Cover Page

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ROOTS AND ROUTES: ORIGINS OF MEGALITHS AND THEIR CONTEXT IN INDIA

Dr. K. John Milton
Associate Professor of History
Telangana

Abstract

This study explores the origins and diffusion of megaliths, focusing on their significance within the Indian context. Megaliths, monumental stone structures built by ancient cultures, have been found globally, reflecting diverse cultural practices and beliefs. This research examines the archaeological evidence of megalithic sites in India, analyzing their architectural features, burial practices, and cultural significance. By tracing the routes of diffusion and the cultural exchanges that influenced the development of these structures, the study highlights the interplay between local traditions and global megalithic practices. Ultimately, this exploration seeks to enrich our understanding of India's megalithic heritage and its connections to broader historical narratives.

Keywords: Megaliths, Origins, Diffusion, and Monumental Stone Structures

Introduction

Advent of Iron technology brought tremendous impact on the cultural life of the Peninsular India. Building different kinds of massive stone sepulchral structures to commemorate deceased people has been an important tradition of the people during the age. The Eurocentric connotation has been in vogue in terming these cultures as Megalithic cultures. Though some scholars deny its existence as a identifiable meaningful culture entity yet some scholars regarded these culture as first worldwide phenomenon, while other as a well defined stage of civilization, and still others claimed that these cultures as of all the enigmas of archaeology. It is widely assumed that during the Neolithic era, the Megalithic culture arose in the Mediterranean region long before metallurgy was practiced and then spread to Europe. However, in Indian context, in particular – peninsular India, archaeological findings indicate that the most of the megalithic complexes are associated with the pre- literate phase of Iron Age.[1] Conspicuously, in peninsular India, this culture known not from their habitation sites which are rarely found but from their funerary structures and as such these cultures often termed since funeral cultures as funeral remains are the main source to understand these societies.

Definition and Explanation of Megaliths

Beliefs and practices concerning death have been in vogue throughout human history. The reaction to this common destiny is as varied and complex as there are traditions, cultures, beliefs and religions, despite the fact that all will die and all humans face the same end. The archaeological record consists of the innumerable testimonies about human actions to the inevitable from the remote past. In the Indian context, death is not only revered but also given respect since the ancient times. It pertinently reflects in a vast amount of archaeological as well as in literary data related to rituals performed for the dead. There are evidences which are stating that people belong to the Palaeolithic age buried their dead which was amply attest their concern over the dead.[2] From the Mesolithic age and subsequent period up to Iron Age, the dead were buried inside their houses – beneath the floor – or very close to them, at the limits of the settlements they had lived in[3], probably to show that the departing soul and its spirit, inspirations and aspirations still exist within the living

[1] Srikumar M. Menon, *Ancient Stone Riddles: Megaliths of the Indian Subcontinent*, Manipal University Press, 2012, p.12.
[2] Darsana S.B., 'The Megalithic Burials of Tamilnadu: An analysis', Dikshit K.N. and Kumar, Ajit (ed.) *The Megalithic Culture of South India*, The Indian Archaeological Society, New Delhi, 2014.
[3] Shanthanu Vaidya and Yogesh Mallinathpur M., 'Burial Concepts and Traditions in Pre-Iron Age India: An Overview', Kishor K. Basa, Rabindra K.Mohanty, Simadri B.Ota, (ed.) *Megalithic Traditions in India: Archaeology and Ethnography*, Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya, Bhopal, 2015, pp.17-37.

Cover Page

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communities. By the time of Iron Age, these changes culminated in the development of a peculiar way of disposal, which is widely known as megalithic culture.[4] Massive stone constructions at burial places have been a hallmark of the Megalithic tradition. It was during this period that separate burial landscape was marked distinct from the living landscape and worship of the dead became the norm of the day. The term 'megalith' comes from two Greek words, *megathos* meaning big and *lithoi* meaning stone.[5] It may be defined as a sepulchre or memorial built in stone, whether dressed or in its natural form which contains, encloses or erects over a funerary assemblage'**.** It is a term which incorporates different kinds of stone monuments built by primitive societies all over the ancient world. These monuments shed light on the past societies whose ritual traits centred around the funeral customs. In fact, the term Megalithic itself comes from the structures made by huge stone blocs erected by the past societies. The intricate architecture of graves, grave goods and other metal and stone artefacts explain megalithic people's funeral rituals.

The megalithic structures may be classified with reference to their forms as dolmens, dolmenoid cists, cromlechs, cairns, menhirs, topikal, stone circles and alignments. Archaeological findings indicate that the most of the megalithic complexes were associated with prehistoric sites and cultures. However, it should be mentioned at the outset that megaliths are not the principal markers of any homogenous and distinct culture. They reflect certain burial practices that surfaced at different times and in different regions.

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[6] 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 artefacts 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."[7] The said superficial similarities traced in terms of form and technique, by and large, determined what one implied as 'megaliths'. 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 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.[8] To indicate the fact that megaliths need not necessarily be associated either with mega or with lithos he argues[9], "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 was interpreted by him as "our own taxonomic decision," contributing to the word 'megalithic tomb' being extended to monuments as distinct from dyssers in Denmark and Almeria passage tombs.[10]

[4] Rao K.P., *Deccan Megaliths,* Sandeep Prakashan, Delhi, 1988, p.1.
[5] Srinivasan K.R. and Banerjee N.R., 'Survey of South Indian Megaliths', *Ancient India*, No.9 (1953), p.108; Gordon V. Childe, 'Megaliths', *Ancient India*, No.4, 1947, p.5.
[6] Glyn Daniel, *A Hundred And Fifty Years of Archaeology*, Harvard University Press, Duckworth, 1976.
[7] McIntosh J., "Dating the South Indian Megaliths," *South Asian Archaeology*, 1983, p.203.
[8] Gordon V. Childe, "Megaliths," *Ancient India*, Trubner & Co. Ltd., New York, 1948, p.5.
[9] Ibid., p.13
[10] Colin Renfrew, *Before Civilization: The Radiocarbon Revolution and Prehistoric Europe*, Penguin Books, London, 1973, p.167.

