



Recent advances on the megalithic traditions of South India

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Abstract

The term 'megalith' is derived from Greek 'megas', which means great and 'litho' meaning stone. As the nomenclature suggests, the 'megaliths' refer to the monuments built of large stones. But all monuments constructed of big stones are not megaliths. The term has a restricted usage and is applied only to a particular class of monuments or structures, which are built of large stones and have some sepulchral, commemorative or ritualistic association except the hero stones or memorial stones. In other words, the megaliths usually refer to the burials made of large stones in graveyards away from the habitation area. The problem of chronology of these cultures has evaded a clear solution. R.E.M. Wheeler, for the first time, on the basis of excavations at Brahmagiri provided a firm archaeological setting for megalithic cultures in South India. Based on archaeological evidence, he places these cultures between the 3rd c. B.C and the 1st c. A.D.

Keywords: megalith, prehistoric, monuments, south India

Introduction

The term 'megalith' is derived from Greek 'megas', which means great and 'litho' meaning stone. As the nomenclature suggests, the 'megaliths' refer to the monuments built of large stones. But all monuments constructed of big stones are not megaliths. The term has a restricted usage and is applied only to a particular class of monuments or structures, which are built of large stones and have some sepulchral, commemorative or ritualistic association except the hero stones or memorial stones. In other words, the megaliths usually refer to the burials made of large stones in graveyards away from the habitation area. The problem of chronology of these cultures has evaded a clear solution. R.E.M. Wheeler, for the first time, on the basis of excavations at Brahmagiri provided a firm archaeological setting for megalithic cultures in South India. Based on archaeological evidence, he places these cultures between the 3rd c. B.C and the 1st c. A.D. But the limits prescribed by Wheeler on the basis of Brahmagiri evidence are unconvincing. Megalithic culture of South India had a much larger chronological span than what Wheeler could visualise over five decades ago. Similarly, B.K. Thapar, on the basis of his excavations at Maski, assigned the megalithic culture in South India from *circa* 200 B.C to the middle of the 1st c. A.D with a reasonable margin of a century on either side. It is interesting to note that in other parts of the world, for example England, France, Iran and Seistan, such sepulchral monuments of the dead were constructed through this period and are not identical in all the countries. The megalithic monuments are among the most widespread remains of man both in time and space. The origin of the most megalithic monuments is placed in the Mediterranean region in the early Neolithic period. From here this culture is said to have been carried by traders who went in search of metals along the Atlantic coast to Western Europe and from the Aegean coast into Southern Europe through Greece. Its spread

was in criss-cross pattern, carrying different cross currents across the whole of Europe. In the context of India this culture arrived with the Dravidian speakers who came to South India from west Asia by sea.

In the present state of research these megalithic monuments, whatever their external shape and contents be, seem to herald the Iron Age in South India. The megalithic culture in South India was a fully fledged Iron Age culture when the great benefits of the use of this metal were fully realized by the people. Hence, normally the stone dropped out of use as a material for the weapons and tools to a large extent. The megalithic people of South India, or, for that matter, the Iron Age people of the subcontinent in general, found out new uses of stones in their daily life. Most of the information about the Iron Age in South India comes from the excavations of the megalithic burials. Iron objects have been found universally in all the megalithic sites right from Junapani near Nagpur in Vidharba region (Central India) down to Adichanallur in Tamilnadu in the far south. With the introduction of iron there was a gradual change in almost everything except perhaps the house plans. But, of all these changes the most remarkable was the elaborate method of disposing the dead. This became a characteristic feature of the South Indian regions. Instead of laying the dead accompanied by four or five pots in a pit in the house, now the dead were buried in a separate place – a cemetery or a graveyard away from the house. The remains of the dead were collected perhaps after exposing the body for some time and then the bones were placed underground in specially prepared stone box called a cist. The cists were elaborate structures and must have necessitated an amount of planning and cooperation among the community and the existence of masons and other craftsmen capable of manufacturing the required size of stones, large and small. It is probable that like Egyptian cellars, these megaliths must have been planned and kept ready before the death of an

individual.

Classification of Megaliths - It is not easy to prepare a typology of the megaliths of South India in general because the megalithic burials show a variety of methods for the disposal of the dead. Moreover, there are megaliths which are internally different but exhibit the same external features. Nevertheless, on the basis of the explorations and excavations carried out on different sites of South India, the megaliths can be classified under different categories depending upon their outstanding features.

