

## **A Study on the Early Historic Society of Kerala, Its Society, Trade and Burial Practices Through the Megaliths (1000 BCE–500 CE)**

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### **Abstract**

Megaliths are undressed burial stones belonging to pre-historic Kerala, in India during 1000 BCE to 500 CE. Originally excavated by J. Babington, in Kerala, the term megaliths derives its origin from the Greek words “Mega” (big) and “Lithos” (stone). In this period, Kerala was inhabited by agro-pastoral communities skilled in iron metallurgy. The objective of the paper is to study the cultural and sepulchral practices of the society with the help of the material vestiges left by them. It also intends to explore the nature of the exchange/trade economy boosted by their skill in iron metallurgy. Further, it analyses burial practices adopted by these communities to understand how they commemorated their ancestors. This qualitative study adopts a critical and descriptive approach in analysing both primary and secondary data along with the author's personal observations and inferences. The primary data are the Archaeological Survey of India's excavation reports and the secondary data include the classical literature belonging to the period. The key research questions of this study are “Whether these structures evidences settlements in these areas?” and “Were these sepulchral practices evidences of social stratification?” The study found that are nine types of megaliths-Urn burials, Cap Stones, Hat Stones, Dolmens, Menhirs, Stone Circles, Cists, Rock Cut Chambers and Sarcophagus. They were made of locally available granite, laterite and terracotta. Grave goods found in assemblages inside or beneath these structures consisted of pottery, metal implements, beads and bones. These findings evidences agro-pastoral communities attempting to settle with their diverse skills and proficiency in myriad occupations.

*Keywords:* megaliths, rock cut caves, menhirs, sarcophagi, hat-stones, umbrella-stones

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## Introduction

Megaliths are huge monolithic sepulchers in peninsular India constructed by the people to pay respect for the dead ancestors. The stone henges the famous pre-historic monuments on Salisbury Plains in Wiltshire, England was a true marvel which enthralled archaeologists, historians and public alike. Megaliths of this type, meant to commemorate the ancestors are found in various parts of Kerala, in India, distributed in Highland, Midland and Low land geographical zones. The age of megaliths (circa 1000 BCE to 500 CE) is considered to be the primordial phase in the history of Kerala. Though no habitation cum burial sites were discovered in the region their presence points to the spread of human settlements close to burial grounds. The people who inhabited these areas were skilled in metallurgy, masonry, pottery, bead manufacturing, weaving and were engaged in an exchange economy that was largely urban (Loga, 1887). The assemblages found in the megaliths stand proof to an organized society which was largely agro-pastoral and stratified in nature, that existed during the period.

### Objectives

1. To study the cultural and sepulchral practices of the society of Kerala with the help of material vestiges left by man
2. To explore the nature of the exchange/trade economy by their skill in iron metallurgy
3. To analyze the burial practices adopted by these communities to understand how they commemorated their ancestors

### Previous Works and Literature Review

A series of excavations were conducted by the archaeologists to unearth the unique heritage of Kerala, mainly the megaliths in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Earlier excavations were made in various parts of South India with different types of sepulchral practices and it included Adichanallur, Koraki, Kayal, Pallavaram, Dadampatti, Parvai, Brahmagiri etc. The discovery of pottery from these sites are different in nature, but the use of iron and the skill in metallurgy is attested to all the sites. Primary burials with the human skeletons have not been found in Kerala. On the other hand the megaliths of region has secondary burials which have bone fragments along with pottery, ornaments and metal objects.

Credit goes to the British Archaeologist J Babington (1823), who had excavated a capstone at Chettapparamba in Kozhikode. In his work, the Description of *Pandoo Coolies*, J Babington has written that this place was literally the field (compound) of death, *Chatthum paramba*. He has also written elaborately of the tripods, swords, knives, axes made of iron along with other burial goods (Babington, 1823).

