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# A Study of the Umbrella Stones in Kerala

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**Abstract:** *Umbrella Stones have been portrayed as a distinct regional type among the Megalithic monuments in India. It is often regarded as a 'type monument' of the Megalithic culture of Kerala. These are locally known as Kudakal or Kotakal and sites like Kodakalluparambu are often denoted by this name as in the case of. These are burial monuments of the Iron Age. They are unique in shape as well as in the style of construction. Umbrella Stones are monuments built over urn burials and are confined to certain geographic locales in the western coast of peninsular India particularly the lateritic plateaus in the midlands of Kerala. A specific study of the Umbrella Stones is attempted in this paper. It brings forth certain cultural specificities and regional preferences of the Megalithic communities in Kerala. The paper also deals with the colonial and post-colonial discourses on Umbrella Stones. It shows how Babington translated the local name 'KodeyKull' as 'Hat Stone' instead of 'Umbrella Stone'. Since the antiquarian researches in British Malabar in nineteenth century by Babington and Logan, the Umbrella Stones have received a sustained interest from social scientists including archaeologists.*

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**Keywords:** Umbrella Stone, Megalithic, Iron Age, Kerala, Sites, Symbolism, Typology

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## Introduction

The Umbrella Stone is a prominent type of megalithic monument in peninsular India. It is called *Kudakal* in Malayalam by the natives. Architecturally, it has four orthostats or side slabs. A domical capstone rests over these orthostats that converge at a point. *Kudakal* is built of dressed laterite blocks. Each of the orthostats faces one of the cardinal directions (Krishnaswami 1949). Though the Umbrella Stones are limited in distribution when compared to other megalithic monuments, it is found in the districts of Trissur, Palakkad, Malapuram, Kasargode, Kozhikode and Kannur in Kerala. Majority of the Iron Age burials in Malapuram belong to this type. Clusters of umbrella stones have been found in large sites while in a few sites only one Umbrella Stone remains often due to widespread human settlements encroaching into archaeological sites. Majority of the sites can be dated to late Iron Age.

## Umbrella Stones in Colonial Cultural Discourses

The archaeological potential of Kerala first emerged in the colonial cultural discourses in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. John Babington, a British administrator had explored Megalithic

sites in Malabar as far back as 1819 and conducted two small excavations one at Chataparamba/ Chattanparamba on the banks of the Beypoor River and another at Pudiyangadi on Kozhikode- Palakkad road. He presented a paper on it in 1820 which was subsequently published from Bombay in 1823. The colonial attempts to make sense of the cultural past of Kerala were largely confined to Malabar district in Madras Presidency directly administered by the British.

The Umbrella Stones are known for their architectural splendor and occupy a distinct position in the research carried out so far on the Iron Age burials of Kerala. These were known as *Kudakal* among the native people. It is mentioned as *Kodeykull* by Babington which he translated as Hat Stone. But, *kuda* means umbrella while *toppi* means hat in Malayalam. Hat Stones were later reported along with *kudakal* in many sites such as Cherumangad and Ariyannur. Thus Babington's *Kodeykull* is actually a *Toppikal* and vice versa.

The colonial historiography has made remarkable strides in the study of Megalithic sepulchral relics. William Logan's 1886 edition of the Malabar Manual summarizes the current and dominant ideologies that influenced imperialist historiography. In the colonial context, an Indological or imperial understanding of the role and function of the Umbrella Stones can be seen. This led to a distinct understanding of the past of Malabar or the northern part of Kerala as a colonial construct.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, very little was known about the chronology of the Megaliths. Babington had to classify the monuments he saw. This classification was later modified by Logan. Babington classified the Megaliths of Kerala broadly into five categories. According to Logan, the '*megalithic remains*' and '*excavated caves*' were '*probably synchronous*'. The urn burials formed one category, rock cut caves formed second. The third category was *topikull*/umbrella stone and fourth category was the *kodeykull*/hat stone.