Cover Page

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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 manner in which megaliths were directly engaged in social strategies in Western Europe was based on the present historical context. The presence of the tombs can only be effectively understood by evaluating the value-laden meanings within European society.'[11]

Diffusion of Megalithic Culture

Megaliths have intrigued the lay people, historians and antiquarians alike because of their mysterious and bold presence on the surface of the earth. Megalithism is a global phenomenon, and its occurrence from the coasts of England to Japan certainly captures one's imagination. These ancient stone structures have been studied almost throughout the Old World as a result of which numerous hypotheses have been propounded to account for their origin and spread. From an archaeological point of view, megalithic monuments are of particular interest for a number of reasons, such as:

1) They have existed both historically and prehistorically in many parts of the world (e.g., Europe, India, Africa, Southeast Asia, Polynesia).
2) They are also related to the evolution of ancient complex cultures; and
3) They require a very significant expenditure in resources, labour and capital, typically being the single greatest undertaking in the communities in which they are built.

Megaliths in Europe

European megaliths are found to be of the earliest origin when viewed chronologically. Europe's vast megalithic complex is derived from the Eastern Mediterranean, where it traces the dissemination of this tradition by seafarers travelling across Spain, through Europe's coasts and into Scandinavia. It is believed that this tradition was prevalent from the Neolithic to the Bronze Age for a long time. (i.e. from around 5000 BCE to 2000 BCE) until the Iron Age. The European megaliths date back to BCE 4th millennium and lasted until BCE 1st millennium.[12] According to Stroud, the concept of erecting megalithic shrines may have originated in the Western European countries of the Neolithic and Copper Periods. The origin of megalithic buildings or monuments is extremely contentious. Some scientists trace their origins in Egypt, while others attribute it to the Palaeolithic cave funerals.[13] Most European archaeologists agree that megalithic Culture has evolved indigenously[14], though it may have different independent centres. However many prefer to agree with Mackie's version of modified diffusionism in the dissemination of ideas, and claim that this took place along the Atlantic coast. The most popular form of megalithic construction in Europe is a portal tomb commonly known as dolmens, a chamber consisting of upright stones (orthostats) with one or more wide flat roofing caps. However there are also local names. The single standing stone, or menhir, as known in France, is also a type of megalithic monument that is very common throughout Europe with about 50,000 examples. These sites were connected to complex ceremonies that

[11] Colin Renfrew and Paul Bahn, *Archaeology: Theories, Methods, and Practice*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1991, p.429.
[12] Thom A., 'The Distance between Stones in Stone Rows', *Journal Royal Statistical Society*, Vol. A 141(2), 1978, p.253-257.
[13] Daniel K., 'Megalithic Culture as a Symbolical Boundary of Pan-Naga Ethnic Community: A Study of Shepoumaramth in Manipur North-East India', *Radix International Journal of Research in Social Science,* Vol.3(5), 2014.
[14] Sherratt A., 'The Genesis of Megaliths: Monumentality, Ethnicity and Social Complexity in Neolithic North-West Europe', *World Archaeology*, Vol.22(2), 1990, pp.147-167.

Cover Page

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actually reached well beyond mortal funeral.[15] There are long and complex alignments of such stones in some places, with the largest known example being Carnac in Brittany, France. A comparatively common form of megalithic construction in some parts of Britain and Ireland is the stone circle, of which Stonehenge, Avebury, Ring of Brodgar and Beltany are prominent. These megalithic constructions show signs of both solar and lunar astronomical alignment. For instance, Stonehenge is famous for its alignment of the solstice. In the rest of Europe, too, traces of stone circles are found. Three types of dolmens are referred to by Estyn Evans: portal dolmens derived from court or horned cairns, passage dolmens derived from passage graves, and wedge dolmens derived from wedge tombs. For whom the Megalithic culture is the product of a synthesis of intrusive and well-established cultures. Megaliths in Europe were typically found to have been founded during the Stone Age or late (4500-1500 BCE) or during the Chalcolithic or Copper age.[16] While megalithic monuments have been built in Atlantic Europe for two centuries, they are part of a relatively early stage in the development of agricultural economies. They were the creations of communities able to mobilize relatively unskilled labour rather than specialist craftsmen, unlike the architectural accomplishments of early Mesopotamia or Mesoamerica; and their experiments, though remarkable, were of little importance in the larger architectural tradition. They belong more to the proliferation of agriculture than to the beginning of urbanization. The entire European megalithic phenomenon, in Childe's opinion, was itself an indirect consequence of contemporary Oriental culture, brought along the Atlantic coast as part of a mortuary cult by seaborne missionaries. Although this diffusionist link has been severed by radiocarbon chronologies, megalithic monuments still retain some of the glamour of this earlier association; they have therefore been viewed as symbolic of new modes of social organisation, or signs of territorial consciousness as a result of the lack of land prior to the actual commencement of urbanization.[17] Megalithic sites have links to different traditions. Megalithic monuments and fertility have universal link in folklore and it appears to practice from an ancient and deeply held belief. The conservation and promotion of life through ritual symbolism has been a fundamental concern since Palaeolithic times. The numerous folk practices and legends which link fertility with Megalithic sites may have survived in vague traces of the cults in contemporary society.[18] On the other hand, Colin Renfrew notes that 'tomb' is far too limiting that as a result of a single megalithic movement, we are no longer obligated to see the various megalithic monuments as they are just as likely to have been separate and essentially identical social demands and shown that Arran megalithic sites may be related to settlement trends, seventeen out of eighteen sites. This site was not simply an ancestral tomb, but a permanent indication of the use and possession of a specific piece of land by the social community. He also wrote that this site was created for the living as well as the deceased.[19]

Megaliths in Africa and Asia

Megalithic monuments differ in their function in Africa's vast stretches, and the interpretation of these sites varies from astrological to funeral in nature. The people of Nabta Playa in Africa, Egypt, created an astronomical device that exactly marked the Summer Solstice by the fifth millennium BCE. Findings show that the area was inhabited only seasonally, most likely only during the summer period when the nearby lake was filled with cattle grazing water. There are other megalithic stone circles in the southwest desert. In addition, there are some old megaliths in Tiya in Central Ethiopia. Some of these ancient monuments have engravings, and Tiya is a World Heritage Site. Megaliths can also be

[15] Piggott S., *Ancient Europe*, Aldine Publishers, Chicago Co., 1968.
[16] Evan-Pritchard E.E., 'Archaeology in Ulster Since 1920' in *Ulster Journal Archaeology,* Vol. 31(3), 1968, pp.3-8.
[17] Sherratt, A., 'The Genesis of Megaliths: Monumentality, Ethnicity and Social Complexity in Neolithic North-West Europe', *World Archaeology*, Vol. 22(2), 1990, pp.147-167.
18 Sibylle Cles-Reden and Sibylle von Reden, *The Realm of the Great Goddess: The Story of the Megalith Builders,* Thames and Hudson, 1961.
[19] Colin Renfrew, *Before Civilization*, Knopf, New York, 1973, p.141.

