

2 Deo and Jamkhedkar 1982 : 4.

3 ibid : 9.


5 ibid

6 Deo 1973 : 9.

7 ibid : 11.
east. At megalith 9 (locality III), the pair of human skeletons are oriented east-west, with their heads to the east. So, as such there emerges no pattern of orientation of the bodies.

(6) Some of the Vidarbhan stone circles record single and multiple internment of the dead within the same circle. For example, at Mahurjhari the number of individuals in a single burial range from two to five (Deo 1973: 15-18).

(7) The skeletal data indicates a very high percentage of "young-adults" and "adults", while the infant or sub-adult group age group is not represented well (Mohanty and Walimbe 1993: 97-98). It may be that the disposal of the infant dead was done in a way other than the customary method. There is no evidence that infants were buried within the habitation sites, as was the practice in western Maharashtra, in Chalcolithic villages. As far as skeletal remains are concerned we find not only human but animal skeletal remains particularly that of the horse. What is indicated is obviously horse sacrifice.

(8) A number of the excavated megalithic burials yielded partial burials of horses, consisting of skull and lower extremities of limb bones. The average age of the buried horse is between 3.5—6 years (Thomas 1992: 78). Thus well-trained older horses must have been spared from being sacrificed. Besides the horse, the only other evidence of animal burial is that of cattle. From locality IV, megalith number 13 at Naikund cattle bones of the horse were discovered (Thomas 1992: 76). Thomas also suggests on the basis of the presence of horse bones along with the kitchen refuse at Naikund and Bhagi Mahari that "... possibly after the sacrifice and subsequent offering to the dead...


3. According to Thomas (1992: 77) "animal sacrifices and food offerings have also been reported from a number of preceding Neolithic and Chalcolithic cultures".
person, the rest of the horse was consumed ceremoniously by the kin of the deceased" (ibid. : 77).

(9) Grave Goods, even those of a kind which were not exclusively associated with burials (and also found at the habitation sites)\(^1\) were ultimately an aspect of funerary rituals which were intended to convey public messages to the living, "(Burger 1992 : 206). The very act of intentionally/deliberately interring certain objects at a place associated with the dead gave them ritualistic significance.

No doubt that death and its rituals are reflective of social values and are also an important force, as Geertz emphasized in shaping them. But, it is very likely that the megalith phenomenon, scattered over the peninsula, represents not a coherent social unit but simply a cult of the dead practised by diverse groups/societies. As Burger's work (1992) demonstrated that a regional cult like Chavin could spread over thousands of miles, transcending political and ethnic boundaries and incorporating groups differing in their language, culture and natural resources.

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\(^1\) A comaprision of artefactual finds from stone circles and habitation mounds in Vidarbha as attempted in Part A showed that only a few object-types were exclusive to burial sites like 'exotic' lids or covers with decorative finials in Black-and-Red ware; pottery with graffiti; certain iron objects like hooked lamps; copper-and-iron objects like the copper domical bell with an iron clapper at Naikund; copper objects like dishes with decorative lids and elaborate horse gear; and stone objects like pounders.
CONCLUSION

Culture continues to be the basic object of inquiry in archaeology and anthropology (as the theoretical debate in Part-I has shown). But it is not a pre-defined or self evident starting truth (as we had said right in the beginning). Our case study of the Vidarbha megaliths has highlighted the need to (re) define culture/s in archaeological terms. After all, how can archaeology progress if a critical entity like culture remains unidentified/undefined?

In Vidarbha, in the megalithic period we have two distinct archaeological phenomena, i.e., habitation and burial sites representing different site formation processes. Not surprisingly, as they were the residues of different or separate set of activities. Moreover it must be remembered that the artefacts recorded at the habitation sites would not have been contemporary because of stratigraphic differences, items being used over long periods of time etc. Whereas at burials we have the chance of finding contemporary artefact-types which were no doubt deliberately interred.