In the paper sent to Transactions of the Literary Society of Bombay Vol. 3, Babington had referred thus:

*"Kodey Kull so called from it being shaped like the umbrella or chatry in common use among the native (Babington 1823). This has not been authoritatively connected with sepulchral uses. But it evidently belongs to the megalithic period of Class."*

*"Though from its situation, size and appearance I was led to expect my labor to would not have been in vain, nothing was found in the hollow space between the stone which supported the toppikull and which were themselves placed on the solid rock."*

Babington also made detailed archaeological drawings and one Umbrella Stone is labeled as '*Kodey Kull/Hat Stone*'. This confusion between Umbrella Stone and Hat Stone thus began with the first detailed observation on the Megalithic monuments of Kerala. Inspired by Babington, Umbrella Stones continued to be 'opened' and studied

during the colonial times and well since India's independence. Logan mentions he did '*researches similar to Babington's but were unsuccessful in finding grave goods from the Umbrella Stones.*' Thus excavation of Umbrella Stones was not a 'rich' affair when compared to the rock cut caves and urns which were more frequently encountered.

Studies in the Megalithic culture of Kerala and Umbrella Stones have continued. The terminology has been revised and the methods and descriptions have changed. But our level of understanding is still very much derived from the colonial tradition. Babington as well as Logan observed that the two remarkable features of the Umbrella Stones are that these monuments are not sepulchral or the relics were damaged beyond recovery by the archaeologists and that there are subtypes of Umbrella Stones and a wider distribution and hence it is a distinct monument type than a variant. Both these observations were modified with recent discoveries.

Babington first noticed an Umbrella Stone at Pudiyanagadi in Malapuram district. He noticed two types of Umbrella Stones; one with a flatter capstone/ Class II of Babington reported from a site near Manjeri in Ernad Taluk in Malapuram district. Though his report was prepared within a year and considering antiquarians almost always practiced archaeology part-time and as a hobby, it may not have been a norm in those days to go in for detailed post-excavation studies. Babington just as William Logan later must have relied on native scholars and administrative machinery to gather information. This seems to have been the approach of most of the colonial administrators turned antiquarians during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### **The Umbrella Symbolism**

The Umbrella motif in Megaliths has been attributed to symbolic, sovereign, and spiritual origins. Babington has given detailed description of the site name Chataparamaba as well as the terms *Kodeykull* and *Topikull* for the benefit of his primarily European audience. Babington describes that there were two types of umbrellas in Malabar one with a shaft and the other without a shaft. Both are in vogue in south India. Umbrella with shaft is more common now. The umbrella without shaft is still used by peasants in south and Southeast Asia. In Kerala till 19<sup>th</sup> century, umbrellas with or without shaft were made of areca nut leaves and bamboo frame. The peasant's umbrella actually looks like a hat and has a broad rim for better protection from the sun and rain. Though this is not in use any more in Kerala, its models can be seen in museums. Similar hats are found in Japan, China and Southeast Asian countries and are used mostly by the peasants and farm workers.

The Umbrella Stone might signify the identity of a particular group among the various culture groups that habited Kerala's midlands during the Iron Age in this region. The Umbrella Stone has also been considered as a 'three-legged dolmen' (c.f. Nayar 1989) and as a 'complex form of Urn burial' (John 1974; McIntosh 1985; Moorti 1994). It may have derived its shape from the mushrooms which grow in the local climatic conditions in Kerala (Manilal 1979), or it may denote some an exotic type of mushroom

