



UNDERSTANDING MEGALITHS OF PENNAGARAM TALUK, MIDDLE CAUVERY BASIN

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ABSTRACT

Since the discovery of Megalithic burial by Babington in 1823 at Kerala, hundreds of Megalithic burials were explored and excavated all over India. The northern part of Tamil Nadu, the Middle Cauvery Basin is very rich in archaeological vestiges dating from various periods. Burial with superstructure in the form of Cairn-Circle or Dolmen was a common feature dating from the Iron Age to the Historical period and are collectively referred to as Megalithic Burial in India. In order to understand the spatial pattern and the effect of geography and geology of an area on the Megalithic burial practice, the taluk of Pennagaram was selected. This paper primarily focuses upon the finding from ten newly discovered Megalithic burial sites from Pennagaram taluk, which forms part of the Middle Cauvery Basin. It is based primarily on field study. An understanding of the spatial pattern and the reasons why Megalithic builders of this region selected the place where the present burials are noticed was arrived at with the aid of Google map, GIS map and Geological map.

Keywords: Megaliths, Cairn Circle, Cist, Pennagaram

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‘Megaliths’ are monuments constructed out of large stones and were the burial practice of various cultures dating from the Iron Age to the Historical period. The term ‘Megalith’ is derived from the Greek word ‘*me-gas*’, which means big or great and ‘*lithos*’ meaning stone. Thus, Megaliths refers

to the monuments constructed out of large stones in memory of deceased people. These Megalithic burials are spread over a large area, including the Deccan Plateau, Peninsular India, the Vindhya ranges, some parts of Jammu and Kashmir and Northeastern part of India. In Tamil Nadu, the Sangam literatures such as *Narṛinai*, *Purananuru*, *Pathiṛrupattu* and *Manimekalai* have mentioned about these various types of burials and its ritual practices in ancient Tamil Nadu. Morphologically these burials were classified as Cairn circle (*Kal Vaṭṭam*), Dolmen (*Kal Tittai*), Cist burial (*Kal Patukkai*), Urn burial (Mutumakkaḷ Tāli), Menhir (Kutukkal), Hat stone (Topikkal) and Umbrella stone (Kuḍakkal). Research on Megaliths were undertaken by various scholars like Babington (1823), Alexander Rea (1888), Wheeler (1948), Gururajaro (1972), Leshnic (1974), Sundara (1975), K. Rajan (2000) and Selvakumar and Mohanti (2002) from colonial period. Chronology of Megaliths is still controversial after two centuries of research on Megalithic burials. Earliest date of Megalithic burial is 9th century BCE obtained from an archaeological site called Adichanallur in Tamirabarani river valley and youngest Megaliths of the state date back to 7th century CE from Siruthavur in northern part of Tamil Nadu. Most of the Megalithic burials from South India are secondary burials, where the burials contain a few remains of the deceased person and not the whole body. Along with these burials, artefacts in the form of grave goods like beads, iron objects and pottery have also been discovered. Often these potteries include Black-and- Red Ware, All Black Ware, Red slipped Ware and Red Ware.

The present study area geographically comes under Middle Cauvery Basin and lies between the Western Ghats and Eastern Ghats and forms an administrative division in Pennagaram taluk of Dharmapuri district (Figure 1), Tamil Nadu. Initial exploration work was conducted by Robert Sewell in 1882, when he discovered one dolmen at Ajjampatti in Pennagaram taluk, which he published in *Antiquarian Remains in the Presidency of Madras* in 1882. After the establishment of Archaeological Survey of India in 1861, many archaeological exploration works were conducted

in Pennagaram Taluk and numerous archaeological sites have been reported from this study area. These findings were reported in the journal of IAR- *Indian Archaeological Review* 1988-1990. Subsequently in 1997, Dr. K. Rajan had conducted extensively field work in Dharmapuri district and reported several archaeological sites ranging from Iron Age to Historical period, which was reported in *Catalogue of Archaeological sites in Tamil Nadu* (Rajan: 1997).

These studies have reported archaeological vestiges dating from Iron Age to Modern Period. The present study is mainly focused on Megalithic Burials, its location, exploitation of raw material and to study the spatial pattern of burials. This article is based on ten newly discovered Megalithic burial sites from Pennagaram taluk as mentioned earlier.