Cover Page

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found in the Marvels Valley in Euthopia's East Haranghe zone.[20] In wide parts of the Middle East, from the Turkish border on northern Syria near Aleppo and southern Yemen, Dolmens and standing stones have been identified. They can be found in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. Its scale and complexity demonstrate that its builders have been exposed to significant sociological transformations. The standing stone has a very old history in the Middle East, dating back to the Mesopotamian period. They occur in the Orient, but not always 'megalithic' in the true sense, and in some cases can exceed 5 meters or more (such as Ader in Jordan).[21] Megalithic burials are also found in many sites in Northeast and Southeast Asia. They are found in the Korean Peninsula, Liaoning, Shandong and Zhejiang in China, the East Coast of Taiwan, Kyushu and Shikoku in Japan, the Province of DongNai in Vietnam and parts of Pakistan and India. Some living megalithic traditions have been found on the islands of Sumba and Nias in Indonesia, as well as in Northeast India. The megalithic tradition in Korea is represented primarily by a number of menhirs. In Korea, menhirs are still venerated by the locals as an item of worship or a sacred object; and menhir is considered to be the grandfather and grandmother stone in some places when two of them are standing nearby. In the Indonesian Prehistoric Culture, there was a ritual of ancestor worship performed to honour the eldest person living in a group, or the eldest in a village. At that time, someone who was very well regarded by his followers due to his outstanding actions in terms of bravery, hunting prowess, or having more pastoral property, or more wives and children, was the eldest of a community or village. If anyone possessed these attributes, he was selected to become the eldest of the community or the village. He was meant to celebrate merit. The power and status of an individual in society will rise with the magnitude of festivities he conducts. Their community practices a tradition in which either a wooden or a stone structure (monolith) is erected in memory of the host of the feast. Trobriand megalithic structures in archipelago of Papua New Guinea were originally funerary monuments, and there are records of pottery and human bones found beneath fallen stones.[22]

Extent of Megalithic Culture in India

In Indian context, though a few megalithic sites have been reported from North India (Kashmir, Bihar and Jharkhand), by far the great majority of these monuments are found in the southern part of the country**.** The megalithic sites of the Vindhyan region sprouted in a pre-iron Chalcolithic context. The megaliths of peninsular India on the other hand, are associated with iron. Some of the sites date back to c.1300 BCE while others are as late as the early centuries of the CE.[23]

Iron technology came into use in megalithic culture for the first time in South India and Iron was predominant metal associated with this culture. Hence, the megalithic culture in India is considered as an Iron Age phenomenon. Scholars have assumed that these megalithic monuments would have been erected during the period between 1500 BCE and 200 CE.[24] However the practice of creating megaliths still persists among certain tribal communities in Assam and Chotanagpur even today. The context of these modern day examples provide scope for indirect ethnographic hypotheses

[20] Wendorf F. and Schild R., 'Nabta Playa and Its Role in Northeastern Africa Prehistory', *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology*, Vol. 17, 1998 pp.97-123. Lawson A., 'Recent Archaeological Research on Gambian Iron Age Habitation', *Nyame* Akuma, Vol. 55, 2001, pp.32-35.

[21] Zohar Mattanyah, 'Rogem Hiri: A Megalithic Monument in the Golan', *Israel Exploration Journal* Vol. 39, No. 1/2, 1989, pp.18-31. Zohar Mattanyah, Megalithic Cemeteries in Levant. In: Ofer Bar-Yosef; Anatoly M Khazanov (ed.) *Pastoralism in the Levant: Archaeological Materials in Anthropological Perspectives*, Prehistory Press, Madison, pp.43-63.

[22] Sakaguchi T., 'Mortuary Variability and Status Differentiation in the Late Jomon of Hokkaido Based on the Analysis of Shuteibo (Communal Cemeteries)', *Journal of World Prehistory,* Vol. 24 (4), 2011, pp.275-308. Ollier, C. D., D. K. Holdsworth, and G. Heers, 'Megaliths, Stones and Bwala on Kitava, Trobriand Islands, Papua', *Archaeology and Physical Anthropology in Oceania*, Vol. 8 (1), 1973, Wiley, pp.41-50.

[23] Dikshit K. N., 'Iron Age and Peninsular India', *Puratattva*, Vol. XXII, 1992, pp.31-34.

[24] Srikumar M. Menon, *op.cit*., p.12.

Cover Page

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even for pre-historic megalithic complexes in some cases. As mentioned above, the origin of some of the burial practices dates back to a Neolithic-Chalcolithic period. In fact, the style of burial changed in the first millennium BCE and burials began to be located outside the habitation huts in specially demarcated sanctuaries. Whether these early indications in some of the Neolithic-Chalcolithic complexes marked the beginnings of a new paradigm of religion and philosophy leading to the later megalithic style remains a mystery.

North and the North-West: A number of cemeteries belonging to the large prehistoric complex of the Gandhara Grave culture were located in the area of Swat, between Peshawar and Chitral, on both sides of the Hindukush mountains. The name was coined by the noted archaeologist and historian A.H. Dani. The C14 dates for the culture indicate a time-bracket of c.1710 to 200 BCE. The sites mostly lay along the Swat and Dir rivers. Excavations in Dir, at Balambat and Timargarha, and in Swat at Aligrama by A.H. Dani, at Bir-kot-ghundai, Kalakoderay and Loebanr by Giorgio Stacul suggest a homogeneous culture represented by similar grave and burial patterns, pottery assemblages, and other artefacts. This core of Gandharan sites was found to be extended further north to Chitral by G. Stacul's brief survey and excavation in 1969, east of the Indus in 1987 and south to the valley of Peshawar by M.A. Khan in 1973. The graves are usually represented by an oblong pit, sometimes with stone-lined walls and often closed with a stone slab. Three basic types of burials have been identified – flexed burials, post-cremation burials like urn burial and fractional burials. The pits were often surrounded by a circle of stones. The sites reveal both single and multiple burials. A wide range of grave goods have been unearthed from the sites. These include tall goblets, pedestal cups, beakers and long, slender-necked bottles in plain, buff-red and grey ware. Crudely modelled terracotta female figurines were found in large numbers. Copper-bronze objects dominated the assemblage and iron was relatively scarce. Kalako-deray and Loebanr contain similar bell-shaped pits, some stone paved, others containing terracottas in human and animal forms, ceramic vessels, polished stone objects, stone sickles, hammer stones, grinding stones, bone objects, and jade beads.[25]