The habitation sites were the foci of a more 'private', domestic set of activities as compared to the burial sites in which the very act of deposition of bodies and artefacts would have been 'public', in nature involving funerary (and may be ancestor) rituals. The site formation process at the habitation sites exhibited remains of cooking activity, storage activity, craft activity, loss of items (beads etc.), breakage of items (like pots), mound buildings (repairing of floor etc.), garbaging and disposal. At the burial sites we have a deliberate internment of artefacts. But there is no simple formula which explains their occurrence in graves: in some societies grave goods and grains are interred for the afterlife, in others they have to do with the social persona of the dead or as a gift to the gods, in other contexts they have to do with ritual contamination associated with death. To ascribe an economic function to the internment of artefacts in megaliths is difficult. It is often said that 'primitive' early societies destroy or bury wealth items as means of restricting their circulation and preventing their devaluation.
However in the case of Vidarbha this study has made an important finding— the majority of the artefact types occurring in megalithic are also artefact-types (I use the term judiciously) found in discard contexts in habitation sites. Thus the two different kinds of archaeological processes did not produce entirely different patterns in terms of presence/absence of artefact types.

Archaeological data need to be studied in human terms. It would be misleading to view the artefact data in terms of the abstract because they (i.e., artefacts) were always part of a mobile set of social relationships maintained between persons and things" (Thomas 1996 : 159). It may be recalled that Childe was amongst the first archaeologists to emphasize this— "we find certain types of remains ... constantly recurring together. Such a complex of regularly associated traits we shall term, a cultural group or just a 'culture'. We assume that such a complex is the material expression of what today be called a 'people' " (1929 : i-ii). It is only by viewing the archaeological record as integral to past social relationships that its "information value" (Clarke 1978 : 363) can be maximized -- afterall it is always the people who "... really think and act and revolt" (Sapir 1917 : 442).

Thus the question that arises in the case of Vidarbha is : on the basis of different site formation processes evidenced at habitation and burial sites, can we assume distinct social groups i.e., sedentary farmers versus mobile herders or was there one social groups involved in the building of stone circles and agricultural villages.

The spatial and locational analysis of the Vidarbhan habitation and burial sites revealed that no distinct micro-environment was being favoured by either, though no doubt habitation sites like Bhagi Mahari and Naikund were located in comparatively more productive areas (but this would be expected since the agriculture group would try to establish itself in zones more suited to agriculture). But the Vidarbha region, as a whole, is not known for its agricultural potential (particularly the Nagpur and Wardha districts). The burial sites were many-a-time situated near hilly, forested regions or
sometimes even in the midst of the forest belts of the Vidarbha region (many of them far from the habitation sites). In the past these forests must have been thicker and more extensive. These forests could have been an important resource for ancient pastoralists.

Material artefactual analysis of the habitation and burial sites, as just pointed out, revealed the presence of similar kinds of iron and copper objects, stone objects, beads and pottery in the context of the different sites. (Therefore the technological level of knowledge of the people who inhabited the habitation areas and those who utilized the burial sites was the same). A few artefact-types were of course, exclusive to the burial sites but this is to be expected considering the funerary nature of the site where items were deliberately being interred, no doubt as a part of some kind of funerary ritual.

Thus on the basis of archaeological evidence and spatial patterning of habitation and burial sites it would not be right to assume a clear cut demarcation between agriculturists and pastoralists (as done by Leshnik 1974; and Deo 1985). The idea of 'cultivating pastoralists' (Anderson 1988) seems to fit in better with the archaeological and locational data available for the megalithic sites in Vidarbha. However the dynamic of movement between one form of subsistence and the other should be kept in mind, even though the dynamic of change may not be so easily reflected in the archaeological record. Anderson (1988 : 241-60), in his case study of the communities of cultivating pastoralists in northern Kenya pointed out how these communities have formed, fragmented and reformed again at the same sites as periods of ecological diversity have set in and then retreated. This could also have been the case in megalithic Vidarbha. After all no society is ever static but is always in a state of "continuous flux" (Boas 1920 : 97).