Table 1: List of Megalithic burial sites from Pennagaram taluk, Dharmapuri District, Tamil Nadu

Sl. No	Name of the Site	Latitude	Longitude	Burial Types
1	Ajjanahalli	12°1'50" N	78°48'44"E	Cairn-Circle
2	Eriyur	12°0'17"N	77°47'17" E	Cairn-Circle
3	Kurkampatti I	12°1'52"N	77°48'53"E	Cairn-Circle
4	Kurkampatti II	12°1'36"N	77°47'47"E	Cairn-Circle
5	Kurkampatti III	12°1'37"N	47°47'28"E	Cairn-Circle
6	Pattakaran-kottai	12°1'29" N	77°48'27" E	Cairn-Circle
7	Periyavathalapuram	12°3'41" N	77°50'05" E	Cairn-Circle
8	Sidumana-halli	12°0'43" N	77°50'22	Cairn-Circle
9	Solapadi	12°0'8" N	77°49'2" E	Cairn-Circle
10	Thanda	12°01'41"N	77°47'05"E	Cairn-Circle

Location of the Burials

The Megaliths are found generally on the slopes of hills or elevated part and on the foot hills of the non-productive lands. In the Pennagaram taluk, the Megaliths are found very close to the river streams, dry lakes, whereas in some cases, they are also found to have been erected in dry areas where the rocky outcrop is exposed. The places selected for constructing these burials were found in close proximity to raw materials and located at an approachable distance from the habitation area.

Majority of these burials from this taluk are situated on the foothills and slopes of the hills, dense forests and some of them were also found on river banks.

Exploitation of raw material for Burial Erection

The Megalithic people have selected locally available raw materials for erection of these burials and the reason could be easy transportable stones for burial construction. The present location of the graves clearly indicates that the raw materials were available within the distance of one or two kilometers. These stones were used as undressed boulders for the alignment of circles and with dressed stone slabs for the orthostats chambers with capstone. Urns were made out of Coarser Red ware and most of them are in completely broken condition. In the Cist burials dressed and undressed slabs were used for orthostats and cap stones. In the study area locally available raw materials for burials were found to belong to the Proterozoic era and included granite, charnockite, granitic gneiss and dolerite. Granite is the dominating raw material used in construction of Cist burials. The materials used for cairn-circles and cairn packing were granite, charnockite, granitic gneiss and dolerite. Quartz is the major stone type which was used for cairn packing.

Local Mythology and Vandalism

In Pennagaram region, the Megalithic monuments, such as Cairn-circle and cists are referred to by the local people by various names such as *Pandiyar Kuli* and *Pandavar Kuli*. Locals believe that ancient people lived inside these burials and also that dwarf humans lived in this burials, whom they call *Chittira Kullargal*. Most of the burials in Pennagaram taluk have been vandalized (Figure 3) due to this myth by the local people searching for precious metals and precious stones within the burial.

Typology

In the study area three major types of Megalithic burials were noticed, such as cairn circles, cairn circle with cist and cairn circle with urn. Though most of the burials from the study area are Cairn-

Circle, but, due to vandalism activity by the locals the structures in the form of cist and urns burials have been exposed, otherwise the surface indicates only Cairn-circle.

Cairn-Circle

The Cairn-Circles are one of the most popular types of Megalithic burials which are commonly seen all over South India. Mostly Cairn-Circles were constructed out of irregular boulders; usually the stones were arranged in a circle or oval shape with cairn packing in the centre (Figure 2). The diameter and measurement of the Cairn-Circle may vary according to the contents and some of the circles are found with cist burials and some of them have urn burials. These types of burials are found in villages like Ajjanahalli, Eriyur, Kurkampatti, Pattakarankottai, Periyavathalapuram, Sidumanahalli, Solapadi and Thanda.

Cairn-Circle with Cist Burial

The Cist is a box like structure constructed by four orthostats and covered with a capstone. The cist burial noticed here are found to have been constructed with four granitic orthostat slabs in the form of a tub with huge capstone placed over it (Figure 3). Usually they are found in single and multiple chambers. The eastern or northern orthostat has invariably a round port-hole at the centre. These Cists was surrounded by boulders arranged in a circle and filled with cairn packing. These types of Megalithic burials were exposed due to human vandalism in villages like Ajjanahalli, Eriyur, Pattakarankottai and Solapadi.

Cairn Circle with Urn Burial

It is one of the most dominant burial practices found in South India. These urns were generally closed with a lid and protected by a capstone and cairn packing. The Urns are made mostly of Red Ware or Black-and- Red Ware of a coarse fabric and are ill fired. The rim portion is thick and short. They often have a decoration on the neck portion. The size of the Urn varied from region to region. These Urns were buried inside the stone circle then filled with cairn packing. They were noticed in the vandalized burials in the villages like Periyavathalapuram and Sidumanahalli.

Findings

Systematic exploration conducted by the authors of this article has revealed 10 burial sites from this taluk. Initial plotting of these burials on the contour, geological and geomorphological maps have brought to light certain important aspects related to these burial sites. These are discussed below.

Contour maps have revealed that most of the burials were erected on an elevation of 250 metres Above Mean Sea Level (AMSL) and only two sites namely Periyavathalapuram and Thanda are noticed above 300 metres AMSL (Figure 4).

The Geological map has revealed that all these burial sites are found in the Charnockitic region (Figure 5). As almost all the boulders of cairn-circles were made out of different types of charnockite, so, the availability of raw material might be a reason for the selection of this location by the Megalithic builders.

