A. Megaliths in General

The existing knowledge on megaliths indicates that the term ‘megaliths’ has been often redefined and held in question. It was used for the first time not by any archaeologist, rather by antiquaries in the second half of the nineteenth century. Even the classification of Stone Age into two, Paleolithic and Neolithic, was of recent origin. Beginning with the early Europeans, various explanations were offered reflecting ways in the very perception of megaliths. Glyn Daniel believed it was French archaeologists\(^1\) who first made clear that there were two ages of stone, distinguishing in the Stone Age the periode de la Pierre taille and the periode de la Pierre polie. It was the monuments, rather than the associated artifacts that attracted people first, hence it is often said that the “superficial similarities between megaliths all over the world caused their attribution to a single cultural group.”\(^2\) The said superficial similarities traced in terms of form and technique, by and large, determined what one implied as ‘megaliths’, a word derived out of a combination of two Greek words megas-big and lithos-stone, meaning very large stones. The varieties of megaliths of Europe include the temples of Malta, the stone alignments of Brittany, stone circles of Britain (that include Stonehenge) and the like.

During the first half of the twentieth century in Europe, the very practice of associating megaliths with big stones was questioned. Hence, Gordon Childe has made an attempt to understand why these antiquaries called certain lithic structures alone as megaliths while there were other monuments constructed out of the same kind of materials available. The

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conclusion he arrives at is that ‘the basis of classification is not merely material or magnitude, but also function [al],’ which, for him is sepulchral. 3

To indicate the fact that megaliths need not necessarily be associated either with mega or with lithos he argues, “Indeed in the case of sepulchral circles I suggest that neither the lithoi nor their megothos are the decisive element; the circle is the crucial thing, its materials being dictated by geology, its magnitude by the importance of the dead encircled or by the intensity of the survivors’ fear of ghosts.” When the discussion on the megaliths of the west reached Renfrew it began to be perceived in terms of “taxonomic decision of our own which leads us to apply the term ‘megalithic tomb’ to monuments as different as dysser of Denmark and the passage graves of Almeria.” 4

A cursory review of the various explanations offered to understand the megaliths in the West saw a shift from the old pole of migrationist and diffusionist to processual and post-processual explanations. If migrationists explained it in racial terms, diffusionists were explicating that in terms of influence of higher civilization of the East Mediterranean on the barbarian west. Functional-processual explanation saw the tombs as having a useful function in social and economic terms within the society. Neo-Marxists by the 1980s emphasized on ritual and ideology in the garb of controlling and legitimizing inequalities within the society. Post-Processualism with Ian Hodder stressed the symbolic aspects and historical context. He argues “the way megaliths were involved actively in social strategies in Western Europe depended on an existing historical context.

The existence of the tombs can only be adequately considered by assessing the value-laden meanings within European society.” 5

B. MEGALITHS IN INDIA

A corresponding development in cognizing megaliths of India cannot be traced, but it remained always within the European theoretical framework. Hence, just like in Europe, the early administrators, archaeologists, and anthropologists who talked about Indian megaliths visualized it as part of Indian Neolithic culture, despite the presence of iron. Therefore, initially all the attributes ascribed to megalithic culture that was part of Neolithic culture in west were given to megalithic culture in India, in general, and Kerala in particular. That even continues now uncritically when the discussion takes a theoretical turn. 6

The discussion on megalithic burial in India started with the publication of Babington’s article on Pandoo Coolies. In this article the term megaliths is absent. In many of the notes on Indian megaliths that were published subsequently till the third quarter of the nineteenth century the word does not figure. What is apparent in all discussions as seen in the existing literature on megaliths is the treatment of the term megaliths in lighter vein and a preference of the term Pandoo coolies (or that matter any such term) instead of megaliths. If it was cromlechs, name of a type of megaliths for H. Congreave, 7 for Col

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7 While discussing the settlement pattern of megalithic builders, Moorti, K.N.Ganeshan’s and Gurukkal and Varier’s works lean to Renfrew’s argument on megaliths of Europe.
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Meadows Taylor was interested in the study of ancient Scytho-Druidical remains. He published various works on the topic of megaliths, including "Notices of Cromlechs, Cairns and other Ancient Scytho-Druidical Remains in the Principality of Sorapur," in the Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society in 1853. His work was further elaborated in "Description of Cairns, Kistvaens and other Celtic, Druidical or Scythian monuments in Dekkan," Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy, 1862, and "Cairns and barrows or rock temples," which was published in 1884.

J.W. Breeks, an early scholar of megaliths, wrote about the primitive tribes and monuments of the Nilgiris in London in 1837. J.S.F. Mackenzie, in his work on the Rude Stone Archaeology of the Hassan District, Maisur, in the Indian Antiquary, 1873, provided an early classification of megaliths based on lithic presence and absence.

M.J. Walhouse published an article in 1874 in which he used the term megalithic monuments. B.R. Branfill published another article using the term rude megalithic Monument. H Meadows Taylor’s discoveries and investigations made him adopt a classification, which was devoid of the usage of the term megaliths, but rather persisted with a classification which ran thus namely cromlechs, kistvaens, Cairns and barrows or rock temples. His conviction being “These I believe embrace all forms of Druidical or Scythian remains known, except barrows with trenches round them, circular forts, and dolmen or holes bored in rocks.

Later in the 19th century, there were attempts to define the term 'megaliths'. M. Wheeler in 1948 describes megaliths as “those monuments, which are built of rough, large and undressed block of stones.” Here the emphasis is on liths. In the very next year (that is in 1949) V.D. Krishnaswami made an attempt to provide a scientific nomenclature for megalithic types, but here also any attempt to define the term megaliths itself remained aloof and types are defined in relation to its presence with mega-liths only. When we come to the period of Sundara, lithic presence and absence ceased to become the prime determinant, rather along with that pottery also occupied the key position. Hence, he argues:

The term ‘megalith’, in archaeology, is, as is well known, defined as a tomb built with big stones in natural forms or roughly dressed or even a grave marked with a prodigious rude stone or an excavation in soft rocks containing remains of dead human beings. It is also applied to erections of huge stones, memorial or religious in function. Besides graves without any lithic appendage, but by virtue of pottery their possession of certain other complex traits, especially pottery, commonly found in the other types of megaliths, are also classed as megaliths.

Earlier European scholars have clearly asserted that the megaliths of Europe have nothing to do with the use of metals. Hence it is argued that, “[…] [T] he grave goods accompanying the burials were generally unimpressive-- a few pots, a stone axe, a flint blade or two. In almost every area of Europe where they are found, the tombs were built long before metallurgy was practiced…” But in the very first observation on
Meadows Taylor it was “notices of Cromlechs, Cairns and other Ancient Scytho-Druidical Remains while for J. Fergusson it was Rude Stone monuments and for J. W. Breeks, Monuments of the Nilgiris. Interesting perhaps is that despite the absence of the term megaliths in these works some of these early scholars were eager to provide ‘true’ nomenclature for the megalithic varieties. Breeks, Mackenzie, and Taylor are perhaps earlier read, re-read, and discussed mainly for this purpose. It was in the year 1874 M.J. Walhouse published an article in which he used the term megalithic monuments. B.R. Branfill published another article using the term rude megalithic Monument. H Meadows Taylor’s discoveries and investigations made him adopt a classification, which was devoid of the usage of the term megaliths, but rather persisted with a classification which ran thus namely cromlechs, kistvaens, Cairns and barrows or rock temples. His conviction being “These I believe embrace all forms of Druidical or Scythian remains known, except barrows with trenches round them, circular forts, and dolmen or holes bored in rocks.