These are scooped out on soft laterite, as found in the southern part of the West Coast. These rock cut cave tombs are peculiar to this region and occur in the Cochin and Malabar regions of Kerala. They also occur in other regions. On the East Coast of South India, they are present in Mamallapuram (Mahabalipuram) near Madras. In the Deccan and western India they are observed at Elephanta, Ajanta, Ellora, Karle, Bhaja etc. But these belong to a later date and were used for entirely different purposes while those in Kerala are purely megalithic and funerary ones, the others being of different tradition. The Kerala funerary rock cut caves consist of an open well, roughly rectangular or square, cut vertically down the rock and provided with a flight of steps for descending to the floor. Such caves are found at many sites like Chovvannur, Kakkad, Porkalam, etc. More elaborate specimens of such caves occur at sites like Eyyal, Kattakampal, etc. On the basis of his detailed study of these rock cut burial caves in Cochin region, Y.D. Sharma (1956) recognizes four types of caves – (i) Caves with Central pillar, (ii) Caves without central pillar, (iii) Caves with a deep opening and (iv) Multi-chambered caves.

Allied with the rock cut caves but of a simpler form are the Hood stones or Kudaikallu. These consists of a dome-shaped dressed laterite block which cover the underground circular pit cut into a natural rock and provided with a stairway. In some cases the hood stone gives place to a hat stone or toppikkal, which is a Plano-convex slab resting on three or four quadrilateral clinostatic boulders, forming a square base and a truncated top on which rests the toppikkal or the hat stone. This also covers an underground burial pit containing the funerary urn and other grave furnishings. Unlike as in the rock cut caves, there is no chamber apart from this open pit in which itself the burial is made. Usually, it contains a burial urn covered with a convex or dome-shaped pottery lid or a stone slab and contains skeletal remains, small pots and, sometimes ashes. Similar monuments are commonly encountered in Cochin and Malabar regions extending along the Western Ghats into the Coimbatore region up to the Noyyal river valley in Tamilnadu.

Menhirs are monolithic pillars planted vertically into the ground. These may be small or gigantic in height, ranging from 14 to 16 ft. down to a mere 3ft. Their common heights range between 3 to 6 ft. They are often rudely dressed or not dressed at all. These are essentially commemorative stone pillars set up at or near a burial spot. These menhirs are mentioned in ancient Tamil literature as nadukal and are often called Pandukkal or Pandil. In some cases, the menhirs are not planted in ground but rest on the original ground propped up with a mass of rubble as at Maski. These occur in a number of sites in close vicinity of other type of megalithic burials,

mostly in different regions of Kerala and Bellary, Raichur and Gulbarga regions of Karnataka in large numbers, but less frequently at other places of South India. Alignments are closely associated to the menhirs. This consists of a series of standing stones, oriented to the cardinal directions. Some of these stones are 14 to 16 ft. high and one monolith at a certain place measured 25 ft. long. But the normal heights range between 3 and 6 ft. These stones are sometimes dressed. The alignments are found at Komalaparathala in Kerala and at a number of sites in Gulbarga, Raichur of Karnataka Nalgonda and Mahboobnagar districts of Telangana.

Dolmenoid cists consists of square or rectangular box-like graves built of several orthostats, one or more for each side, supporting the superincumbent capstone consisting of one or more stones, often with the floor also paved with the stone slabs. The orthostats and the capstones might be formed either of undressed rough blocks of stone or partly dressed flattish stones. The Dolmenoid cists occur at large number at Sanur near Chingleput and many other sites in this region. The cists built of dressed slabs or the slab cists are the normal type of cists, occurring all over South India, as also in some parts of the north. There are many sub-types of this in Tamilnadu – (i) Dolmenoid cist with multiple orthostats, (ii) Dolmenoid cist with four orthostats planned contra-clockwise with U-shaped port-hole in the east or west, (iii) Dolmenoid cist with four orthostats kept contra-clock-wise with U-shaped port-hole on the top corner of the eastern orthostat, and (iv) Dolmenoid cist with four orthostats arranged contra-clockwise and with slab-circles. The Cairn circles are one the most popular type of megalithic monuments occurring all over south India in association with other types. They consist of a heap of stone rubble enclosed within a circle of boulders. On the basis of the form of the underground burial, they may be divided into three sub-types – (i) Pit burials, (ii) Sarcophagi burials, and (iii) Pyriform or other types of urn burials. The pit burials under the cairn circles consist of deep pits dug into the natural soil, roughly circular, square or oblong on plan. The skeletal remains and the grave furniture were placed on the floors of these pits. The pits were then filled up with earth, either the earth dug up in the pit or that which was brought from elsewhere, up to the original ground level. Above this earth filling was placed the cairn heap which might be just a thin layer or may rise up to 3 to 4 ft. above the ground level and bounded by a circle of stones. Such pit burials have been found at many sites in the Chingleput (Tamilnadu), Chitradurg and Gulbarga (Karnataka) districts. The urn burials under the cairn circles are a variant form of the sarcophagi burials described above and occur in large number in most parts of South India. The urns, in which the burials are made, are deposited in pits dug into the soil. The pits are filled up with the soil up to the ground level and are frequently provided with a capstone. Then, the heap of cairns on the surface, which marks the burial, is surrounded by a circle of stones. They are predominant in Kerala and have been known to occur is Madurai, Tiruchirapalli, Coimbatore, Nilgiris, Salem, Chingleput and South Arcot district of Tamilnadu; Kolar, Bangalore, Hassan, Chitradurg, Bellary, Raichur and Gulbarga districts of Karnataka; various districts of Andhra Pradesh and the region around Nagpur in Maharashtra. They are the most commonly encountered megalithic monuments in India. They