In the Ghalighai cave region excavated by Stacul, Phase V represents the early strata of the Gandhara Grave Culture. A number of graves strewn all over the hillside have been identified as cist burials made of vertical and horizontal stone slabs. Most of the graves indicate post-cremation burials. This phase revealed remains of rectangular stone houses and a rich collection of copper and bone objects along with a fine wheel-made pottery. The next phase marks a shift in burial practices. Post-cremation burials were on the wane and inhumations dominated the scene.[26]

According to scholars, the Gandhara Grave Culture is one of the "four principal archaeological assemblages that document the early Iron Age in South Asia".[27] Traces of iron have been evident from the latest phase, i.e., the Phases III of Dani and Phase VII of Stacul, which were chronologically in the same zone (400 to 300 BCE). Thus this phase of the Gandhara Grave Culture marks the advent of the metal in the region. At Timargarha seven items of iron were recovered from the layers of this phase which comprise of spoons, spearheads and nails and most significantly, a cheek piece from a snaffle bit generally used for harnessing a horse. A considered opinion came from Karl Jettmar, a renowned Austrian ethnologist and archaeologist, in 1967 that this item may be compared to some similar items from Eastern Europe belonging to the date between 7th to 6th centuries BCE. The habitation site of Balambat in the same region yielded a more substantial evidence for iron. At Katelai small amount of iron was found at Phase V levels and at Aligrama at Phase VI level. However, going by the chronology provided by Dani and Stacul and the general evidence from most of the sites, it seems that the transition to a general use of iron can only be observed from the first millennium BCE. It has also been pointed out that the Gandhara Grave Culture was the first to use domesticated horse in the subcontinent.[28]

[25] Rangacharya V., *Pre-Historic India*, Anmol Publishers, Delhi, 1985.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Chakrabarti D.K. and Praveena Gullapalli, "The Early Iron Age in South Asia" in Vincent C. Pigott (ed.), *The Archaeometallurgy of the Asian Old World*, University of Pennsylvania Museum, Philadelphia, 1999, p.154.
[28] Rangacharya V., *op.cit*.

Cover Page

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In Kashmir, at sites like Burzahom and Gufkral the Neolithic phase merged into a megalithic phase around the middle of the second millennium BCE. At Burzahom huge menhirs and a large megalithic stone circle typify this phase. The material objects retrieved from this layer consisted of grey or black burnished ware, bone and stone tools and a sprinkling of metal objects. At Gufkral, the megalithic phase is marked by fallen menhirs. A habitation complex was also unearthed here. A 10 cm thick floor was found with few pits. A burnished grey ware, gritty red ware and a thick dull red ware have been recovered from the site. Apart from a large number of ring stones, copper objects dominated the scene. The quantity of bone tools decreased sharply. All the grains of the preceding period continued, while rice and millet appeared at the end of the phase. Hunting seems to have lost importance which can be deduced from the fact that the number of wild animal bones declined sharply. The bones of sheep and goats dominated the faunal remains. Traces of iron have been discovered at Gufkral.[29]

In the Almora area of the Uttarakhand, various kinds of megalithic burials have been unearthed. Dolmens, cairns, menhirs and cists have been discovered in this area. The early cist burials in Kumaon are found in large numbers from the valleys of the tributaries of the Ganga like the Gomti, Western Ramganga and others. They were discovered in large numbers from the Ganai, Gwaldam, Baijnath and Bageshwar areas. The structures seem to have been oriented keeping to the slope of the hill or the terrace rather than by the cardinal directions, as was also the case in the Swat valley.[30] The large number and wide distribution of the megaliths between the Garhwal and Kumaon divisions is indicative of a long-persisting cultural tradition as D.P. Agrawal and others point out in their work. Very few artefacts have been found associated with this phase and that too only at some sites. This meagre cultural assemblage at a few sites include specimens of a red ware and the grey ware, bronze items reported by S.P. Dabral and confirmed by D.P. Agrawal and others in 1991 and a common stone tool type which has been described as a rectangular sickle. The dating of the Almora megalithic complex is not very clear and Agarawal provides only comparable dates based loosely on similar artefacts with the Gandhara Grave Culture which is probably culturally and spatially comparable. They have also drawn linguistic and ethnographic links with the idea that the terms Kassite, Khash, Kashgar, Kashmir and Khasia could be culturally connected and mention that the main ethnographic community in Kumaon comprise of the Khasis. However, more research is required before any certain statement regarding the theory of Inner Asia Complex proposed by Jim G. Shaffer could be drawn for Kumaon megaliths too.[31]

North-East India: The examples of Megaliths from the north-eastern states provide data on living or recently extinct megalithic traditions among the tribes of the subcontinent. Therefore, the megalithic culture of the rest of the subcontinent cannot be temporally or culturally linked with this complex. Throughout the whole of the eastern Indian hilly region between the valley of Assam and the plains of Sylhet, comprising the modern states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Manipur and Tripura an archaeological complex can be identified where megalithic monuments occur in profusion. The largest concentration is found in the Khasia and Jaintia hills, with important sites like Laitkor, Unistow, Nartiang and Nongkrem. A sprinkling of such sites can also be seen in the Angami area of Nagaland, Naga inhabited areas of Manipur, the Mikir and Cachar hills. The dating of these monuments proves to be an uphill task for the researchers as some of the monuments definitely belong to the prehistoric age but the others are embedded in the contemporary local culture. The continuity of these practices makes the dating more problematic.[32]

The modes of disposal of the dead vary according to region and local customs. The Khasia hills yield evidence for elaborate stone structures mostly alignments and menhirs, dolmens being comparatively rare. Sometimes the urn containing the ash is placed in little circular cells with flat tops. The menhirs were generally erected in the memory of the ancestors. In the Naga area the dead are interred and several types of megalithic formations are created as markers. In the

[29] Ibid.
[30] Stacul G., "Discovery of Proto-historic Cemeteries on the Chitral Valley, West Pakistan", *East & West*, Vol. 19, 1987, pp.92-99.
[31] Rangacharya V., *op.cit*.
[32] Moorti U.S., *op.cit*.