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19 Narasimhiah defines megalithic types and not megaliths. See, Neolithic and Megalithic cultures in Tamil Nada, Delhi: Sundar Prakashan, 1980.

what we presently consider as megalithic monuments in India the presence of iron has been noticed and the monuments, i.e., kotakkal, topikkal-s and Rock cut caves, were referred to as “Pandoo Coolies” and not as megaliths in spite of the conspicuousness of liths. When researches on south Indian megaliths further advanced, scholars concretized the notion that the presence of iron objects should be reckoned and that should be taken as an indicator to distinguish megalithic culture. Also, since the Brahmagiri excavation of Wheeler, the presence of Black and Red Ware at a site has been accepted as sufficient reason to recognize a “megalithic period,” even in the complete absence of liths. Leshnik challenged both these notions with sufficient empirical evidences. He argues that,

The research of the past fifteen years has demonstrated however that this technique of preparing pottery [black and Red Ware] is much wider spread over a far greater stretch of time than was formerly supposed. It appears, for example, in Gujarat in the XX century B.C.E. and is still found in Madras in the VII century C.E. It has no value as a chronological marker therefore, and its continued use for the naming of cultural periods, and worst still, association with ethnic group is deplorable. The same is true of iron objects when interpreted in such terms. It is quite correct that the Pandukal burials frequently contain iron funerary objects and very likely, that none of the graves ante-date the advent of iron to south India, when ever that may have been. But to conclude from this, as is done, has the same people who made the graves also introduced the iron is to take a big leap. 21

These understandings has its bearing on re-using the term Pandukal complex, the word once Babington used to signify the stone grave structure, instead of megaliths, by Leshnik in the year 1974, exactly a century after the word had been first used in India. Perhaps one of the reasons for the preference of this word might have been, as we delineated, the megalithic cultural dissimilarity he identified in the east and in the west. He says that, “[a] more limiting designation that focuses on the specific problem at hand is required, and for this purpose I shall borrow from the folk-usage the name Pandukal complex.” 22 But further discussions on this aspect do not appear in subsequent literature.

Taking insights from New Archaeology and structural anthropology U.S. Moorti 23 defines megaliths to “mean a socio-religious expression of burying the deceased in a grave which may/may not have lithic appendage.” The influence of the same theoretical position can be seen in Shereen Ratnagar. She suggests that “Megaliths may be studied not only as evidence for migration routes, but as territorial markers appearing in situations where external threat, or intensified culture contact, or extension of agriculture, lead to competition over land or crucial resource areas, so that descent groups acquire a new importance as owners and controllers of resources.” 24

Yet, another aspect of megalithic studies in India is the attempt to trace a living tradition of megalithism. It is widely known that megalithism is a living tradition among a few tribal populations like, Nagas, Khasis, Kurubas, Bondos, Savaras, and Gonds in central, eastern, and northeastern India. Scholars have argued that it is prevalent even among the Madias of Maharashta, Cholanayakans, and Malayrayans of Kerala. Perhaps S. B.

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Deo’s description on the cultural practices of the Lamana community of the Vidarbha region may have implications of the aspect of living tradition, even though he does not use the term. The presupposition on which many of these writings proceed are that the “knowledge of the living megalithic tradition is essential in unfolding the past Megalithic records. Besides, it enables us to trace back the antiquity of the living megalithic tradition.”

Here one should be aware of the logical fallacy that may incur out of proceeding with the assumptions of an uninterrupted historical continuity and the projection of the present into the past. However, the inception of ethno archaeology can be seen in these kinds of works, but still remains in infancy due to the lack of adequate conceptualization.

C. Distribution and Classification

Confronting the material remains of the megaliths meant sorting out the multifarious strands in the forms of monuments on the one hand and the accompanying internments on the other. Scholars began by working out some kind of a classification of basic types on the one hand and the internments on the other. It even moved beyond just explaining the type to the influence of climate and geology in understanding the location and distribution of the megaliths, even though many such interpretations were later refuted. This is what Srinivasan and Banerjee implied while delineating the occurrence of different kinds of cists and cairn circles in the Chingelpet and the neighbouring areas. They say that,

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these monuments have invariably been found to occur on rocky high grounds, which are themselves unfit for cultivation, in close juxtaposition to a hillock and an irrigation-tank, but in very close proximity to arable land. The hills supplied the materials of the structures and, by the nature of the rock, influenced their shape; the irrigation-tank, intended to hold rainwater perennially owing to the lie of the land, made the cultivation of the adjacent arable land possible.

Whereas Moorti argues the contrary, by pointing that it is neither the climate nor the geology that determines the preference of certain monuments at certain geographical location. He says that, “a particular rock type was not necessary for a particular type of burial structure... it seems probable that the construction of a sepulchral/non-sepulchral monument depended upon the nature of a particular burial custom and not vice versa. In other words, the existing burial customs decided the type of burial monument to be built and not the geology of the area.”

Any attempt to provide ‘true’ nomenclature for the megalithic varieties starts with the attempts of early scholars like Breeks, Mackenzie, and Taylor, where initially definitions were provided to identify certain types of megaliths. The man who made a ‘scientific’ attempt to define the megalithic varieties was V.D. Krishnaswami although his terminology

was confined to Tamil Nadu and Kerala. K.N. Dikshith\textsuperscript{31} on the analogy of classification adopted in North Europe (Montelian system) suggests that the following typology can be used in India: Dolmens, Underground rock-cut passage caves, menhir, topi-kallu, koda-kallu, and cist. These he further divides into 1). Imported types (Dolmens, Rock cut Caves, Menhir and cist) 2). Indigenous types (a) imbibed from contemporary cultures-urn and extended burials (b) topi-kallu and Kadakallu 3). Origin not established- cairn, cairn-circle tumulus etc.

Sundara’s\textsuperscript{32} researches and discoveries called for certain incorporations and slight modifications in the existing terminology and classification. Simplifying the types on the basis of certain characteristics and distribution, he put them into three groups viz., the chamber tombs, unchambered graves, and monuments. In the first category, he classifies passage chambers; the porthole chambers, the oblong chambers, the topiikkal-s, the kotakkal, and the rock cut caves. In the second category associated with burials were included pit-burials, pit-circles, the barrows, menhirs, the cairn stone circles, the terracotta sarcophagus burials, and the urn burials. Monuments not associated with burials formed the third category in which stone alignments figured. Leshnik, Agarwal, and Allchins classified them into five basic types’ viz., pit burials, urn and sarcophagi burials, rock-cut burial chambers, cist burials, and stone alignments.