reflect the features of various forms of megalithic monuments such as the Kudaikallu, Topikkal, different types of pit burials, menhirs, Dolmenoid cists of different types, cairns, etc. These occur from the southern tip of the peninsula up to Nagpur region and in different parts of North India, where the megalithic monuments are known to occur. But in this category under consideration, only stone circles without any considerable cairn filling within the circle, containing burial pits with or without Pyriform urns or sarcophagi, are included. The monuments under this category are distinguished from the cairn circles only in that the cairn heaps occur or do not occur in these circles. Otherwise, all the three sub-types discussed above under the cairn circles are found to occur in this category also. It may appear that there is not much justification in making this distinction between cairn circles and stone circles. But at some sites like Sanur near Chingleput, both the kinds exist side by side, but in separate groups. Therefore, on the basis of some distinctions they are placed under different categories under our considerations. Burials in Pyriform or fuci form urns large conical jars or handy-shaped jars containing the funerary deposits are buried in the underground pits specially dug for the purpose into the hard natural soil and sometimes into the basal rock and the pits are filled up. In these kinds of burials we do not find any surface indication of the burial in the form of a stone circle, cairn heap, hood stone or hat (cap) stone, or even a menhir. These urn burials are without any megalithic appendage. But in some sites like Amritamangalam in Chingleput district some small heaps of earth mixed with quartz chips would make out the place of the burial. Strictly speaking, this class of megalithic burials cannot be included under the megalithic burial monuments, because no megalithic or, for that matter, any lithic appendage in the form of stone circle or capstone is observed in relation to them. But they exhibit the general traits of the megalithic culture of South India, characterized by the use of the typically megalithic Black-and-red ware (BRW) and associated wares with iron objects. These grave goods are identical typologically with their counterparts found in the regular megalithic burials. Moreover, these occur in the general areas where the typical megalithic burials exist. In fact, these urn burials do not differ in any detail from the urn burials under a stone or cairn circle of the megalithic order, except for the surface features. These urn burials without megalithic appendage are found in many sites of Tamilnadu like Adichanallur, Gopalamiparambu and scores of other sites, practically in almost every village in Madurai, Tiruchirapalli, Coimbatore, Salem, and South Arcot districts. However, these occur less abundantly in Karnataka and Andhra regions. Even in North India, these urn burials are frequently observed at a number of Harappan and the Later Chalcolithic sites in Western, Central and North-western India, but their context is completely different from the South Indian urn burials. But the latter might have had some phylogenetic (racial affinity) connection with the former. The barrows or earthen mounds mark off the underground burials. They may be either a circular or a round barrow, oblong or oval on plan, a long barrow. They have or may not have the surrounding stone circles or ditches. Monuments of this kind have not been found in large numbers in India. However, such monuments have been observed in the Hassan district of

Karnataka. Thus, the megaliths of South India reflect a series of questions, answers to which are still shrouded in mystery. In his very recent writings even questioned the authenticity of the megaliths as a burial. The issue still requires more investigations. Let us hope that the future researches on the subject would illuminate us with a more confirmed and clear image of the megalithic culture.

Conclusion

Summing up the above discussion, we can say that the megalithic culture in South Asia and South India was gifted with dynamic people, who almost revolutionized the society of the earlier neolithic-chalcolithic times. They depended heavily on agriculture to sustain a considerably large society, though hunting and fishing supplemented their food supply and various industries and crafts enriched their economy. It becomes amply clear that the megalithic people practiced a mixed-economy on agro-pastoral production. They had a bias towards the urban life but were slow in building up huge cities unlike their contemporaries of the Gangetic valley, where well-established cities had been flourishing since the 6th-5th centuries B.C. They were essentially a separate and more group of dynamic people than the other Iron Age folk in India. The cult of the dead became the dominant feature of their religion and life, which survives in the culture of many tribes till today.

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