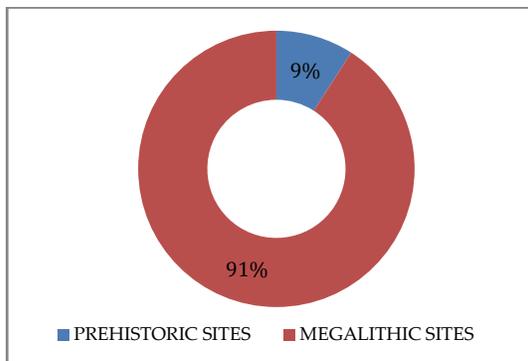
from which the Vedic Soma juice was extracted (<http://whenonearth.net/umbrella-shaped-megaliths-kerala-india/>). The most common explanation is that the umbrella motif may represent royalty, power and protection (Nayar 1989). The grave goods and the distribution of these monuments do not suggest any form of clear-cut elite status of these monuments (Peter 2002). Though there are varied opinions on the etymology and symbolism of the Umbrella Stones but it can be considered as a distinct type due to its uniqueness. It could be a regional adaptive monument type found in suitable lateritic terrains as laterite is easier to work with when compared to granite (Peter 2002).

## Sites

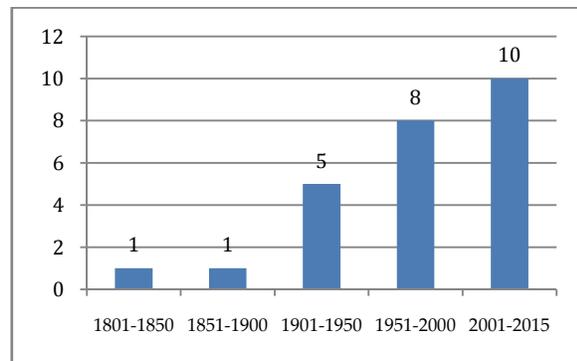
The Umbrella Stones are found in the midlands of Kerala from Kasargod in north to Trissur in south covering Kannur, Kozhikode, Malapuram and Palakkad districts. In majority of the sites, the best quality primary laterite was preferred in building Umbrella Stones. The size of the monument varies within sites. The quality of laterite also varies regionally. So far, Umbrella Stones have been reported only from Kerala (Table 1). But, primary compact and exposed laterite which is a suitable raw material available in the Konkan coast also. Rock cut caves cut into laterite deposits have been reported from sites in Konkan coast in Goa (Nambirajan 2007) as well as in Karnataka (De Silva *Personal Communication*).

Majority of the known archaeological sites belong to the Iron Age/Late Megalithic periods. The explorations from 1819 to 2015 have led to the discovery of more than 1000 megalithic sites in Kerala. There are nearly 100 known prehistoric sites in Kerala covering the Paleolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic periods (Fig. 1).

Of the 1000 known megalithic sites, less than 25 have been systematically excavated (Fig. 2). Most of the excavations took place after 1950. In nearly hundred sites salvage digging was resorted to in recent years. Also to be noted is that, due to active site formation agents and human encroachments into the Megalithic sites, there are occurrences of both selective reporting of sites and large-scale disturbances in most sites. This can affect archaeological reporting.



**Figure 1: Distribution frequency of Prehistoric and Megalithic sites in Kerala**



**Figure 2: The frequency of excavated Megalithic sites in Kerala from early 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present**

**Table 1: List of Major sites with Umbrella Stones**

<b>Serial Number</b>	<b>District</b>	<b>Site</b>
1.	Kasargode	Adappa
2.	Kasargode	Kalikadavu
3.	Kasargode	Ummichipoyil
4.	Kasargode	Varikulam
5.	Kasargode	Kalkulam
6.	Kannur	Kattur
7.	Kozhikode	Asharikandiparambu
8.	Kozhikode	Atholi
9.	Kozhikode	Cheruppa
10.	Kozhikode	Cheruvannur
11.	Kozhikode	Kizhakothe
12.	Kozhikode	Kodassery
13.	Kozhikode	Kotal
14.	Kozhikode	Naduvallur
15.	Kozhikode	Perambra
16.	Malapuram	Abdurrahman Nagar
17.	Malapuram	Alankode
18.	Malapuram	Alathur
19.	Malapuram	Ariyakad
20.	Malapuram	Anakkara
21.	Malapuram	Angadipuram
22.	Malapuram	Edathattumadampa
23.	Malapuram	Kalpalli
24.	Malapuram	Karattu,
25.	Malapuram	Kattiparuthi
26.	Malapuram	Kilikollur
27.	Malapuram	Koduvayur
28.	Malapuram	Kottakkal
29.	Malapuram	Kodakal (near Tirur)
30.	Malapuram	Kunnumpuram
31.	Malapuram	Manjeri
32.	Malapuram	Mankada
33.	Malapuram	MannurDesom
34.	Malapuram	Melmuri
35.	Malapuram	Nagalasseri
36.	Malapuram	Nannambra
37.	Malapuram	Naramaruthur
38.	Malapuram	Ozhur
39.	Malapuram	Panundam
40.	Malapuram	Pattarkulam