Therefore, since there is no clear cut division visible in the archaeological record, there is nothing to refute the idea that people who lived at say Takalghat buried their dead in the nearby stone circles of Khapa and Gangapur. The stone circle sites and habitation sites could have been examples of situational or behavioural variability (as suggested by Binford
resulting in different site formation processes. Therefore while the stone circle sites were no doubt the foci of funerary rituals the habitation sites residue were the result of domestic activities (And whereas objects in stone circles would represent only one or two specific or discontinuous acts of disposal, habitations would have a continuos process of artefacts being lost or discarded). Thus the same group of people may have been using the habitation and burial sites for different functions. As Thomas (1996 : 178) pointed out, material artefacts at the different sites may not reflect social wholes but overlapping spheres of activity. Therefore an artefact, like say, an iron dagger would have a role to play not only in the economic, but also magical, territorial, social, religious, aesthetic and ritual senses; Therefore the iron dagger would not have a meaning which is absolute but would instead be capable of converging meanings (going beyond its utilitarian application) depending on for what purpose/occasion it was being used for : sacrifice, wedding, feast or battle.

In archaeology since all inference is via material culture therefore we need to be extremely sensitive to it in the way archaeologists like David Clarke were. It would be useful to refer back to Clarke's definition of "artefact-type" and assemblage in the context of Vidarbhan megaliths. At Vidarbha a diagnostic combination of contemporary artefact types found in association with each other in the context of burial and habitation sites, no doubt, constituted an archaeological assemblages. But did they in turn constitute 'a culture' ? Clarke (1978 : 265-70) worked out that each individual artefact-type may have its own distribution on the map, perhaps even into the area of neighbouring archaeological culture but the region in which more than half of the total artefact types occur is the culture area'(though he points out that culture areas

\[1\] According to Clarke : "In most practical examples of cultural artefact-type distribution patterns it will be found that since the cultural assemblage is imperfectly polythetic and since the culture is a manifestation of an internally communicating social network - the number of specific types shared with other individual cultures will be small and the mutual boundaries fairly well defined ... the central zone or irregular plateau in which the mutual affinity between the polythetic assemblages remains high and roughly constant will then define the essential archaeological 'culture area'.\]
are not always constant and tend to fluctuate, and the areas often cross-cut
one another if superimposed through time)—for when regular interaction,
common kinship, common institutions, shared language coverage in area,
material culture is most homogeneously spread across it. But these are two
sorts of attendant problems.

Thus maybe the Vidarbhan Megaliths did constitute an archaeological
culture. Where Peninsular India is concerned the 'stone circle' is a term with
very little analytic or descriptive value. We have seen in chapter V (Part-B),
in a comparative study of 'stone circles' of Mahurjhari (in Vidarbha) and
Brahmagiri (in north Karnataka) that the 'stone circle' is not the same material
phenomenon wherever reported. The Vidarbhan megaliths appear to represent
a different archaeological phenomenon from that of the Brahmagiri megaliths.

It is also possible that the Vidarbhan megaliths constituted a higher
level of archaeological entity i.e., an agro-pastoral technocomplex. According
to Clarke a technocomplex may be defined as 'a group of cultures
characterized by assemblages sharing a polythetic but differing specific types
of the same general families of artefact-types, shared as a widely diffused and
interlinked response to common factors in environment, economy and
technology' (ibid. 330). It is possible that the Vidarbhan burial and habitation
sites with its complex of artefact types associated with the implementation of
a particular subsistence strategy, which I presume was agro-pastoral, in a
particular environment constituted a technocomplex.

It is also entirely possible that the similar complex of artefact-types
found all over the eastern Vidarbhan region might have been a part of a wider
cult of the dead spread over Peninsular India, transcending political and ethnic
boundaries, and incorporating groups diverse in language and subsistence
strategies [as for example, the Chavin cult of the Andean region (Burger
1992)].

