
Iron Age-Megalithic Findings in Ettumanoor Region, Kottayam District, Kerala

Aparna K. R.¹

¹. Department of History, NSS College Manjeri, Malappuram, Kerala – 676 122, India
(Email: aparna.regunandan@gmail.com)

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Abstract: *This paper explores newly identified Megalithic sites around Ettumanoor in Kottayam district, Kerala, situated primarily along the Meenachil River basin. These sites reveal a diverse cultural assemblage characteristic of the Iron Age in South India, including megalithic monuments such as dolmens, cists, urn burials, and menhirs. The study highlights Vedagiri and its associated myths, which preserve its significance as a sacred and archaeological site. The analysis also documents various megalithic traditions, such as hood stones and cup-marked capstones, emphasizing their cultural and chronological significance. Additionally, the research identifies challenges threatening these archaeological remains, such as encroachments and destruction due to modern activities. The study underscores the urgent need for systematic exploration and preservation to safeguard the region's rich archaeological heritage.*

Keywords: Iron Age, Neolithic, Kottayam, Menhir, Dolmen, Cist Burial, Cup Marks

Introduction

This paper attempts to bring forth some new Megalithic sites around Ettumanoor. The sites are mainly located in the basin of river Meenachil. The cultural assemblage of iron, presence of Black-and-Red Ware and the erection of megalithic monuments are typical features of the Iron Age in South India. The megaliths essentially denote the commemorative monuments erected in honour of the dead, using large dressed or undressed stones. The archaeological research on megalithic burials has been started at Chattanparamba in the Kozhikode district by J. Babington in 1819 (Babington 1823). This was the first reporting of Megalithic remnants from Peninsular India.

The megalithic burials are the predominant archaeological remains of the Iron Age. In South India the Iron Age has given different dates, generally in Kerala the period ranging from about 1000 BC to 300 CE. This is only a general range of dates available from different regions, but late as well as early dates have come from some sites. Kerala has a vast distribution of different types of burials. The major types of Megaliths explored and studied in South India are Dolmens, Cists, Urn burials, Menhirs, Stone circles. Compared to the south Indian context, Kerala has some specific unique

megalithic monuments such as 'Kudakkallu' (Umbrella stone) 'Toppikkallu' (capstone) and rock cut chambers (Srinivasan 1946:10, Satyamurthy, 1992:2).

Physiography

The study area Ettumanoor is a major town and municipality in Kottayam district of Kerala, located 11km north-east of Kottayam city 50km south of Cochin. The site located in a distance between western ghats and western waterbody is minimal. The area is lateritic with granite outcrops in plenty. The main crops cultivated along these hills are mainly rubber and occasionally coconut and other naturally growing trees and plants like mango, jackfruit, pineapple, pepper and so on.

Early Attempt

The megalithic tombs attracted the attention of the archaeologists since the early part of the 19th century. The antiquity and archaeology of the Kottayam region was first studied by Rajendran, P when he was excavating 2 cist burials from the region of Oliyani or Thakadi (Rajendran 2005). Later in 2011 Archaeological Survey of India conducted excavations at Kadanad Inchukav, Kurumannu under Nambirajan, M. and C. Kumaran of ASI Thrissur Circle.

Four dolmens were reported from Kurinji in Meenachil taluk. (Nikhildas and Jolekae 2011) Four megalithic sites were discovered at Kalikavu Marangattupalli, Parapalli and Kudakkachira (Cyriac Jose 2020). Apart from megaliths, a polished Neolithic Celt was discovered by sand miners in late 2006 and it was located in the Chemplav area of Meenachil.

Few sites are reported in *The Indian Archaeological Review* such as Megalithic sites at Pattan colony in Kallar (IAR 1961-62) Athirampuzha Kanakkari Kuravilangad Thirunakkara (IAR 1963-64) Kallar, Kanakkary Pampadumpara Pannivayalkara (IAR 1965-66). Several menhir sites were reported from Arppookkara (IAR 1992-93) Thottakkad in Changanassery taluk (Kumar and Nikhil 2014) Muttom (Renjinimol 2013) in Kottayam.

Recent researches are also published about the megalithic burials in Kottayam. 'Megaliths Discovered Around Neeloor, Kottayam District, Kerala by Ajit Kumar and N. Nihildas, 2014, Department of Archaeology, University of Kerala. The paper focused on a cluster on five cist burial sites namely Mattathipara, Nerappu, Injukave, Payazmound, Vadakkummuri, and Kurumannu. All megaliths noticed around Neeloor are dolmenoid cist/dolmens and most of them are multi chambered. The observation part included the type of chambers, pottery, Cultivations, and iron implements in Neeloor region as well as megalithic traditions of Cholanaikans of Nilambur region.