US Moorti\textsuperscript{33} ignoring slight ‘variations in the construction methods and taking into account the basic concepts of the nature of the tomb’ further reduces Sundara’s classification into two basic categories viz., sepulchral monuments (burial proper) and Non-sepulchral monuments (commemorative). Under the sepulchral, he includes three categories, Pit burial (8 types), Chamber Burial (6 types) and Legged and Un-legged Urn Burials (7 types). Non-sepulchral are Dolmen (chamber open on one side), port-hole dolmen (a closed chamber), Menhir, Stone alignment, and Avenue.\textsuperscript{34} Perhaps the criterion for classifying monuments in such a fashion would have emerged out of his vision that the burial customs rather than geology determined the type. He says that, the variations occur “because of spatial and temporal factors and it was but natural depending on the changes in socio-religious expressions.”\textsuperscript{35}

\textbf{Dating and Chronology}

Sorting out the multifarious strands, which the mortuary database provided began as attempts to work out a detailed typology by meticulously


\textsuperscript{34} The classification of Sundara and Moorti are given below. Sundara classifies megaliths into three groups’ viz., Chamber tombs, unchambered graves, and monuments not actually associated with burials. Under Chamber, tombs the following are included. The passage chambers, the port-hole chambers, the oblong chambers, the topiikkal-s, the kotakkal, the rock cut caves. Under unchambered graves he includes, the pit-burials, the pit circles, the barrows, Menhirs, the cairn stone circles, the terracotta sarcophagus burials, and the urn burials. Under monuments, he includes stone alignments. Moorti at the outset classifies the megaliths into two, sepulchral and non-sepulchral. Sepulchral is again divided into three, viz., Pit burial, Chamber Burial and Legged and Un-legged Urn Burials. Under Pit Burials, there are eight types. Pit burial enclosed by an earthen mound; pit burial enclosed by cairn packing, pit burial enclosed by boulders circle/s, pit burial enclosed by cairn packing and bound by boulder circle/s, pit burial capped by a slab and enclosed by boulder circle/s, pit burial enclosed by boulders circle/s, having flat slabs at the centre, pit burial with a ramp and enclosed by cairn stone circle/s, pit burial with a passage and enclosed by cairn stone circle/s.

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was confined to Tamil Nadu and Kerala. K.N. Dikshith on the analogy of classification adopted in North Europe (Montelian system) suggests that the following typology can be used in India: Dolmens, underground rock cut passage caves, menhir, topi-kallu, koda-kallu, and cist. These he further divides into 1). Imported types (Dolmens, Rock cut caves, Menhir and cist) 2). Indigenous types (a) imbibed from contemporary cultures-urn and extended burials (b) topi-kallu and Kadakallu 3). Origin not established- cairn, cairn-circle tumulus etc.

Sundara’s researches and discoveries called for certain incorporations and slight modifications in the existing terminology and classification. Simplifying the types on the basis of certain characteristics and distribution, he put them into three groups viz., the chamber tombs, unchambered graves, and monuments. In the first category, he classifies passage chambers; the porthole chambers, the oblong chambers, the topi-kallu-s, the kotakkal, and the rock cut caves. In the second category associated with burials were included pit-burials, pit-circles, the barrows, menhirs, the cairn stone circles, the terracotta sarcophagus burials, and the urn burials. Monuments not associated with burials formed the third category in which stone alignments figured. Leshnik, Agarwal, and Allchins classified them into five basic types viz., pit burials, urn and sarcophagi burials, rock-cut burial chambers, cist burials, and stone alignments.

US Moorti31 ignoring slight variations in the construction methods and taking into account the basic concepts of the nature of the tomb further reduces Sundara’s classification into two basic categories viz., sepulchral monuments (burial proper) and Non-sepulchral monuments (commemorative). Under the sepulchral, he includes three categories, Pit burial (8 types), Chamber Burial (6 types) and Legged and Un-legged Um Burials (7 types). Non-sepulchral are Dolmen (chamber open on one side), port-hole dolmen (a closed chamber), Menhir, Stone alignment, and Avenue.34 Perhaps the criterion for classifying monuments in such a fashion would have emerged out of his vision that the burial customs rather than geology determined the type. He says that, the variations occur “because of spatial and temporal factors and it was but natural depending on the changes in socio-religious expressions.”35

Dating and Chronology

Sorting out the multifarious strands, which the mortuary database provided began as attempts to work out a detailed typology by meticulously

31 *idem*
34 The classification of Sundara and Moorti are given below. Sundara classifies megaliths into three groups viz., Chamber tombs, unchambered graves, and monuments not actually associated with burials. Under Chamber, tombs the following are included. The passage chambers, the port-hole chambers, the oblong chambers, the topi-kallu-s, the kotakkal, the rock cut caves. Under unchambered graves he includes, the pit-burials, the pit circles, the barrows, Menhirs, the cairn stone circles, the terracotta sarcophagus burials, and the urn burials. Under monuments, he includes stone alignments. Moorti at the outset classifies the megaliths into two, sepulchral and non-sepulchral. Sepulchral is again divided into three, viz., Pit burial, Chamber Burial and Legged and Un-legged Um Burials. Under Pit Burials, there are eight types. Pit burial enclosed by an earthen mound, pit burial enclosed by cairn packing, pit burial enclosed by boulders circle/s, pit burial enclosed by cairn packing and bound by boulder circle/s, pit burial capped by a slab and enclosed by boulder circle/s, pit burial enclosed by boulder circle/s, having flat slabs at the centre, pit burial with a ramp and enclosed by cairn stone circle/s, pit burial with a passage and enclosed by cairn stone circle/s. Six types come under Chamber Burials viz., Chamber burial with without cairn packing and boulder circle/s, Passage chamber burial with without cairn packing and boulder circle/s, Passage chamber burial with without cairn packing and boulder circle/s, Passage chamber burial with without cairn packing and boulder circle/s, Passage chamber burial with without cairn packing and boulder circle/s, Rock-cut chamber burial. There are seven types in the third category called Legged and Unlegged Um Burials. They are Um burial with/without cairn packing and boulder circle/s, Um burial capped by a slab and without a passage/Port-hole and with/without cairn packing and boulder circle/s, Passage urn burial capped by a slab and covered by a kotakkal (hat stone), urn burial capped by a slab and marked by a menhir, unlegged sarcophagus burial with/without cairn packing and boulder circle/s, legged sarcophagus burial with/without cairn packing and boulder circle/s, the Non-sepulchral, that either may be commemorative or memorial includes Dolmen (Chamber open on one side), Port-hole dolmen (closed chamber), Menhir (a monolithic slab), stone alignment, Avenue.
working out the distribution of various types, which was also a step towards building an internal chronology. It was Wheeler’s Brahmagiri excavations as wheeler himself stated “a fixed point has been established in the chronology of the megalithic tombs which are characteristic of south India.”

Analyzing artifacts like Roman coins and soil deposit from the excavation site at Brahmagiri, Mortimer Wheeler placed the megalithic period’s upper limit as the first century A.D and 200-300 B.C. as the lower limit. Srinivasan37 and Banerjee further lifted the upper limit to 4th century A.D. when an excavation at Nilgiris yielded again Roman coins of the early 4th century A.D. The references in Tamil anthologies of later periods and the inscriptive evidence of the kurangathupadi in 13 century A.D. and the living tradition of megalithism identified among various communities makes it difficult to prescribe a definite upper boundary for megalithism. While talking about the case of Vidarbha region Robert Brubacker38 states that one impact of the invention of scientific methods like radiocarbon dating is the shifting of the earlier dates provided by people like Wheeler. To quote, “Several decades later, excavations undertaken at the site of Bhagimohri, Naikund and Tekalghat-Khapa (…), Khirwada (…) in the region of eastern Vidarbha (…) produced a series of radiocarbon assays suggesting that the ‘megalithic’ period in this region began around 800 B.C. and continued until 400 B.C. a time span completely ante-dating the temporal limits proposed by Wheeler in the wake of his Brahmagiri excavations.” Referring to the material remains like white painted black and red ware and iron implements that the Hallur site provided, Nagaraja Rao39 pushed back the lower limit of the culture around the beginning of 1000B.C. The thermo luminescence dating that A. K. Singhvi40 made on the material remains of Kumaranhalli (Chitradurg, Karnataka) suggests that the megalithic mortuary practice can be dated back further to 1440 B.C.41 Despite the ready availability of more than fifty C14 dates which provides a broad chronological span the question of an internal chronology poses difficulties.42