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1 We need to maintain the distinction between the archaeological record and the societal
interpretation of this record. Society is the structured matrix in terms of which material items
acquire their functional significance.
No doubt, the archaeological assemblage at the Vidarbhan megalithic sites must have related in the past to a tribe or a language or a political or a racial group. But we cannot assume that prehistoric identity is something we can just "go out and find" (Shennan 1989: 11 ff). As a number of anthropologists beginning with Boas have pointed out that no co-relationship can be established between particular peoples and particular cultures; and that race, language and culture are distinct entities with their own usages, histories and boundaries. Even bounded and mutually exclusive culture assemblages at say Vidarbha do not necessarily map the extent and boundaries of ethnic, language and tribal groups. However to look for crisp boundaries separating these entities would also not be right for the boundaries of archaeological culture(s) and these units might occasionally coincide. Nevertheless these entities need to be studied independently. And it must be remembered that the archaeological entity reflect realities as important as those recognized by classification of other disciplines "--the entities in all these fields are equally real, equally arbitrary and simply different" (Clarke 1978: 361)

Lastly, it must be kept in mind that understanding culture as simply as adaptation to the environment (environmental diversity being a major factor in cultural diversity) or an organically integrated, structured whole with its internal logic as 'cause' of human actions and beliefs or as a monolithic corpus of symbols and meanings that can be definitely be interpreted or as a fixed entity is to narrow down the scope of its study. Instead culture is more likely a "web of meanings" in Geertz's famous phrase; or we could equally invoke

1 The Welsh et al. and Moore and Romney debate is interesting in this respect. Based on the study of artefactual assemblages from the north coast of New Guinea, Moore et al. (1992, 1994) concluded that language is unrelated to material culture whereas Moore and Romney (1995) held that language (and distance) contributes to variation among material cultural assemblages.

2 Recent research trends indicate that the study of culture is now fragmented, the stress shifted, as Kahn (1989: 14) put it from "single ethos ... to contention and, indeed, power, dominance and resistance."
Bourdieu's 'map', the aid an outsider uses to "find his way around in a foreign landscape" (adding that what makes people walk one way or another is not the cultural map).

Culture(s) is not static but dynamic. Cultural patterns change through space and time as a result of underlying processes. Some details may remain for a long time but the general complex of culture cannot be assumed to retain its character for centuries. Culture is therefore dynamic\(^1\), fluid and complex, with variations in class, status, region etc. and above all culture is all-pervasive. Rather than being a separate domain, like icing on a cake, culture in this sense mediates all human conduct ... To perceive cultural dimensions, one need only ask: Could things human be otherwise?" (Rosaldo 1994: 526).

None of the above is however accessible in archaeology because archaeological remains are only material; and the material record is incomplete and fragmentary (and consequently subject to multiple readings) and constitutes only a fraction of past reality. The material record is not by itself cultural so much as the traces of behaviour (which itself draws upon culture) of past men and women.

The material record is like a jigsaw puzzle with no picture on the box and no edge pieces of which most of the pieces are missing and the shapes and the designs of the other change in relation to the questions we ask them (Nicholas 1994: 449). And it is on the basis of this incomplete "jigsaw puzzle" that all inferences about the past have to be drawn. Keeping in view the limitation imposed on the one hand by the nature of a complex archaeological record and the other by the archaeologists "languages of expression" (Clarke 1973: 14) the concepts and terms like 'culture' and 'culture area' need to be enriched and more specifically defined in terms of

\(^1\)Culture is never static but is constantly re-invented and re-negotiated, even without people aware that are involved in any activity at all (Marcus and Fischer 1986: 24).
the material record. Yet acknowledging archaeology's limitations is not "defeatism" (Trigger 1991: 562) but instead reflects an understanding of the discipline and its potential for informing us about the past.

I would like to conclude my case study on the iron age Vidarbha on the note that there can be no single interpretation, no ultimate truth, no final point at which we can say we have achieved a definitive understanding of the period. There could be many possible interpretations of the excavated phenomena ('a culture', a 'techno-complex', a 'cult of the dead'). After all there will always be more to know about the past. And as Anthony (1995: 87) pointed out, among the most basic requirements of a disciplined archaeology is the requirement that questions about the past be framed in terms that have a finite number of possible answers. And I have attempted to do just so.