Serial Number	District	Site
41.	Malapuram	Tharanur
42.	Malapuram	Tirurangadi
43.	Malapuram	Triprangode
44.	Malapuram	Trisulam
45.	Palakkad	Angadi
46.	Palakkad	Kalkulam
47.	Palakkad	Kappur
48.	Palakkad	Kumaramputhur
49.	Palakkad	Ungallur
50.	Trissur	Ariyannur
51.	Trissur	Cherumangad
52.	Trissur	Eyyal
53.	Trissur	Velappayi
54.	Trissur	Vellarakal
55.	Trissur	Vellatanjoor

Among the twenty five excavated sites, Chataparamba, Cherumangad, Ariyannur, Ummichipoyil, Kalkulam and Anakkara have Umbrella Stones. These excavations have helped to understand the mortuary variability and the relationship of Umbrella Stones with other monuments like Rock Cut Caves, Hood Stones (Peter 2002: 22). Major breakthroughs in understanding Umbrella Stones were through the excavations at Perambra in 1979, at Cherumangad in 1990-91, at Ummichipoyil in 1997-98 and at Anakkara in 2007-08.

For anyone studying the Megalithic culture of Kerala, place names have been helpful. The Megalithic site at Cherumangad (Fig. 3) in Talapilly Taluk in Trissur district is locally known as *Kudakallu parambu* meaning the land with Umbrella Stones. There are several Megalithic monument types including Umbrella Stones. It shows the indigenous perceptions attributing a certain unique and elitist value to the Umbrella Stones over other monuments. The term *kudakal* is preferred over Umbrella Stone in the post-independence period. This was in tune with the increasing indigenization in cultural discourses. Place name helped to distinguish the megalithic site at Anakkara. A place called Kodakal near Tirur in Malapuram district has Umbrella Stones. There are quite a few other sites with similar place names but in most cases, place names alone have survived (Gurukkal and Varier 1999: 115).

### Typology of Umbrella Stones

The first attempt at devising a suitable typology for the Megalithic monuments in India by incorporating European terms was made by Wheeler at Brahmagiri (1948). It was further developed by Krishnaswami (1949), Leshnik (1974), Sundara (1979), Allchins (1982), McIntosh (1985), Moorti (1994) and Rajan (2009) (Peter 2002). Moorti classified the Megalithic monuments in Peninsular India into two categories; a) sepulchral and b)

non-sepulchral. This classification is based on the presence/ absence of the mortal remains of the dead persons in these monuments. Sepulchral monument types include Pit Burial, Chamber Burial (Cist) and Urn Burials. Non-sepulchral monument types include Dolmen, Port-holed Dolmen, Menhir, Alignment and Avenue.



**Figure 3: Umbrella Stones, Cherumangad**

This typology cannot be applied blindly in Kerala. That is because Megaliths are found practically in all parts of South India and are strongly regional in architectural representation. Eight to ten major types have been distinguished by archaeologists in most regions within peninsular India. Majority of these types belong to Late Megalithic. The custom of burial signified by Megaliths must have begun before that. A few of those burial traditions continued in the historical period (Paddayya 2006).