William Logan (1879), Alexander Rea (1911), A.H. Longhurst (1912), L.A. Cammaide (1930), A. Ayyapan (1933) H.H. Khan (1937) were some of the archaeologists who conducted excavations during the colonial period in Kerala. Vasudeva Poduval, Department of Archaeology and Anujan Achan of the Department of Archaeology, Cochin state were the other pioneers of excavations before Indian independence. The Archaeological Survey of India undertook systematic excavations of the region on the basis of stratigraphy to determine the chronological sequence of the megaliths. V.D Krishnaswamy, B.K. Thapar, K.J. John, worked to locate the chronology and significance of the megaliths. The family likeness of the ceramic types and fabric noticed here and Brahmagiri and other megalithic sites no doubt indicates a alienness of the different groups comprising the southern megalithic complex, though the

different shapes of the monuments and the variations in the burial customs represented therein seem to preclude an absolute homogeneity (Thapar, 1948). The excavations at Porkalam, Mangad that yielded a lot of artefacts belonging to the period, archaeologists have arrived to the consensus that the megaliths of Kerala roughly belonged to the times between 1000 BCE and 500 CE. Carbon-14 dating method on organic materials like charcoal or bones found in association with the burials helped to fix the timeline of the megaliths.

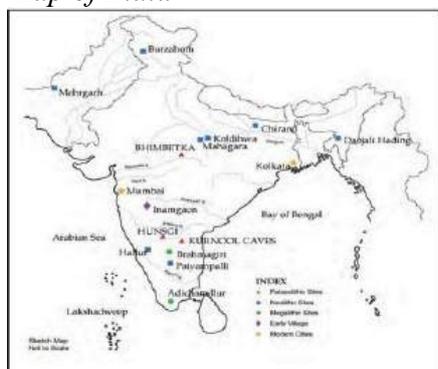
### Research Methodology

This is a qualitative study that uses a critical and descriptive approach in analysing both primary and secondary data along with author's personal observations and inferences. The literature belonging to the period of study, the Sangam Literature- *Ettuthaokai*, *Pattupattu*, *Patinenkillanakku* and post Sangam works like *Cilappathikaram*, *Manimekhalai*, *Kilkanakku* etc., throw a lot of light on the society, traditions and practices of the period. Early epigraphs in *Tamil Brahmi*, *Vattteluthu*, *Granthavari* and coins with references also are important sources. Reports of the studies of the Archaeological Survey of India, provide authentic and first hand information about the monuments ever since their existence was found to be a marvel to the academia involved in archaeological excavations in India.

### Significance of Megaliths

Kerala, the region located in the southern part of India, has distinct topographical zones. It has a long coastal belt (lowland) near the Arabian sea on the western part, fertile plains in the middle (midland) and hilly ranges on the eastern part alongside the Western ghats (highland). The region was part of ancient *Thamizhakam* and widely referred in the ancient corpus of Literature- the Sangam Literature. Till the middle of twentieth century it was believed by the archaeologists that the ecology and mineral availability in this region did not make it conducive for palaeolithic and neolithic man of make a living in this zone. Microliths were discovered from Chevayur in Kozhikode, Malampuzha and Thenmala which were used by the tribal groups for hunting and food gathering. Microliths were proof of people trying to make a living in this geographical zone when man hadn't begun to practice sedentary life by settling down with agriculture and domestication of animals. The Edakkal caves, an Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) protected site has petroglyphs of animal and human figures and *muniyaras* (burial chambers) suggesting the presence of human settlement in this region.