41 A host of archaeologists like Wheeler (1948), Begley (1965), Dikshit (1969), Ramachandran (1969-70), Gururaj Rao (1972), Gupta (1972), Deo (1973), Leshnik (1974), Sundara (1973,1975), Nagaraja and Gururaj Rao (1979), Singhvi (1984), Mcintosh (1985), Rao (1988), Joshi (1993) Moorti (1994), Sondurajana (1996) Brubacker (200-01) made attempts at ascribing and discussing various aspects related to dates of the megalithic culture. However, the most accepted chronology of the megaliths is now assumed to be generally the first millennium B.C. to the mid first century A.D. Meanwhile Moorti in a recent study evaluating carefully the accumulated evidences puts the beginning of the megalithic culture to c.1200B.C. and the terminal date around 300B.C after which there occurs Brahm writing. Subarayalu opines that such a consideration would put the Tamil Nadu megalithic sites outside the megalithic period as they have evidence of Brahm writing. The limited information from absolute chronology and less attention being paid to analysis of pottery, which makes date from thermoluminiscence, impedes any uniformity in the chronology of the megaliths. According to Narasimhaiah, the dolmenoid cist with multi, orthostats, and the sarcophagus types originated outside TamilNadu and entered into the region through different routes at different periods. The dolmenoid cist with multi-orthostats developed inside Tamil Nadu as a result of the contact between the sarcophagus type and the dolmenoid cist with slab circles. The origin of the sarcophagus is still untraceable. Sundara provides a chronological sequence for megalithic chambers in North Karnataka by differentiating it into three phases: the passage chamber tombs of Konnur and Kaladgi types as the early phase dated to 1200-700B.C. and 900-700B.C respectively. Porthole chambers of the Athole and Rajankolur type and round barrows of the upper Tungabhadra and the Malaprabha as the middle phase of the age of 800-600B.C. The last phase he identified was that of the Porthole chambers, pit circles, Oblong chambers in Hire Benkal and Brahmagiri region, which belong to 100-100B.C.
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42 For megalithic associations occurring in chronological contexts from the Iron age down to the modern period in different parts of India see (Soundara Rajan 1963; Gupta; 1972; Thapar and Singhvi (1973,1975), Nagaraju and Gururaja Rao (1979), Singhvi (1984), McIntosh (1985), Rao (1985), Jothi (1993) Moorti (1994), Souna (1996) Brubacker (2000) pushed back the lower limit of the culture around the beginning of 1000B.C. The thermo luminescence dating that A. K. Singhvi made on the material remains of Kumaranhalli (Chitrardurg, Karnataka) suggests that the megalithic mortuary practice can be dated back further to 1440 B.C. Despite the ready availability of more than fifty C14 dates which provides a broad chronological span the question of an internal chronology poses difficulties.
Consolidating evidences provided from research carried over the years Mohanthy & Selva Kumar have provided tentative dating for the megaliths of Peninsular India covering a chronological span of the end of the 2nd millennium B.C. to the middle of the first millennium A.D.

Megaliths of Peninsular India

The five peninsular states of Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala present a pattern reflecting considerable diversity in megalithic mortuary architecture and associated wares. The Vidarbh region in Northeast Maharashtra shows the occurrence of a single type of stone monument, the stone circles with cairn fillings, which is geographically located in high rock bench regions or with hills nearby. The predominant among the wares is the miceseous red ware

Megalithic Remains in the Vindhyas, in Recent Advances in Indo-Pacific Prehistory (V.N.Mishra and P.Bellwood Eds.), New Delhi: Oxford IBH, 1985,p.475. Also G.R.Sharma, "Megalithic Cultures of the Northern Vindhyas," *Academia* , p.480. B. Narasimhaiah extended the typological analysis of megalithic structures into Tamil Nadu and comments on the chronology of the Tamil Nadu megaliths. He says that all the Tamil Nadu megaliths "except a few, have their origin in Karnataka and they developed after 800B.C. The origin and development of typological analysis to be traced are the dolmenoid cist with multi orthostats and passage and the sarcophageus," as mentioned in Neolithic and Megalithic Cultures in Tamil Nadu, 1983,p.165. McIntosh 1985 as cited in Robert Brubaker's *Aspects of mortuary Variability in the South Indian Iron Age*. In the Bulletin of the Deccan College 60-61, 2000-01, 2nd millennium B.C. to the middle of the first millennium A.D.

Localized differences can be seen sometimes in a single outstanding characteristic like the occurrence of terracotta sarcophagi in Cairns and dolmenoid cists a feature exclusive to Northeast Tamil Nadu. Russet coated painted ware is dominant in the upland district of Coimbatore and adjacent parts of Kerala in the west of the Palghat gap. The Coimbatore region is characterized by a wide array of megalithic types lacking dolmens but complex transected porthole cists. Later than the megaliths of the south the Nilgiris megaliths is characterized by red ware ceramics. Kerala’s megalithic architecture reveals forms similar elsewhere in the peninsular but shows uniqueness in forms like topikkal, kotakkal hitherto unknown from anywhere.

ORIGINS

The insecure usage of terms like a ‘megalithic people’, a ‘megalithic race’ and ‘Megalithic builders’ saw a shift from the monuments to the question of the origin of megaliths framed in terms of the superficial similarities between megaliths all over the world. It suddenly became imperative to seek origins within the traditional European migrationist/
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**Megaliths of Peninsular India**

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Elaborations could be seen in the burials by Cairns, stone circles and complex stone chambers and eventually rock cut caves. Excarnated remains in urns, sarcophagi and later cremation augmented the existing mode of burial, and finally megalithic grave offerings contained an increasing array of iron implements and other artefacts. But McIntosh’s argument seemed rather controversial as Sundara showed that the elaborate stone passage graves at nearby Halingalli can be attributed to a different tradition and are among the earliest of the South Indian megaliths as cited in Brubaker, p.273. Radiocarbon dates from Mangadu in Kerala recovered from large urns containing cremated remains calls into question the late introduction of cremation.

\textsuperscript{43} R.K.Mohanthy and V. Selvakumar, “The Archaeology of the Megaliths in India” in Prehistory - Archaeology of South Asia (S Settar and Ravi Korisetty Eds), Indian Archaeology in retrospect, vol 1.ICHR, Manohar, 2002.

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Meadows Taylor believed that resemblances of the east and west were not merely accidental and that "the actual monuments of celtic- scythian tribes are found... in India and being examined are found to agree in all respects with those of Europe." James Fergusson, who noted analogies between the Indian and European examples, argued that they were all "erected by partially civilized races after they had come in contact with the Romans." He also stated that it was difficult to comprehend "how and when intercourse could have taken place which led to their similarity." But resemblances in form and function to the Buddhist stupas made him swirl to a derivation "that all forms of rude stone monuments post-dated and were derived from the more sophisticated stone architecture of the classical civilization." People like Dubreuil argued an Aryan origin for the megaliths. Elliot and Perry saw the south Indian megaliths and its


52 Ibid., p.209.

53 Ibid., p.206.


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Literature on megaliths appear muddled when the question of classifying them as either pre or proto or historic period arises, especially when no epigraphic evidence has so far come out from any of the site. Meanwhile, an inscription from Narttamali, believed to be 13th century, mentions the word kurangappattadai. Since it is not of contemporary origin this would not in any way be taken as an indicator of existence of a literary tradition while megalithism was in vogue. Meanwhile the umpteen number of reference on various aspects related to erection of megaliths appearing in Tamil anthologies has often been taken as point of importance while classifying it as proto or historic. Perhaps the only available marks of any kind so far the sites have provided are the potteries carrying graffiti marks. But, archaeologists never attempted to infer it as bearing any significations of either the existence of literary tradition or as prototype of literacy. Sundara’s interest while speaking on the graffiti marks was to identify its cultural traits, hence, he says, “most of these graffiti can be traced back to the post-Harappan chalcolithic and Harappan times. It appears by way of regional comparisons that this feature does not seem to be a regular feature of the megalith builders in the beginning, but was adopted from the chalcolithic folk with whom they came in contact.” Meanwhile it has been construed either as (1) potters mark, or as (2) owners mark or as (3) clan mark  

K. Rajan argues that, graffiti can be treated as “clan marks or the marks with other meaning.” To substantiate his argument he asserts that, “each burial at Kodumanal had a distinct symbol on most of the pots placed as grave goods. Of the fifteen burials excavated, only three did not yield any graffiti on their pottery…” … “Certain symbols like four vertical lines hanging from a horizontal line collected from different cemetery areas of Kodumanal; denotes a clan or a social group. However, more than fifty graffiti marks found in the habitation makes one rethink this interpretation as one cannot expect more than fifty clan groups in an early historic site.”