The Megalithic burials of Kerala have been broadly classified into six types (Peter 2002). These are; (a) Dolmens/Cist and Dolmenoid Cist; (b) Rock Cut Caves; (c) Umbrella Stones; (d) Hat Stones and Hood Stones; (e) Urns and (f) Menhirs (Peter 2002: 46-7) Certain Megalithic monuments are composite types. They are a combination of two or more types suggesting their complexity. For example, an Urn burial covered with a granite capstone surrounded by a circle of laterite and was found at Porkalam in Trissur (Thapar 1952:3).

The Umbrella Stones, Hat Stones and Hood Stones are considered as variants of Urn Burials due to the presence of Urn beneath them (Moorti 1994). Mitra and John considered Umbrella Stone as a three-clinostat Dolmen (John 1979). But a few excavated Umbrella Stones at Cherumangad and Ariyannur in Trissur district did not have Urns underneath. Hence Umbrella Stones cannot be regarded as a variant of Urn Burials or Dolmens. They form a distinct type in Kerala in terms of distribution.

The Hat Stones, Umbrella Stones and Rock Cut Caves are built of laterite. Umbrella Stones have been found in association with Hat Stones at Cherumangad and Ummichipoyil and with Rock Cut Caves in a few more sites. Despite using the same raw material, Rock Cut Caves are more in frequency than the Umbrella Stones. Hat Stones were found in association with Umbrella Stone and both use the same raw

material i.e. hard laterite in the zone of Talapilly- Ottapalam with sites like Cherumangad and Ungallur. In terms of distribution, Hat Stones are rarer than Umbrella Stones and are confined to Central Kerala.

The Umbrella Stone at Cherumangad (IAR 1990-91) in Trissur district had no grave goods while Perambra in Kozhikode district (John 1982) was rich in grave goods. Though Umbrella stones in Cherumangad were bare, the nearby Hat stones were rich in artifacts. Thus, the Hood Stones and Hat Stones are limited in distribution when compared to Umbrella Stones but seem to be rich in grave goods. The excavated Umbrella Stone at Cherumangad was devoid of any form of interment. A Hat stone found nearby also did not yield interment but two other Hat stones were rich in pottery as well as copper artifacts (IAR 1990-91).

In the sites with many types of monuments, it was interesting to notice that each type of monument occupied a distinct portion within the site. Such possibilities may be surmised from Cherumangad, Ummichipoyil and Anakkara.

## **Conclusion**

With the application of processual archaeology models to the study the Megalithic culture of India since the 1990s, the term Megalith was largely substituted with the word Iron Age denoting its emphasis on technology. The factual data was quantitatively classified and showed that the Megalithic communities had their subsistence from the agro-pastoral base and must have had major zones of industrial activities with the introduction of iron technology.

The Megalithic culture of peninsular India can be dated to the Iron Age. Iron Age in north India has been broadly divided into two phases. In the first phase, iron was used for making only weapons and in the second phase it was also used to make a variety of tools along with weapons. This initiated an intense field-agriculture in the later phase of the Megalithic culture too. This would have led to industrial activities, increasing urban trends, demographic expansion and cultural complexities side by side. This should ideally reflect in the artifact variability in mortuary practices in monuments as well as beneath.

Iron technology led to unequal power relations within the Megalithic societies. All this points to a stratified society during the Iron Age which is coeval with Late Megalithic. Moorti (1994) feels there is a higher percentage of a male in most Iron Age burials suggesting a broad patriarchal nature of the society throughout South India. Side by side, we find evolved forms of ancestor worship through the tradition of burial monuments. This has been explained as arising out of a need for legitimization of the successors over land. This was done through both rituals and religion.

Despite vast data on the Megalithic culture of Kerala since 1820, our knowledge on the socio-economic structure is rather sketchy and most post-independence works have focused on typological studies. These works have devoted more energy in explaining

the architectural attributes of the monuments than on what they point to. In the Kerala context, there were interesting strides made in the study and excavation of Umbrella Stones since 1950. The first major stride was fixing Umbrella Stones as *kudakallu* and Hat Stones as *topikallu*. But the confusion is not resolved yet.