Neolithic and Iron Age-Megalithic Findings from the Meenachil River Basin, Kottayam District, Kerala by Cyriac Jose, 2020, *Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in*

Archaeology 8.1 (2020): 448-461. 'Vedagiri: An undisclosed Megalithic site in Kerala' by Sethu Maria are important works regarding the present study.

Menhirs of Vedavyasagiri

Vedavyasagiri is located at Kanakkary and Athirampuzha villages of Kottayam taluk. It lies 28m above the sea level in a hilly slope that is 200m from the K.S.E Limited and a distance about 2.5km (9.6885° N,76.5343° E) away from Ettumanoor railway station in Kottayam district.

Menhirs are upright monolithic stones of varied height and also known with varied names such as 'nattukallu', 'patakallu' and 'pulachikkallu'. The Vedagiri site consists of 4 Menhirs which are undressed granite boulders having different size and shapes. One among them, which is larger than others, is made of a crude stone having 9f in height and at present it is under worship (Figure 1). It is covered with a yellow cloth and has a separate roof, basement with an oil lamp. The other three menhirs were installed in front of it with a distance of 10m to 15m. The menhir in the northern side is in a prolonged shape in which the body is rounded and the base is plain (Figure 2). The middle one is in vertical rectangular shape with 6f height and plain surface on both sides. The southern one is in 5f height of semicircle shape with backward sloping position (Figure 3).



Figure 1: Menhir



Figure 2: Menhir



Figure 3: Menhir

Multiple Hood Stones of Vedavyasagiri

The Hood Stones are circular alignments of five to twelve orthostats made of laterite. Below the super structure, inside, the dead body is placed either in a pit, Urn or sarcophagus. The Vedagiri has 2 sets of Multiple hood stones within a 50m distance from the Menhirs. There are two sets of slabs which are placed in a manner inclined inwardly. They are arranged in a circle without joining the top and it makes a circular

gap in the middle (Figure 4). Among them one set of stone slabs are conical at top and arranged in circular fashion. But the second one is half circular (Figure 5) and the other part is almost scattered (Figure 6). Due to thick vegetation these hood stones are not easily visible (Figure 7).



Figure 4: Alignment of Stones



Figure 5: Alignment of Stones



Figure 6: Alignment of Stones



Figure 7: Alignment of Stones

The myths and legends are the main reason for the preservation of the site. During these days the site functioned as a temple and it is one of the formal pilgrim centres in Kottayam. People called it 'Dhakshina Kasi' and considered it as the Garbhagriha of Ettumanoor Mahadeva temple. According to oral traditions, it is believed that Pandava during the forest dwelling (Vanavasa) visited and settled in this hill and the main menhir is worshiped as Bheema (Sethu Maria2021). Some stories are related with Vedavyasa in which he performed penance at this hill and composed 18 Puranas from

here. The Hood stones found here are considered as the Kalari or a classroom of Vedavyasa. On the first day of each month, Deeparadhana or ceremony of lighting lamps and special Poojas were done by the local priest. The springs are formed when groundwater flows on to the surface. It has long been important for humans as a source of freshwater (Figure 8). In Vedagiri hill there are two small springs named as 'Vyasatheerth' and both of them have protected walls (Figure 9).



Figure 8: Vyasatheerth 1



Figure 9: Vyasatheerth 2

The Unnuneeli Sandheham of 14th century CE refers to Vedagiri. It marked Vedagiri on the ancient trade route from Thiruvananthapuram to Kothanallur (Pranavraj 2017) and Athirampuzha which 3km from Vedagiri, was one of the famous trade Centre during the period of brisk trade (Sethu Maria202). In the medieval period Vedagiri was a village of local kingdom Vadakkumkoor, the feudatories of Cheras. After the fall of Chera power, Vedagiri turned as the border village when the kingdom was divided into two namely Thekkumkoor and Vadakkumkoor. There are some remnants of an ancient fort called Kottamuri (parts of a fort).



Figure 10: Cist Burial, Mangattuparamb



Figure 11: Broken Stone Slab

Mangattuparamb Cist Burial

The site Mangattuparamba also known as Akkakunnu is situated in Needoor village in Ettumanoor block. It lies at a distance about 1km east from S.K.V Higher secondary

school Neendoor and 400m away from Ettumanoor- Neendoor road. Cists are similar in structure to the Dolmens, but the main difference is that Cists are seen below the ground. Usually Dolmens, contain burial goods inside. They are found in single and multiple chambers (Abhayan 2018). In Mangattuparambu the cist burial is situated in the east west direction and has three stones (Figure 10). Large scale human intervention and land encroachment has mostly demolished the cist burial. A few years ago, local residents opened the burial. As a result, the stone slab on the western side is now missing, and fragments of a broken slab are scattered in the surrounding area (Figure 11).