MEGALITHS IN KERALA

Studies on India’s megalithic past began with the discovery by Babington along the Kerala coast at Banglamotaparamba in the Taliparamba taluk in North Kerala. What to him were pandoo coolies was what later scholarship described as the enigma of megaliths. The literature on the megaliths of Kerala reveals that its usage began when the term first appeared in the context of Kerala in William Logan’s Malabar in 1887 under the head of religion. The subsequent writings predominantly rolled around providing typology, racial affinity, chronology, and seldom subsistence pattern of the megalithic builders. Methodologically all these works followed the paradigm of either migrationist or diffusionist till recently. Hence, while defining megaliths those who adopted these

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perceptions defined megaliths giving primacy to lithic appendages. For example, K.J. John following Sundara defines megaliths.

The term ‘megaliths’ in cultural studies is defined as a chamber tomb built with big stones in natural forms or roughly dressed or even grave marked with a prodigious rude stone or a purposeful excavation in soft rocks to place the remains of dead ancestors. It is also…. to erection of huge stone memorial or religious in function and … to grave without any lithic appendage which by virtue of the possession of ceremonial pot, water jars and in some cases…. of the dead, clearly projecting the traits of ancestral worship…. classed as megaliths.

It was only in the early 1990s that the first attempt to review megalithic culture along the line of new archaeology appeared in Kerala. It would not be wrong to say that Rajan Gurukkal and Raghava Varier have been pioneers in adopting conceptual tools of New archaeology in interpreting material remains of Iron Age in Kerala. They define megaliths like the following.

The monuments and burials called ‘Megaliths’ are the predominant archaeological remains of the Iron Age that represents a formative phase in the history of Peninsular India in general and Kerala in particular. Distinguished by the practice of raising big stone monuments to the dead, Iron Age is commonly named as Megalithic Age. But all burials of the Age are not Megaliths. Many of them have no lithic association or the associated lithic remains, if any are not large enough to be called Megaliths (…). There were various kinds of mortuary practices among whom a few alone involved erection of megalithic monuments. So, the term ‘Megalith’ is not generally appropriate to refer to all the burials and monuments of Iron Age. In spite of the fact that many of the burial types are not really Megaliths i.e., those made of large stones. The term Megalith is used here as it has been widely accepted. In the present context this term denotes all types of burials and monuments that have sepulchral association, irrespective of their dimension and structural features except the hero stones or memorial stones.

From the presence of etched carnelian beads with designs having parallels with Brahmanabad, Brahmapuri, Maski, and Sanghanakallu and a few others, B.K. Thapar fixes the date of Porkalam 3rd century B.C. to 1st Century A.D. Y.D. Sharma puts the chronology of rock cut caves of Cochin between two or three centuries before and one century after Christ. George and Mehta postulated that in the absence of the so-called Andhra criss-cross ware, the monuments could be earlier than its occurrence in the first millennium A.D. But based on the beads, ceramic and iron objects the site at Machad and Pazhayannur could be ascribed to a period ranging from 2nd century B.C. to 2nd Century A.D. Sathymurthy on the basis of Carbon dating and comparative analysis suggests 1000 B.C. as the lower limit of the megaliths of Mangadu. Following the periodization of megaliths of south India given by Balakrishnan Nair and McIntosh as Phase I and Phase II and some of the arguments of K. Rajan on Deep South, Gurukkal and Varier argues that the Kerala megaliths belonged to the period between the mid first millennium B.C. and mid-first millennium A.D. The evidence of Neolithic survival, like the presence of the typical lipped bowls, spouted vessels and the absence of iron in one of the caves in the cluster of seven, in the megalithic site of Umichipoyil explored by the

References:


64 B.K.Thapar, “Porkalam 1948: Excavation of a megalithic Urn Burial,” Ancient India 8:3-16, 1952


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The term ‘megaliths’ in cultural studies is defined as a chamber tomb built with big stones in natural forms or roughly dressed or even grave marked with a prodigious rude stone or a purposeful excavation in soft rocks to place the remains of dead ancestors. It is also…. to erection of huge stone memorial or religious in function and … to grave without any lithic appendage which by virtue of the possession of ceremonial pot, water jars and in some cases…. of the dead, clearly projecting the traits of ancestral worship…. classed as megaliths.

It was only in the early 1990s that the first attempt to review megalithic culture along the line of new archaeology appeared in Kerala. It would not be wrong to say that Rajan Gurukkal and Raghava Varier have been pioneers in adopting conceptual tools of New archaeology in interpreting material remains of Iron Age in Kerala. They define megaliths like the following.

The monuments and burials called ‘Megaliths’ are the predominant archaeological remains of the Iron Age that represents a formative phase in the history of Peninsular India in general and Kerala in particular. Distinguished by the practice of raising big stone monuments to the dead, Iron Age is commonly named as Megalithic Age. But all burials of the Age are not Megaliths. Many of them have no lithic association or the associated lithic remains, if any are not large enough to be called Megaliths (…). There were various kinds of mortuary practices among whom a few alone involved erection of megalithic monuments. So, the term ‘Megalith’ is not generally appropriate to refer to all the burials and monuments of Iron Age. In spite of the fact that many of the burial types are not really Megaliths i.e., those made of large stones. The term Megalith is used here as it has been widely accepted. In the present context this term
denotes all types of burials and monuments that have sepulchral association, irrespective of their dimension and structural features except the hero stones or memorial stones. 63

From the presence of etched carnelian beads with designs having parallels with Brahmanabad, Brahmapuri, Maski, and Sanghanakallu and a few others, B.K. Thapar64 fixes the date of Porkalam 3rd century B.C. to 1st Century A.D. Y.D. Sharma65 puts the chronology of rock cut caves of Cochin between two or three centuries before and one century after Christ. George and Mehta66 postulated that in the absence of the so-called Andhra criss-cross ware, the monuments could be earlier than its occurrence in the first millennium A.D. But based on the beads, ceramic and iron objects the site at Machad and Pazhayannur could be ascribed to a period ranging from 2nd century B.C. to 2nd Century A.D. Sathymurthy67 on the basis of Carbon dating and comparative analysis suggests 1000 B.C. as the lower limit of the megaliths of Mangadu. Following the periodization of megaliths of south India given by Balakrishnan Nair and McIntosh as Phase I and Phase II and some of the arguments of K. Rajan on Deep South, Gurukkal and Varier68 argues that the Kerala megaliths belonged to the period between the mid first millennium B.C. and mid-first millennium A.D. The evidence of Neolithic survival, like the presence of the typical lipped bowls, spouted vessels and the absence of iron in one of the caves in the cluster of seven, in the megalithic site of Umichipoyil explored by the

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current researcher suggests the possibilities of bringing the lower limit of the megaliths of northern Kerala near to the one Satyamurthy argued for Mangadu.\textsuperscript{69}

The megaliths of Kerala reflect a unique blend of mortuary architecture characterized by forms common in the other regions of the peninsula and also by several forms unheard of in these regions retaining in a sense its own distinctiveness. The occurrence of certain types in certain areas of the region can be discerned in terms of overall distribution of types. However, the presence of megaliths all over the region whether in the hilly areas or the plains is curious and puzzling. The types found in Kerala may be described on the basis of certain distinctive features. The forms in Kerala are internally different with the same external features and preparing a typology for south India and Kerala in particular is rendered difficult. There is no kind of consistency in the occurrence of burials having similar external features as the internal structures sometimes happen to be different or vice versa. Interestingly one finds consistency in certain identifiable features and inconsistency in mixed features. This could be explicated by the occurrence of urns in rock cut tombs, cists, in menhirs and topikkal-s\textsuperscript{70}.