A major lacuna in the studies on Umbrella Stones is that grave goods in the few excavated sites are not comparable. The excavations at Perambra, Anakkara and Ummichipoyil can be rewarding as these sites are rich in grave goods. Though excavations of *Kudakall* were attempted by various institutions like the Kerala State Department of Archaeology, the Archaeological Survey of India and Mahatma Gandhi University, no detailed reports of the excavations are available. Even reports of the recently excavated sites are not published. Hence much of the discussions on Umbrella Stones are still depended on the colonial writings. In 1940s, the Archaeological Survey of India excavated a couple of Megalithic sites in Kerala but concentrated on the Rock Cut Caves (Sharma 1956; Krishnaswamy 1949).

Scholars have attributed ethnic variability and opens up the issue of elite categories within the cultural fabric of Iron Age in Kerala on the basis of Umbrella Stones. This brings forth the debate on typological traditions in megalithic studies in India which were highly European to begin with. This trend has been criticized recently for its over emphasis on specifics thereby forgetting the socio-economic parameters of this culture. It seems there can be no hard and fast rule as to the presence of grave goods and in the classification of monuments into sepulchral and non-sepulchral.

Typological misnomers have been a challenge to Megalithic studies in Kerala. Previous studies preclude a standard typology pattern. For example a Rock Cut Cave within a stone circle could be either termed as Cave or a Stone Circle which will affect typological studies. Hence, timely shifts in typological terms have been a necessity in furthering investigations into the Megalithic culture (Peter 2012). A new typology had to be devised by incorporating all the internal variations and internal complexities of the monuments found within Kerala.

Since excavations at Ummichipoyil and at Kalkulam in Kasaragod district, more interesting aspects have emerged. Here also, the Umbrella Stones do not seem to have grave goods of great value in comparison to the 'richer' Rock cut Caves. But if these two monuments are contemporary then the presence of channel spouted black and red ware vessels of the Neolithic Chalcolithic tradition need to be explained chronologically while situating the Umbrella Stones (Nair 2005).

The size of the Umbrella Stones also varies from site to site and in most cases each monument is unique. Thus three sub types of Umbrella Stone can be seen.

- Umbrella Stone without laterite stone circle
- Umbrella Stone with domical capstone
- Umbrella Stone with flatter capstone

Architectural variations within the same type of monument in a site were also attested at Cherumangad. The excavation of a Hat Stone at Cherumangad revealed a pyriform urn kept in a pit. So with the contemporaneous existence of the Umbrella Stones along with other monuments, it remains to be answered how the Umbrella Stones can claim to be unique. On the whole, there are lots of similarities among various monuments while the shape remains unique to the Umbrella Stones. Hence how the Megalithic community perceived Umbrella Stone is a challenging question that remains to be answered. In none of the excavated Umbrella Stones, stone beads have been found. Etched carnelian beads are one of the major dating indicators for the megaliths. This points to the need for a study specific to the chronology of the Umbrella Stones.

The distribution of Umbrella Stones is widest in Malapuram district. Malapuram along with the adjoining Taluks of Palakkad and Trissur forms one cluster while the adjoining Taluks of Kozhikode, Kannur and Kasargode districts form the second cluster. This unique distribution pattern needs to be examined in detail. The last two known sites with Umbrella Stones; Anakkara and Angadipuram<sup>1</sup> are in the same zone. A thorough exploration of this region focusing on understanding the relationship between Umbrella Stones and other monuments will be highly rewarding. An earlier attempt by John mainly covered Umbrella Stones in Kozhikode district and similar surveys in Trissur and Palakkad region have yielded promising results.

## Note

<sup>1</sup>Anakkara was excavated in 2007-08 by Rajan Gurukkal and K.P. Shajan of the School of Social Sciences, Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam. Angadipuram was reported in the newspapers and a brief exploration of the region and interviews with local residents by a team from the U.C College Archaeological Museum attested the presence of Umbrella Stones.

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