**Figure 1**  
*Map of India*



**Figure 2**  
*Map of Kerala*



However it was the Iron age of the region that attracted the attention of the archaeologists and historical enthusiasts due to the large presence of burial monuments very distinct for each region. Megaliths derive its name from Latin, Mega which means “big” and lithos “stone” are undressed burial stones found in various parts of Kerala made according to the availability of the material found in a particular locality in abundance. Thus dolmens multiple and single are to be found in the eastern mountainous regions composed of granite gneiss and charnockite: the rock cut caves, menhirs and umbrella stones on the laterite plains; and Urn burials with some menhirs on the alluvial seaboard. The type of megaliths include rock cut tombs, *Pathikalls* or hood stones, *topikalls* or Hat Stones, *Kudaikalls* or umbrella stones, Dolmenoid Cists, Urn Burials, Stone Circles and Menhirs and Sarcophagi. Such monuments were mostly discovered accidentally during the construction of road and buildings. Local people rarely realised the significance of them being evidences of heritage, history and culture. Many of the early attempts on the megaliths were largely antiquarian in nature (Mohanty & Selvakumar, 2002). Mortimer Wheeler, A British Archaeologist who played a pivotal role in excavating megaliths of South India, aptly summarised the situation “Megalithic monuments had been ransacked rather than excavated, sometimes with the help of a dynamite” (Wheeler, 1947). Urn fields had been gathered up like rice crops. However the “summary digging” and the antiquarian interest gave way to studies on the burial chambers as monuments that spoke volumes about the societies of iron age and early historic period of the region. The popular name associated with the megaliths was *Pandoo Coolies*, probable the corruption of *Mandavarkuli*, the burial pit of the dead which are often associated with human skeletal remains and burial furniture (Babington, 1823).

### **The Influence of Geography**

Sangam Literature throws ample light about the practice of commemorating the dead by constructing burial chambers. The *Thinai* concept that is seen in ancient Tamil literature classifies landscapes based on their ecology at the same time mentions about the occupations of the tribes there. In the *Kurinji* (Mountainous regions) people were hunter-gatherers, In *Mullai* (Pastoral forests) they were cattle herders, In *Neythal* (Coastal Regions) they were fishermen or salt makers, In *Marutham* (wetlands), farmers and in *Palai* (Dry regions) they were nomads who were plunderers. The geographical differentiation which was reflected in the occupations, could be seen in the type of megaliths, materials used for construction and also the material vestiges left by them inside these burial chambers.

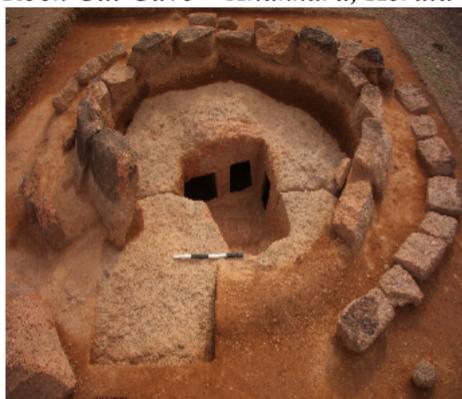
## Megalith Typology

### *Rock Cut Chambers*

Predominantly made of laterite, these caves were made by scooping out square stepped pits in the rock approached by rock cut steps. These caves sometimes have single or multiple chambers and some of them have port holes too. Openings are mostly covered by stone slabs. Kakkad, Eyyal, Porkalam, and Citrari are a few places where rock cut caves are found (Satyamurthy, 1972).

#### **Figure 3**

*Rock Cut Cave – Anakkara, Kerala*



### *Kudaikals or Umbrella Stones*

Porkalam and Cheramangad have a lot of stones that are shaped in the form of umbrella placed above another stone. These monuments are mushroom shaped and were constructed taking into account the incessant rains the region have for a good number of months in a year, allowing rain water to flow to the ground thus safe guarding the burial goods beneath, paving way to its longevity.

#### **Figure 4**

*Umbrella Stones, Cheramangad, Kerala*



### *Topikals or Hat Stones*

A circular laterite stone is seen on the ground beneath which mostly urn burials were found. Such specimens are seen in Cheramangad in Kerala.

**Figure 5***Hat Stone, Cheramangad, Kerala****Dolmens and Dolemenoid Cists***

Dolmens are made of granite slabs and are seen on the ground covered with a cap stone. Dolmenoid cist a variant of the Dolmens are burial chambers constructed with four slabs forming orthostats and the fifth used as capstone. The terms Dolmens and Dolemenoid cists are mostly used interchangeably. The Dolemenoid Cist in Alappuzha had yielded gold coins. Dolmens discovered in the Kerala region are so unique in nature with no parallels of the type found anywhere else in the world.