A meticulous typology has not been attempted for the megaliths and still continues to be classified in terms of basic types. However, among the nearly 26 varieties of megalithic monuments so far discovered from South India 10 varieties are found in Kerala. They are, Dolmens, Cists, topikkal, kotakkal, rock cut caves, menhirs, Sarcophagi, urn burial, pit burial and alignments. Among them, unique to Kerala are topikkal and kotakkal. If one were to follow the classificatory scheme Sundara proposed, the unique monuments of Kerala like the kotakkal and topikkal in addition to rock cut caves, dolmens and cists, would fall into his first category, which is burials proper, or other wise called chamber tombs.\textsuperscript{71} In the second category, which he calls as unchambered burial, one can easily include pits, urn, sarcophagi, and menhir. The remaining one, that is, alignments would come under the category of commemorative monuments. Meanwhile, going along with the classificatory scheme of U.S. Moorti\textsuperscript{72} would mean a bifurcation into sepulchral and non sepulchral where sepulchral included burial proper with a subdivision of pit burials, chamber burials, legged and unlegged burials and the non sepulchral includes only commemorative monuments. The rock cut caves was put into the category of chamber burials and the topikkal, kotakkal, sarcophagi and urn burials under legged and unlegged burials. Dolmens, menhirs, stone alignments, and cists are put in the category of non-sepulchral. The archaeological remains, the monuments listed in the last category from Kerala suggest that Moorti’s classification made on the basis of its socio-religious functions rather than sepulchral needs rethinking. There is an attempt to classify Kerala megaliths alone in Gurukkal and Varier’s\textsuperscript{73} work, even though they do not claim so, where it is found like the following. Pits, urn, and sarcophagi are included in the first category. Dolmens and cists are the second category. Topikkal, kotakkal, and rock cut caves are listed separately. Menhirs and stone alignments are put together as the sixth category. Without following any of the classificatory scheme, a brief description of the various types of megalithic monuments available from Kerala are provided in the succeeding pages.

\textsuperscript{69} The current researcher has here only made a comparative analysis of material remains of megalithic burials. The scientifically analysed data is still impending.
\textsuperscript{71} Here the term kotakkal has been used in the sense of a capstone and interchangeably the English terms capstones and umbrella stones have been used.
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MEGALITHIC TYPES

Rock cut caves

The most widely distributed and commonly found type but with no parallel elsewhere in the peninsula, intriguing in its structure both inside and outside presents the onlooker with an array of architectural grandiose. Most of the discoveries of rock cut caves have been accidental, in the course of quarrying and in majority of the cases leading to large-scale destruction sometimes preventing accessibility into the cave. Extensively found in the laterite beds they occur in many varieties and are known locally by a string of names. These rock cut tombs or shaft graves or catacomb tomb are locally known as pandukuzhi, muniyara, Guba, Pdavu, Pandavanpara Chemkalara. The rock cut caves of Trissur have formed the basis for any discussion on rock cut caves as they ranked foremost in structure and interior details. Those at Eyyal, Kattakampal, Porkalam, Chovannur, and Kandanisseri were described in terms of their general features and a classification was made on the basis of many common as well as divergent elements. These underground caves are fashioned by quarrying into the laterite beds. These monolithic structures have a small rectangular entrance cut into the vertical face of the rock sometimes so small that it hardly allows a person to crawl through. The entrance is sealed with a rectangular capstone and leads to the chamber inside. The inside chamber is sometimes circular; semi circular, oblong, parabolic and the floor of the chamber is sometimes higher than the outer court. The passage is the space between the opening and the chamber.

Leshnik uses the term to refer to the rock cut caves. For further details, see Nomads and Burials …Op.cit, p.49.

The Typological sequence provided by Y.D.Sharma for the rock cut caves of Cochin were caves with a central pillar, cave without a central pillar, cave with a top opening and multi-chambered caves. Gurukkal and Varier believe that though they are found in many varieties they can largely be classified into two varieties viz. single chambered and multi chambered.

Some caves have a flight of steps leading to the passage and the chamber. The caves have a hemispherical domed vault and an opening at the top sealed by a capstone. The entrance bereft of the capstone presents multiple doorways of different sizes in the descending order as they go into the interior and like the jams of a doorway.

The areas from Kattakampal in the south to Chittarikal in the north form the domain of the rock cut caves. Shallow depressions for placing the pottery are found in certain caves and some of the burials are urn shaped pits or trapezium shaped chambers at a few sites. Many of the caves are simple while some have laterite pits or stone benches. They are found in Kasaragod, Kannur, and Kozhikode in Northern Kerala, Mallapuram, Thrissur in Central Kerala and Pathanamthitta and Trivanduram in Southern Kerala. They are by and large sepulchral, the grave goods include variety of pottery, iron objects, beads, stone objects, bronze, and gold objects as well.

Umbrella Stones

Exclusive to Kerala and found mostly in the laterite region visible on the landscape jutting above the ground are numerous kotakkal-s (the Malayalam equivalent for umbrella) representing by far the most beautiful type of megaliths. Fashioned in finely hewn laterite a domical capstone rests on four orthostats. Shaped like a mushroom it resembles a palm leaf umbrella common in Kerala and structurally it consists of the stem and the umbrella head. Their distribution isn’t as profuse as the rock cut tombs. Heavily concentrated in the Malapuram region their presence is seen in Thrissur, Palakkad, districts in central Kerala and Kozhikode, and kannur districts in north Kerala. Kantanassery in Thrissur district, kotakkal, Alattur, Vengara, Pathappiriyam in the Mallapuram District and Atholy, Kduvally in the Kozhikode District. Many of these sites owe their place names to
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Cap-Stones

Resting directly on the ground these hemispherical stones are without any clinostats to support them and are used as lids put on urn burials. Known as topikkal-s, a local name this still continues to confuse archaeologists who interchangeably keep using the terms ‘cap-stone’ and ‘umbrella stone’. Marked by the rarity of their occurrence it is nothing but an urn burial with stylized lid resembling a hat. An urn normally would have a flat stone as a lid but a hat like lid is what marks the topikkal different giving it the name capstone. It acts like an external marker appearing visibly on the ground. Central Kerala seems to be the region of their occurrence in the taluks of Ernad, Ottapalam, Talapilly, and Mannarkkad. They occur with the umbrella stones in Cherumanagad.