Figure 12: Dolmen in Vempalli



Figure 13: Capstone



Figure 14: Western Side



Figure 15: Eastern Side

Dolmen in Vempalli

Vempally is a small village in Uzhavoor block with a distance of 6km from Ettumanoor. The site is situated 500m away from Vempally Devi temple at Vempally-Kadappor road. Dolmens are made of four stone slabs called orthostats arranged in a pattern that makes a square box-like structure. Another big stone slab is placed above this as a capstone. The dolmen in Vempalli is situated in a private property which keeps like a wood storage (Figure 12). It is east-west oriented and 100m away from the road. The dolmen has a huge capstone measuring 12m length and 7.5m width (Figure

13). Other three sides have three orthostats supporting the capstone which creates a chamber below. The western side of the dolmen is open (Figure 14) and the eastern side multiple stone slabs were used for lengthening the size of the chamber as well as it makes the chamber into two (Figure 15).



Figure 16: Dolmen in Kaalikavu



Figure 17: Orthostats



Figure 18: Capstone

Dolmen in Kaalikavu

Kalikavu is a small village in Kuravilangad Panchayats in Meenachil taluk. The site is located (N 09° 43' 49.9, E 76° 34' 13.6) along 1.5 km from MC road at Vayala- Kuriam road which is in a private property. It is in an east -west direction and located at the elevation of 38 m above the sea level. Heavy slabs were used to construct the dolmens and these were partially disturbed due to plantation. The western side is open and the other three sides are covered with three orthostats (Figures 16 and 17). The capstone is approximately 3.8x2.8 m with 0.42 m thickness (Figure 18).

Length of the orthostats which are on the southern and northern side measures 2.76 and 2.4 m respectively and the one on the east measures 1.65m. The orthostats have approximately 0.15 m thickness. Capstone has twelve (?) cup marks on it, the largest cup mark is about 6 cm with a shallow depth of 2.5 cm (Figure 19) (Cyriac 2020). The cup marks or cupules are hemispherical depressions carved by the archaic human kind on surface of the stones. Generally, it appears on rock arts, walls and floors and it is not always circular. Some of the evidence shows that it is in oval shape as well as triangular shape (Kumar and Krishna 2014).



Figure 19: Cup Mark on Capstone

Discussion

Kottayam region has rich archaeological potential and a thorough field investigation is essential to trace and document the archaeological remains, especially Megalithic remains. Previously 16 megalithic sites have been reported from the district mainly in the catchment areas of river Meenachil. Explorations in such areas should be carried out as early as possible since many important archaeological evidences are fast disappearing because of frequent flood and heavy land sliding in the river basins.

The first discussion based on the typology of the burials according to the landscape. The region mainly represented by Menhir, Stone Circle, Dolmen, Dolminoid Cist, Cist and Urn burial. However, Umbrella Stone, Hat Stone and Rock Cut Caves are not

found. In each ecological zone, the presence of these cultural components is not uniform. It varies both chronologically and culturally from one another. Kadanad and Oliyani are the only excavated sites so far in the area under discussion. Many of the surveyed sites were accidentally brought to the limelight by the local people during construction works or such other related activities. Recent findings in the Ettumanoor area have provided some evidence of its greater antiquity in the geological features and megalithic culture. Generally, dolmens and cists are found mainly from highland and Menhirs have been reported from all zones except highlands. In Kottayam the explored site is in the catchment areas of the river Meenachil and there were two dolmens, one cist burial and four menhirs are located in middle land.

Secondly it discussed the present conditions of the megalithic monuments. The megalithic burials vanished day by day and there are so many reasons behind this. Many burial sites have been razed to make way for new residential colonies and different kinds of plantations. The people break the stone slabs into small slabs to use them for flooring and also break the boulders into rubbles and use them to make compound walls. Another type of burials, especially Menhirs, are under worship because of their size or shape, or because of their odd form. But the beliefs and customs of them are varied regionally.

The third part about the cup marks or cupules. In India cup marks, or cupule are the earliest known form of rock art reported from various prehistoric rock art sites. Their occurrence has also been reported from megalithic tombs at various sites. The Cupules today have been elevated to the status of rock art (Kumar 1998) and it is reported from most of the states in the country. The dating of cupules is difficult due to them being subjected to reuse long after they were first created and also difficult to explain the function of these cupules during the prehistoric times. There are some possible reasons such as it perhaps created as commemoration posterior to the funerary ritual of a dead person and in some places, it considered as the symbol of the female vulva like fertility symbols as well as astronomical connotations which later transformed in to gameboards (Subhashis 2016). So, there are a variety of over-interpretations based on very inadequate evidence, and there has been an incredible number of misidentifications.

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