Cover Page

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Angami area the dead is buried below the level of the ground and it is marked by a stone and earth erection. In the Mikir hills, on the other hand, we come across menhirs, alignments and dolmens.

The sheer size of these monuments stuns the archaeologists. The menhirs are mostly erected as memorial stones. In Nartiang the huge structures sometimes measure eight metres in height and eighty centimetres in thickness. The largest dolmens are in Nartiang and Laitkor with the table stone measuring about 30 ft 4 inches by 10 ft in breadth and an average thickness of one foot. As the monuments are yet to be located in their specific cultural contexts, the material culture of the people is difficult to trace. However, unlike the southern part of the country, these sites cannot be associated with iron. The heterogeneity of burial practices suggest that megalithic burials do not constitute a single culture but settlements with cultural habits having similarities in concepts even though they were not identical in form.[33]

Primarily speaking, the megalithic markers denote a shift in belief systems and social organizations leading to reflections on mortuary practices. There is a large variety of megalithic complexes in the subcontinent related to varied temporal, spatial and cultural contexts. In many cases the megaliths represent the emergence of a specific burial practice among prehistoric nomadic pastoralists and/or moving bands of warrior communities. But in some identified specific cases they reveal the rise of new belief systems in sedentary cultures when the burials moved out of habitations to specifically demarcated sanctuaries. Again such burials might have been assigned to socially recognized communities or individuals in some cases. But none of these represent a uniform pattern. We have megaliths belonging to different dates, some ranging over a very long period of time as in the case of the Gandhara Grave Cultures, and in some cases they mark the beginnings of the Iron Age in the subcontinent. Attempts have been made to describe megalithic activity as a homogenous and distinctive culture. But neither can the forms and styles of the megalithic burials be put into a uniform pattern nor can they be arranged in a neat chronological pattern. In the Indian subcontinent, megalithic burials occur in the Far South, the Deccan plateau, the Vindhyan and Aravalli ranges and the north-west.[34]

Some of the megalithic sites sprout out of a pre-iron Chalcolithic context, like the Vindhyan megaliths, while the megaliths of south India are associated with iron. As the burials were detached from habitation areas, it is difficult to reconstruct the specific cultural contexts through the prism of material culture. However, grave furnishings in the Deccan, South Indian and Vindhyan sites yield up the distinctive Black and Red Ware, probably indicating a very broad temporal setting. The regional crop patterns and the faunal remains point towards groups settling down to agricultural pursuits while other groups were still dependent on mobile pastoralism. In the Deccan and south India the discovery of iron artefacts underlines advanced technological finesse. From the quality of the implements the issue of craft specialization and creation of exchange networks can be deduced. Towards the end of the prehistoric and beginning of the historical times the continued megalithic complexes in the peninsular region have also been found to have evolved as places of special socio-economic significance. They probably represented parts of cultural sites operating as nodal points in regional trade network or centres where natural resources were conserved and utilized at the juncture of social development just preceding state society. Thus the megalithic complexes in different regions bear different historical junctures and realities representing significant segments of South Asian history.[35]

Northern Fringes of the Vindhyas: There are a number of sites marked by megaliths in the northern Vindhyas around Allahabad, Banda, Varanasi and Mirzapur districts of south-eastern Uttar Pradesh. Cairns and stone circles are the principal cultural markers of this region. Some of the graves reveal fractional burials. Alexander Cunningham first noted their presence in 1861 CE and subsequently in 1883 CE. Carlyle explored the area and discovered burial mounds with megaliths which he identified as barrows or cairns. The location of the sites in the ecology of the Ganga plains meeting

[33] Gururaja Rao B. K., *op.cit*.
[34] Nagaraja Rao M. S., 'Earliest Iron using people in India and the Megaliths', in M. S. Nagaraja Rao (ed.) Madhu *Recent Researches in Indian Archaeology and Art History,* Agam Kala Prakashan, Delhi, pp.25-32.
[35] Ibid.

Cover Page

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the hilly northern slopes of the Vindhyas facilitated gathering of the raw material for the structures. Three geographical groups may be identified within this zone: Group I in the Karmanasa and Chandraprabha Valleys comprising the Chakia subdivision of Varanasi district, where circular cairns covering grave-pits have been located. A few simple slab cists have also been discovered around the Hathinia and Bhadahwan hills. These include Kakoria and Kaurihar. Kakoria has yielded the remains of a related habitation site also.[36]

The Group II occurs around Chunar in the northern part of the Mirzapur district, the geographical zone continuing from the Chakia region. About four hundred graves have been found lying between the Jirgo Dam in the north to the Chudia hills in Chunar in the south. Typologically they are similar to the first group. Five grave-pits at Panchabahani in the Jangal Mahal region have been excavated. Three major types of megaliths were identified here, viz., a) Cairns, b) Cairns with slab – cists or chambers and c) Cairns with enclosing stone circles. Four pottery types have been unearthed comprising of an ill-fired dull red ware occasionally coated with red slip; an over fired red ware, a black-slipped ware and a black and red ware. Globular pots with flaring rims characterize the red ware and bowls with various types of rims was more common in black-slipped ware. The example of the last type is to date the only one found in the south east of Ram Sarovar. It has not been excavated but it seems to be a low cairn enclosed by a circle of stones of various sizes. The type is rare in this region and more common in southern India.[37]

Group III of megalithic complex comprises of circular cairns at a number of sites located near the Rewa-Chachai region. Kotia is one of the primary sites. At Kotia the graves contained few human skeletons, but were rather associated with animal burial. Fragments of animal bones like the domesticated sheep, ox and pig were found in profusion in burials and these revealed clear cut marks, which suggest that they were killed before being buried. Many of the megaliths in this area are not associated with skeletal remains and probably represent memorials for the dead. Kotia has a date of c. 800 BCE to 300 BCE. Along with the typical types of pottery Kotia also yielded a dull, coarse black or grey ware with a thick fabric.[38]

Kakoria in the Varanasi District has yielded a prominent habitation site discovered on both sides of the Chandraprabha River, situated close to a megalithic cemetery at the base of a hillock. The habitation site seems to have been related to the megalithic remains. Of the twelve graves excavated at the megalithic complex at Kakoria only three yielded human bones in very limited and fragmentary residues. It is not clear whether they were post-cremation or post-excarnate burials.[39]