Urns, Sarcophagi and Pits

The discoveries of urn burials have more often been accidental like the rock cut caves and though not as widely distributed yet have a fairly uniform distribution and occur in thirteen districts of the state. Locally they are known by varying names like Chadi, Kkadi, Plav, Thazi, Manchadi and Matumakkattazi, Nammannati and manzikutam. Pits and sarcophagi are rarely found. The red soil tracts of the region have been the area from where they have been reported. Rarely in alignments and found generally scattered but sometimes in clusters they are kept in pits and prominent among the types of urns are the pyriform urns and the globular type. They are generally sealed by stone-slabs and at times by ceramic vessels too occasionally marked by stone/cairn circles.

Pits and sarcophagi are rare when compared to the urns. A sarcophagus is a legged coffin in terracotta and the one found at Perunkulam and kattakampal are bovine shaped with figurines of animals found on them.

Dolmens and Cists

In the high range normally in the granite belts and also in the rocky tables of the plains occur dolmens and cists. Porkalam in Trissur district and Marayur and Anjanad in the Idukki district are examples of dolmens in the plains and high tables. Similar structurally the dolmen is a variant of the cist. While dolmens are visible on the ground cists are buried. Both have orthostats made of dressed granite slabs and have one or more chambers with sometimes one of the chambers having a porthole, which is a circular opening. They are found sometimes in isolation and sometimes in groups enclosed by a cairn circle or a dry masonry wall. The excavated dolmens have yielded the usual burial goods but there are examples of a few on top of rocky tablelands, which have not yielded any burial remains. The dolmenoid cists discovered are more than the dolmens and have an eastern porthole. They occur in the rocky midlands as well as in the high ranges.

Menhirs and Alignments

Locally known as Nattukal and Pulacchikal monolithic structures towering upwards called menhirs are erected over urn burials. Nattukal symbolises an installed stone erected in memory of the dead interred under the monument. The term pulacchi is a corruption of puratchi signifying fame and therefore represents a fame-stone erected in memory of the dead. Parts of Trissur district and areas in the north of Travancore are the well-known zones of menhirs. Sometimes they are seen in rows or in alignments at different places.
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The locally distinctive kinds of monuments in Kerala coexist with other known forms. These distinctive forms explicitly are dictated by geographical factor especially the ready availability of laterite. The rock cut caves; topikkal-s and kotakkal-s occur in the laterite zones of Northern and central Kerala. Among the known forms, the dolmens are seen in the upland regions. However, the urn burials do not show any pattern of distribution. Despite their concentration in the deltaic and coastal regions, they are visible in the midland and upland region. The accessibility to the raw material readily available has often been given undue importance in determining the burial type. According to Gurukkal and Varier beyond that perhaps what can be discerned is an element of cultural choice in the preference of a particular form of burial as Porkalam is a good pointer to the presence of various burial types in the lateritic zone.

The pattern of distribution shows different types was confined to particular areas. Rock cut cave seems to be the most dominant variety and the commonly found form in North Kerala in the districts of Kannur and Kozhikode. The three taluks of Taliparamba, Kannur, and Talasser have a total of 55 sites of which the rock cut cave is the predominant variety interspersed with two sites having umbrella stones and sometimes occurring with dolmenoid/cist and urns. The hilly district of Wyannad has thirteen single monument sites and two multiple monument sites. The district of Kozhikode has a curious mixture of rock cut caves, umbrella stones, dolmen/cist, urns, sarcophagus and sites have yielded at the same place monuments of granite and laterite. Here a total of 57 single monument sites can be seen of which thirteen are multiple monument sites. Although rock cut caves, occur in majority of the sites umbrella stones are seen in almost thirteen of the sites.

Central Kerala comprising of the districts of Malapuram, Palakkad and Trissur are said to have the maximum number of sites and the region lying in the vicinity of the palghat gap has made scholars emphasise this geographical factor to account for the occurrence of the maximum variety in the forms found. Some of the well excavated sites of Machad and Pazyannur, Porkalam are found here. The site of Cherimanad with its hood stones and hat stones are found here. The Talapilly taluk has all the known forms. Palghat has the largest number of multiple monument sites about 26 out of a total of 130 sites.

South Kerala includes the districts of Ernakulam, Idukki, Alapuzha, Kottayam, Kollam, Pathanamthita, and Trivanduram. While Ernakulam has a large number of urn burials, Idukki has several dolmens and cists while urns and cist burials are found in Kollam, Pathanamthita and Trivanduram. The Devikulam taluk has the largest number of dolmens.

The maximum distribution of rock cut caves can be seen in Kannur district while the maximum distribution of umbrella stones can be seen in Central Kerala with a concentration in Malapurram district. When compared to the rock cut caves however their distribution is less. Menhirs occur in majority in central Kerala, with a concentration in Palakkad. No menhirs have been reported from Alapuzha district or from north Kerala. Urn burials have a uniform distribution in thirteen districts in Kerala. The maximum distribution is found in Trissur. Hat stones and hood stones show a rarity in occurrence found in association with umbrella stones at Cherumanadagad, Talapilly, and Ottapalam taluks. Dolmens/cists have a fairly uniform distribution in all the fourteen districts. The coastal plains show fewer sites when compared to the midlands and the lowlands. They seem to cluster in the midlands and the lowlands and are located in plains.
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As argued in the context of south India that geographical determinants alone do not suffice to explain patterns of distribution the regional macro picture shows the occurrence of burials on top or on the slopes of hillocks. The rock cut caves have a wide distribution and are the most frequently encountered types mainly confined to the mid-land laterite zones of northern and central Kerala where the presence of laterite formation explicitly determined their occurrence. This is applicable for the topikkal-s and the kotakkal-s, which seem to be confined in the lateritic zones in Northern and Central Kerala. Urn burials here are sometimes sealed with laterite slabs as capstones where granite is not available. The dolmens in the upland region of granite zone do exhibit a similar pattern. Urn burials exhibit a pattern in contrast showing a fairly uniform distribution with a concentration in the deltaic and coastal regions but do appear in the midland and upland regions. But as Varier and Gurukkal have argued in the context of Kerala “It is often pointed out the availability of raw material determined the burial type. There is an element of cultural choice in opting for a particular burial type, as evidenced by the presence of various burial types at the sites which lie in the laterite zone, e.g. Porkalam.”

MAKING SENSE OF ARTIFACTS
SETTLEMENT AND SUBSISTENCE

If the largest database which the monuments as such present has evoked questions on their origins, authorship, typology and chronology the grave goods were seen as separate categories in generating wide ranging views in the realms of technology, craft specialisation, settlement, economy, ideology and belief systems. Ceramics and metals constitute major components among the funerary assemblages. Settlement pattern studies initiated in South India have been useful in understanding human adaptation. The paucity of settlement sites in South India, coupled with inadequacies in survey methods to locate habitations saw arguments being forwarded indicating pastoral, nomadic or semi settled agricultural way of the megalithic people. In the context of Kerala in the absence of a single habitation site, present day settlement patterns have been taken to provide clues for dispersed settlement patterns. Biological evidences recovered from the excavated sites in the other parts of the peninsular have shown no possibilities for a clear-cut demarcation between agriculture and pastoralism. Kerala again cuts a sorry


80 “In the absence of habitation site, analysis of the settlement pattern of the Iron Age- Early Historic society has become a difficult task. However, the present day settlement pattern in modern Kerala can give some clues in this regard. In modern Kerala, the entire stretch of land is completely occupied and intensively used, except for the thinly forested and marshy tracts. This is termed as dispersed settlement pattern.” R.Gurukkal and M.R.R.Varier, Cultural history of…Op.cit., p.129.