**Figure 6***Dolmen at Marayaur, Kerala***Figure 7***Dolemenoid Cist at Porkalam, Kerala*

### ***Urn Burials***

Urns made of clay were excavated in various parts of Kerala with grave assemblages meant to commemorate the dead ancestors. Though primary and secondary burials have been excavated from various parts of South India, only secondary burials with bone fragments have been excavated from Kerala, hitherto. Agricultural implements which were made of iron included wedges, blades and cutting knives. The presence of iron slag in the pits from where the urn burials were discovered shows that iron was locally manufactured in the region (Satyamurthy, 1972).

#### **Figure 8**

*Urn Burial, in Situ – Porkalam, Kerala*

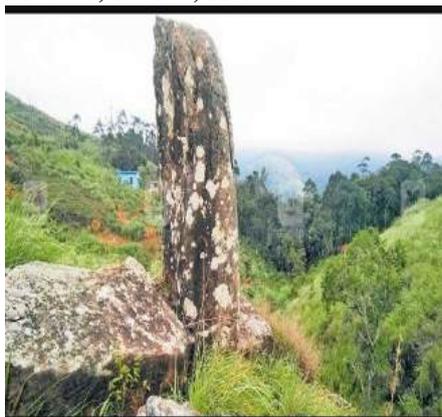


### ***Menhirs***

Generally constructed as memorial stones they are monoliths erected to honour heroes of war. They are either made of granite or laterite whichever was locally found in abundance in the regions.

#### **Figure 9**

*Menhir, Idukki, Kerala*



### ***Pathikals or Hood Stones***

They are unique to the region and are found abundantly in Cheramangad. It resembles the hood of a snake and covers an underground burial.

**Figure 10***Hood Stones, Cheramangad, Kerala***Stone Circles**

Made of laterite or granite these circles are meant to mark the boundary of a burial area and stones are arranged in circular pattern. They are found alongside dolmens or umbrellas stones.

**Figure 11***Stone Circle\_Anakkara, Kerala***Sarcophagi**

Sarcophagi or stone coffins were part of the larger megalithic burials which included urns and cists. A rare sarcophagus was discovered from a rock-cut cave at Viyur, Kerala. Bone fragments were found inside the sarcophagus. Archaeologists have confirmed that it belonged to the iron age of Kerala.

**Figure 12***Sarcophagus, Viyur, Kerala*

## Occupation

The Assemblages found in the megaliths of Kerala include, pottery, metal implements and tools, stone beads and bone fragments. These assemblages are a proof of the different occupations followed by people in different areas and point to the nature, rituals, practices and stratification in the society. The discovery of iron weapons in the megaliths show that they practiced hunting and food gathering. The archaeo-zoological evidences point to domestication of animals. Artificial ponds with slopping steps close are found close to megaliths in certain cases. Milch cow was treated as wealth by the tribal groups. Sickles, Ploughshares among assemblages prove that agriculture was a major source of livelihood. Location of megaliths near arable land and paddy husk excavated proved that they were agriculturists trying to settle down. Evidences also suggest mixed crop patterns in agriculture. A few tribes like *Kadars*, *Uralis*, *Malapandarams* still exist who are dependent on hunting, fishing etc as their ancestors did in the neolithic times.

There are ample evidences to believe that trade with other regions occurred. The presence of Russet coated painted ware which was not locally made and the presence of semi – precious stone beads (camelian, amethyst, quarts, beryl, chalcedony, topaz) among the assemblages in megaliths are proof (Thapar, 1948).

## Conclusion

It can be concluded that the people who built megaliths in honour of their dead ancestors belonged to agro-pastoral societies attempting to settle with their diverse skills and proficiency in myriad occupations. Internal and external trade flourished which added to the prosperity of the tribal groups. The accumulation of political power gradually turned the society to a stratified one. These burial monuments which are undoubtedly the finest proof that throw ample light on the region's iron age, its society, economy and polity don't get enough maintenance and are largely neglected. It is very important that these burial monuments are to be preserved well for the sake of the future generation.

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