The funerary offerings include terracotta beads, microliths and surprisingly a gold bangle. Different types of pottery have been discovered both from the habitation site and the cemetery. These include Black and Red Ware, Black Slipped Ware and Red Ware. Most of the pottery was wheel-made and came in the shapes of dishes, bowls, perforated vases, pedestal cups and jars. A large number of microliths made of agate, chalcedony and chert, beads of terracotta and semi-precious stones, grinding stones and a few copper objects were also recovered from the habitation site.[40]

Pre-iron Kakoria has an early date ranging from the second millennium BCE to the 7th century CE, while the megaliths of Jangal Mahal seems to have sprouted around the beginning of the first millennium BCE. It is clear that the megaliths from the Vindhyas mostly predate the coming of iron in the region as most of the megaliths of southern Uttar

[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Sankalia H. D., *Prehistory of India*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1977.

Cover Page

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Pradesh reveal pre-iron layers. The only exception is found at Kotia in the Belan valley. A wide array of iron tools – spearheads, arrowheads and sickles have been retrieved from the site.[41]

Deccan Region: Iron ores suitable for smelting are found all over the subcontinent barring the alluvial river plains. Archaeological enquiries give detailed and specific evidence for the advent of iron technology in the subcontinent from the 1000 BCE onwards. Though evidence of iron can be traced at several Chalcolithic settlements, this reflected an early, experimental stage. The large-scale use of iron in productive processes and the achievement of technological finesse in iron working happened gradually at a later stage. Among the early iron-using centres in the subcontinent, sites in Vidarbha and Deccan can be identified without any difficulty. The earliest iron artefacts in the Deccan occur at levels associated with the Black and Red Ware and many of these are located in megalithic complexes. Several megalithic burials and associated habitation sites have been unearthed in the Maharashtra. Important sites include Takalghat-Khapa, Naikund, Mahurjhari and Ranjala. Naikund has an early date ranging between 800-420 BCE and 785-410 BCE. These sites were full-fledged agricultural settlements which can be deduced from the presence of barley, rice and lentil grains on the house-floors. A wide range of copper and iron artefacts were found at the site including ladles, nails, chisels, axes, blades, fishhooks and weapons. It has been suggested that iron was locally smelted. The remains of a workshop with a furnace and a cylindrical terracotta pipe were discovered at Naikund. Sites like Mahurjhari had megalithic burials with rich grave goods. The site was probably an important bead-manufacturing centre. Some of these sites have a special significance as they combine habitation as well as burial sites, which is a singular feature amongst the megalithic cultures of India. Takalghat had a habitation area of about 22,500 square metres, Naikund was 1,00,000 square metres. In a nutshell, it can be said, that, irrespective of the precise chronological brackets for each habitation the habitation areas were fairly extensive. The demographic and economic structure seems to have been quite substantial. This is further corroborated by the recovery of a large number of burials at the same sites. For example, at Khirwada, there are almost one thousand five hundred burials adjacent to a habitation area covering 1,07,000 square metres. At Takalghat, there is a megalithic habitational deposit of nearly 2.5 metres along with three hundred burials. These features indicate the sedentary nature of the megalithic people of this region. This is further supported by the fact, that the megalithic people of Vidarbha were engaging in agricultural activities. Even though the iron artefacts retrieved from the sites were mostly non-agricultural tools, the sickle and the hoe did occur. Taklaghat has yielded twenty-six adzes and a sickle. The wide variety of cultivated grains indicates an emergent agrarian subsistence pattern. A very high percentage of cattle bones among the animal bones also suggest a shift towards agrarian economy[42].

The material ingredients associated with the sites comprised of the diagnostic black and red pottery along with the red slipped ware and the burnished black ware in a wide variety of shapes, for daily use, storage and ritualistic purposes. Apart from iron and copper implements there are traces of a flourishing bead industry. This rich material culture presupposes a strong agrarian base to support non-agricultural artisans. Scholars like P.P. Deshpande, R. Mohanty and V.S. Shinde reported on the results of the metallographical studies of a steel chisel excavated from Mahurjhari. The analysis showed clear evidence of technological advance in the form of hardening and quenching followed by tempering treatment in addition to the knowledge of steeling as early as 900 BCE. At Mahurjhari and Naikund the megalithic stone circles mark human or animal burials replete with iron and copper objects. Human burials sometimes contained bones of animals. For example, at Mahurjhari a whole skeleton of a sacrificed horse was unearthed along with a human skeleton. The skeletons of warriors probably killed in a battle were traced, one with an arrow embedded in the collarbone and another with a dagger resting on his chest.[43]

[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid.

Cover Page

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South India: In South India the earliest iron objects appear in connection with the megalithic sites. At most of the sites the earlier Neolithic phase overlaps with the megalithic cultural levels. In Tamil Nadu the megaliths are found in the sites of Amritamangalam, Sanur, Adichanallur, Kodumanal, Tenkasi, Kayal and Kalugumalai. In Kerala, megalithic burials have been discovered in Pulimattu, Tengakkal, Muthukar, Peria Kanal, Machad and Mangadu. While Machad has an early date ranging from the second century BCE to the second century CE, Mangadu in Kerala has a time bracket of c.1000-100 BCE. Karnataka is rich in megalithic remains and important sites include Brahmagiri, Maski, Hanamsagar and Hallur which feature prominently on the megalithic map. In the Andhra Pradesh Kadambapur, Nagarjunkonda, Gallapalli and Amaravati can be identified as the major megalithic sites.[44]

The excavation at Hallur in Karnataka in 1965 yielded the first evidence for the early use of iron connected with megalithic culture. The Period I strata was a Neolithic-Chalcolithic overlap complex and this was followed by Period II which revealed Neolithic-Chalcolithic and Iron Age overlaps. The Period II, according to scholars probably marked the advent of new people at the site with iron arrowheads, spearheads, daggers and knife-blades. The series of radiocarbon dates place the appearance of iron at Hallur around the 1000 BCE. At Tadakanahalli another megalithic complex marked by four stone circles, each consisting of a cairn of stones was discovered and excavated in 1978. Grave goods included Black and Red Ware bowls and lids, small globular pots, pots of red ware, iron implements like heavy axes, arrowheads, spearheads, knives and dagger of iron. The occurrence of the distinctive white painted black and red ware as at Hallur also places the site at about the same date of 1000 BCE.[45]