81 For details, see U.S.Moorthi, Megalithic Culture of… Op.cit., pp.45-109. K.Rajan Archaeology of Tamil Nadu (Kongu Country), Delhi, 1994. Also see J. McIntosh, “Dating the South Indian Megaliths,” in South Asian Archaeology 1983, Schotsman, J. and Taddei, M. (Eds), Naples: Institute Universitario Orientale. The arguments of these scholars are pastoralism being dominant in the early phases and in the riverine tracts an indication of agriculture being dominant in the later stages.
and hill slopes. Highlands have fewer sites when compared to the midlands and lowlands.

As argued in the context of south India that geographical determinants alone do not suffice to explain patterns of distribution the regional macro picture shows the occurrence of burials on top or on the slopes of hillocks. The rock cut caves have a wide distribution and are the most frequently encountered types mainly confined to the mid-land laterite zones of northern and central Kerala where the presence of laterite formation explicitly determined their occurrence. This is applicable for the topikkal-s and the kotakkal-s, which seem to be confined in the lateritic zones in Northern and Central Kerala. Urn burials here are sometimes sealed with laterite slabs as capstones where granite is not available. The dolmens in the upland region of granite zone do exhibit a similar pattern. Urn burials exhibit a pattern in contrast showing a fairly uniform distribution with a concentration in the deltaic and coastal regions but do appear in the midland and upland regions. But as Varier and Gurukkal have argued in the context of Kerala “It is often pointed out the availability of raw material determined the burial type. There is an element of cultural choice in opting for a particular burial type, as evidenced by the presence of various burial types at the sites which lie in the laterite zone, e.g. Porkalam.”

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picture in terms of evidences from the archaeological record. Modes and strategies of existence have been understood using textual sources. Tamil heroic poems have generated clues compensating the paucity of archaeological evidences for food gathering activities.53 According to Gurrukkal and Varier evidences from the megaliths of Kerala together with evidences provided from the other parts of the Peninsular indicates a mixed form of subsistence.

Metal artefacts, which form in a small measure a sizeable quantity of the grave goods, have been used to gauge metal technology. If debates on the origins evoked diffussionist migrationist explanations together with indigenous origins the presence of metals saw an enormous amount of discussion on the introduction of iron technology along the indigenous lines or even otherwise.84 For Kerala, evidences from Machad & Pazhayanur have made scholars point to indicated levels of contemporary metallurgical skills.85 However, sources for copper/bronze artefacts have been sought elsewhere and as import from the Western Asian world.86 The presence of non local items especially carnelian beads among the assemblages makes one postulate an exchange network but in an incipient stage expanding over the centuries.87

SOCIAL ORGANISATION AND POLITICAL POWER

Social organization did not merit serious consideration until the 1980’s barring a few statements or rather observations on society. Incorporating conceptual tools where mortuary remains were analyzed in terms of overall socio-economic scenario adopting categorization of artifacts, social ranking was attempted in the 1990’s. The idea of a ranked society, clan based, segmentary society found its way into the

53 “Economic life of the people is the basic realm for anyone to conceive their culture, because culture means at the cut set material culture. The material processes of human existence in nature generate culture. Where they subsisted how and why would help us understand the entailing cultural processes. During the period the people had taken to various means of subsistence such as hunting and gathering, animal husbandry, agriculture and craft production, as testified by the burial goods,” in R.Gurrukkal and M.R.R Varier, Op. cit. p.131-32.


85 Analysis of iron objects especially a metallic hook has revealed pure iron free of air bubbles and has also helped establish the knowledge of folding and forging techniques in the working of iron. See K. George, “Archaeology of Kerala upto 1500AD.” Unpublished PhD Diss., Baroda, M.S.University, 1975. Also see R.N.Mehta and K.M George, “Megaliths at Machad...Op.cit., pp.20-21.

86 Arippa excavations, which have yielded copper and bronze objects exhibit a higher degree of iron than, copper in majority of the cases and rarely more of copper and less of iron. The failure to identify sources of copper in Kerala have also prompted scholars to argue for raw materials of copper and bronze being brought from elsewhere especially west Asia where Palestine must have been a major source. See R.Gurrukkal and M.R.R Varier, Op. cit., pp.133. P Rajendran and C.P.S Iyer “A Preliminary Report on the Characterisation of the copper and Gold Ornaments of the Arippa Megalithic Culture in kollam District, Kerala, in Man and Environment 22 (2), pp 61-66.

87 R.Gurrukkal “Forms of Production and Forces of Change in Ancient Tamil Society,” Studies in History, (NS) 5 (2), 1989, PP.159-76. R.Champakkakshmi Trade, ideology and Urbanisation: South India 300BC. to A.D. 300, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1996, have shown that inter-regional exchanges of goods came to be well established in South India by third century B.C. Through long distance traders a network of exchange operated enabling the exchange of non local goods and the Iron Age people were linked in this as testified by archaeology and literary allusions. This incipient state of exchange network in the Iron Age expanded over the centuries due to “internal dynamic and external imperius involving the demand for goods in other parts of the subcontinent as well as in the Mediterranean region” as cited in R.Gurrukkal and M.R.R Varier, Op.cit.,p.142.
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writings of some scholars. Speaking of the same in the context of Kerala Gurrukal and Varier believe as archaeology fails to provide clues on the structure of social relations insights can be drawn from anthropology which can help comprehend differences in status and ranking point to the nature of contemporary political power. “The construction of a huge monument involving the mobilization of substantial collective labour implies the power of the buried individual to command it. Keeping in view the fact that contemporary peoples were tribal descent groups, what is anthropologically plausible is the chiefly power. The chief was the great son (perumakan of the literary texts) of the descent group, its embodiment. He commanded the entire personal, material and cultural resources of the clan.”

BELIEF SYSTEMS AND IDEOLOGY

Conceptualizing mortuary rituals remains a realm where attempts have been few incorporating ideas from recent studies on European Megaliths. As Gurrukal and Varier have pointed out reconstructing belief systems and ideology from material remains seems daunting and is always an exercise bringing into play the archaeological imagination. Citing the example of meaning and implications inherent in the kotakkal shows the degree of conceptualization involved. Attempts have been made to raise questions on the importance of the dead to the living and megaliths invoking meanings of life after death. Looking at the monuments and the perceptions of their constructors’ means unraveling ideologies and values where the issue of death itself has to be confronted with renewed interest. It does not imply merely looking at these massive constructions as part of a religious endeavor but it could also been seen as a legitimizing mechanism for the reproduction of power relations.

Apparent in the way treatment has been accorded to understanding the multifarious strands which the bewildering variety of structures have bequeathed is the sparse direct evidence in the region of Kerala and the indirect at times vulnerable to varying interpretations. Archaeologists and historians find themselves falling back on the oft-quoted lame excuse of inadequate fragmentary data to explain the why and how of things and are often content with vague cultural continuities. Sitting back and observing the data through vague questions rather than definite ones results in the past being reduced to an assumed sameness. A regional micro level study becomes imperative. The remaining pages in this thesis embody the work undertaken in the Kasaragod region by the present researcher.

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89 As cited in S.P.Tampi, Prehistoric Archaeology of…Op.cit., p.49. Manilal(1979) has conducted a survey in the tribal belts of Kerala and believes mushrooms belonging to the genera such as psilocybe, amanita, boletus when consumed create hallucination due to the presence of certain chemical substances. Kotakkal having striking similarity to the shape of a mushroom erected for the dead must have evoked respect and fear and was a belief of the living being able to communicate to the dead. Also see K. Jayashree Nair, “Interpreting the Kerala Megalithic Tombs,” in K.K.N. Kurup Ed. New Dimensions in South Indian History, Calicut, 1996, pp.7-21. Also R.Gurrukal and M.R.R. Varier, Op.cit., pp.148-49.
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