In Kerala and Karnataka the burials consist of typical chamber tombs which include the topikal and the kudikal. In the topikals the burial urn is placed in an underground pit and is covered by a low, convex, circular capstone. In the kudikals the urn is placed in a chamber constructed with four vertical slabs of stone, known as orthostats. It is capped by a huge, hemispherical capstone. In Andhra, Kerala and Karnataka menhirs also appear as important megalithic symbols. Rock-cut chambers and topikal occur mainly in Kerala. Karnataka has passage graves. The southern part of India is also rich in dolmens, which occur in the vast tracts between the Narmada River and the Cape Comorin.[46]

In South India the megalithic sites emerged as flourishing agricultural communities supplemented by large scale fishing, hunting and stock-breeding. The subsistence pattern of the people at these sites can also be deduced to some extent from the paintings and the figurines. For example, at Marayur and Attala in Kerala and at some of the sites in Karnataka hunting scenes were depicted. Bones of wild animals as well as of domesticated animals like cow, sheep and dog appear in profusion, corroborating the pictorial evidence. This phenomenon certainly indicates a continuity of earlier subsistence patterns of the Neolithic-Chalcolithic phase.[47]

The Belgaum districts megalithic sites in the region of Saundatti on a gorge created by the Malaprabha River has yielded evidence for a number of dolmenoid cists, discovered in 1951 by R.V. Joshi. More remarkably at Tallur a habitation site was discovered near a megalithic burial site by A. Sundara in 1975. The megaliths were passage chamber varieties and round barrows containing human burials. Grave goods included black and red, bright red and dull red pottery, conch shells pierced with holes probably used for necklace, pieces of iron. The continuation of the burial site in historical period is attested by the presence of the russet coated and white painted pottery which belongs to the historic stage. Sundara had discovered interesting etchings of geometric types on a menhir like stone in this area associated also

[44] Moorti U.S., *Megalithic Culture of South India*, Ganga Kaveri Press, Varanasi, 1994.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Gururaja Rao B. K., *Megalithic Culture in South India*, Prasaranga, University of Mysore, Mysore, 1972.

Cover Page

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with black and red ware and red ware of megalithic links. Sundara interpreted the symbol to represent something akin to the Naga Mandala symbol found in later-day context in the Karnataka.[48]

The main crops ranged from different kinds of pulses and millets to cereals. Though ragi, horse gram and green gram appear as major crops, in Coorg and Khapa in Karnataka rice husk can be definitely found. In a tomb in Kunnatur (Tamil Nadu), traces of rice grains could be detected. Another feature of the south Indian megalithic sites is the recovery of a large number of grinding stones and pestles. These were also found inside the graves. All these point to intensifying agricultural activity suggesting a shift towards sedentary occupations. In a recent study it has been shown that the megalithic sites of Tamil Nadu were often located alongside rain-fed irrigation tanks.[49]

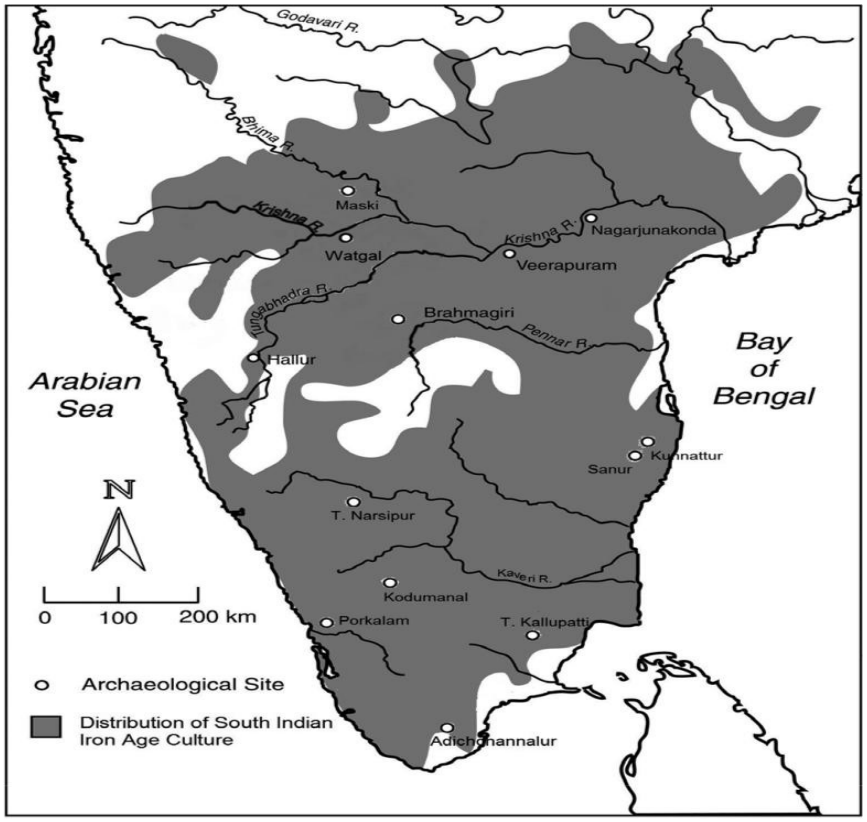

Fig. 2. The Spread of Megaliths in South India

Source: Bauer A. M., Johansen P. G. and Bauer R. L., Toward a Political Ecology in Early South India: Preliminary Considerations of the Socio-politics of Land and Animal Use in the Southern Deccan, Neolithic through Early Historic Periods, *Asian Perspectives*, vol. 46(1), 2007, pp.3-35.

South Indian megalithic sites provide ample evidence of specialised craft activities. Various types of pottery, including the diagnostic Black and Red Ware, have been discovered. Some decorative shapes stand out, such as the lidded pot moulded into the shape of an animal or bird. Beads of various kinds abound in the graves. Most of the sites have

[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.

Cover Page

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copper and bone artefacts, as well as a few gold and silver objects. However, iron objects outnumber those made of other metals at the majority of the sites. The discovery of iron utensils, weapons, carpentry tools, and agricultural implements attests to the widespread use of iron in everyday life. Certain technological skills were mastered to harness iron to the process of production. Extremely high temperatures had to be attained for successful smelting of iron. There is evidence of iron smelting in certain sites like the site of Paiyampalli in Karnataka. At Machad, an analysis of the iron artefacts shows very small traces of impurities, indicating great efficiency achieved in smelting of iron which required great skill in pyrotechnology and knowledge of the metal. The usual practice of manufacturing was to forge thin metal strips, which were then joined together by hammering them. Some of the copper and bronze objects were cast into moulds, while some others were simply beaten into shape.[50]

The earliest phase of megalithic activity in Karnataka is represented by the passage chamber tombs in the north western part of Karnataka between the Krishna and the Malaprabha rivers. This is based on the hypothesis that iron technology and megalithic constructions were introduced into the peninsula from further north via the western coast of India. Other megalithic types further south indicate an evolution of the passage chamber tombs and the emergence of a separate line of development. This development probably originated in the earlier Neolithic-Chalcolithic sites taking shape in different forms like the cairns, pits and pit-circles, especially noted in the Shorapur-Raichur Doab where Neolithic cultures had flourished in earlier times. In Tamil Nadu dolmenoid cists with portholes and the transepted cists with a passage probably evolved from the earlier megalithic types of eastern and northern Karnataka. Other forms of urn burials may be late developments within Tamil Nadu itself.[51]

It has been inferred that the megalithic builders represent only a minority of the population in Tamil Nadu in the first millennium representing mobile groups who gradually settled down. Early Tamil poetry refers to certain modes of disposal of the dead which can be correlated with archaeological evidence from the megalithic complexes. The poetical works also describe warlike pastoral tribes in certain areas of peninsular India, which can be corroborated by the archaeological finds of a large number of iron weapons. There may not have been specialized pastoralism but rather mixed farming which involved dry season movement out of the village base with the flock.[52]

Sites like Adichanallur in Tamil Nadu emerge with extensive area of urn burial site, covering almost a hundred and fourteen acres. A multifaceted material culture reveals something more than simple seasonal camps of the mobile people. The burial urns were placed singly or sometimes in pairs in pits excavated in the solid rock or the gravelly soil. In most cases a selected number of bones were interred. Domestic utensils were found in the urns and outside them. Many of them contained rice husk. A wide range of metal objects has been retrieved, mostly made of iron.[53]

The archaeologists have begun to suggest that the megalithic cemeteries of the peninsula mark places of special economic significance. In Karnataka the site of Brahmagiri has a habitational area adjacent to specific cultural markers like the megalithic cist or the chamber tomb with a porthole. The prolific quantity of iron objects recovered from the site pinpoint access to a fine quality of iron ore. Maski and Brahmagiri were actually situated on prominent early historical trade routes as underlined by the location of the Asokan edicts. They might have been early centres of craft production linked to burgeoning networks of exchange. Inscriptions of the later period refer to skill of the ironsmiths in this region. The site of Kodumanal in Erode district was rich in precious stones like crystal, sapphire and beryl. The area is dotted with megaliths and has a string of coin hoard sites that mark the major west to east route from Coimbatore to Karur, the earliest capital city of the Pandyas. The presence of the horse in the south Indian megalithic sites suggests an extensive

[50] Moorti U.S., *op.cit*.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Gururaja Rao B. K., *op.cit*.

Cover Page

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network. Supply of horse flowed from northern and western India. Such connections with the Vidarbha region in the north are also attested. The copper and copper alloy artefacts recovered from Adichchanallur and Kodumanal show similarities in designs in some of the objects to the copper artefacts exposed at Mahurjhari in Deccan. This indicates a possible trading connection with this distant site. Control over exchange was probably controlled by the heads of clans, who were buried under the megalithic markers. Thus there was a connection between burial and status.[54]

Children's bones are found in very few megalithic graves[55] while adult male burials account for a large percentage of all burials. The same burial area continued to be used for centuries. The early historical layers overlapped with the south Indian megaliths. The graves appear to have been used only once or twice per generation. They are most likely the resting place of a small elite group within a ranked society.

The construction of the megaliths must have involved community endeavour. Yet there are few settlements connected with the megalithic sites. If the area demarcated for burials was associated with status and continuity it could well be situated at some distance from the habitations. The occurrence of Roman coins around Karur and Madurai at the top levels possibly provide a terminal date for the sites and suggests the range of economic networks in which the local societies were involved.[56]

General data concerning site distribution can be traced in below table. It is obvious that in spite of a huge amount of exploration and excavation work the majority of the sites remain unrecognised.

Table 1: Distribution of Megalithic Sites in Deccan and South India

State	Area	Total No. of Sites	Burial	Habitation	Habitation-cum-Burial	Excavated
Kerala	38,863 km^2	270	196	0	0	41
Tamil Nadu	1,30,058 km^2	607	423	13	27	122
Karnataka	1,91,976 km^2	665	429	35	33	50
Andhra Pradesh & Telangana	2,75,045 km^2	300	168	15	44	58
Maharashtra	3,07,713 km^2	91	43	4	7	12
Total	9,43,655 km^2	1933	1259	67	111	283

Source: Moorti U.S., *Megalithic Culture of South India: Socio-Economic Perspectives*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis submitted to the University of Poona, Poona 2009, p.14 & 169 & *Megaliths of South India* at http://en.wikipedia.org, 16.03.2015.

Megalithic monuments in Telangana are traditionally dated somewhere between 1000 BCE and 200 CE. Almost all types of megalithic monuments, such as menhirs, stone circles, dolmens and dolmonoid cists, are reported in hundreds of villages in all Telangana districts. The Megalithic burials in Telangana region yielded repertoire of iron artefacts in addition to pottery. The iron artefacts contained in the megalith burials shows a broad selection of house-keeping, farming, and battle related objects. Discovery of cruciform monoliths in male and female forms known as Statue-Menhirs is a rare characteristic of the megalithic culture of this Mid-Godavari Valley region. The archaeological studies in the

[54] Ibid.
[55] Rao K. P., *op.cit*., pp.114-119.
[56] Ramachandran K. S., 'Chronology of the Indian Megaliths Some Considerations', *Puratattva*, Vol. III, 1970, pp.107-109.


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region has brought to light that it is the home for a distinctive kind of megalithic monuments. Some of the monuments found particularly in Khammam district of Telangana State are very rare and hither to be known from the Subcontinent. Hence the present archaeological investigation in the Khammam district is an ideal area to make an enquiry into the megalithic culture.