The Geomorphological map indicates that all the burials were associated with pediment and pediplain formation (Figure 6). The pediment are usually a place where smaller sized stones are found and these smaller sized stones were used for cairn packing by the Megalithic builders and this could be the major reason why the Megalithic builders had chosen this place.

The Physical map indicates presence of water bodies near the study area. All the burial sites are located very near to rivers or streams (Figure 7). Water bodies were most important for rituals, so the Megalithic builders had chosen places very close to water bodies for erecting the burials.

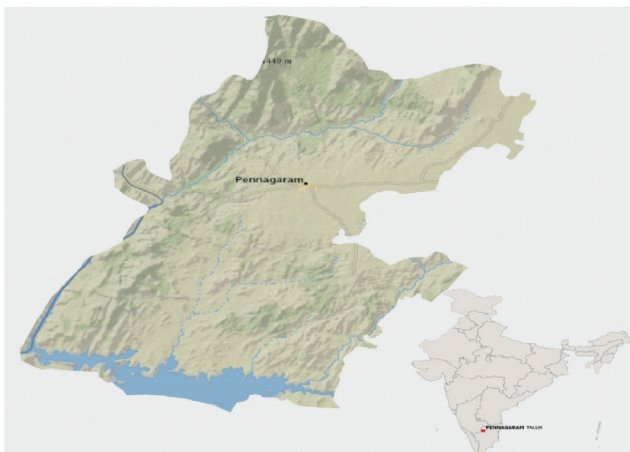


Figure 1: Study Area, Pennagaram Taluk, Dharmapuri District



Figure 2: Cairn-Circle from Solappadi, Pennagaram Taluk



Figure 3: Vandalized Cist Burial from Thanda, Pennagaram Taluk

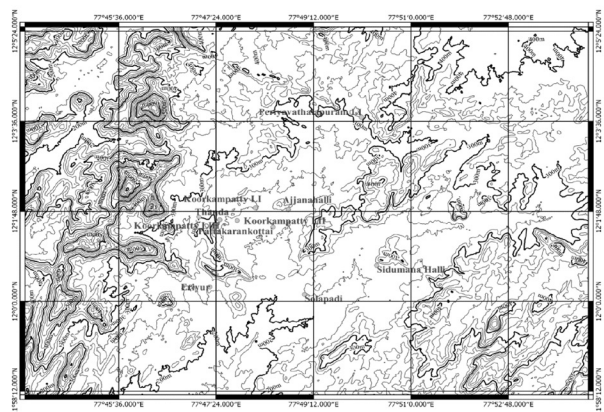


Figure 4: Contour Map of Study area with Archaeological site Located

With the help of these maps it could be concluded that the Megalithic builders of this region have preferred foot of the hills which are closer to an elevation of 250 metres AMSL and preferred the pediment zone where they could easily find smaller stone for cairn packing as all burials from this region are cairn-circles type burials.

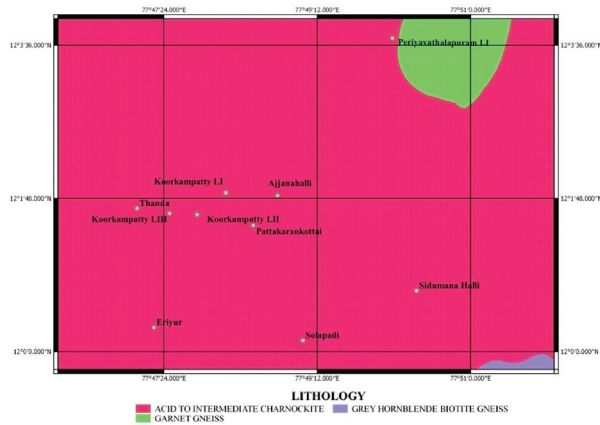


Figure 5: Lithology Map of the Study area

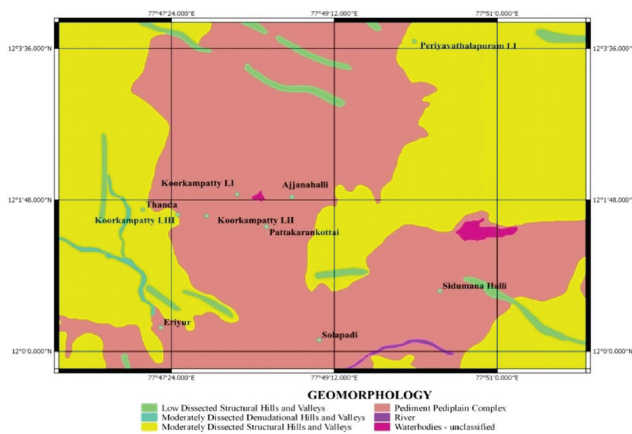


Figure 6: Geomorphology map of the Study area

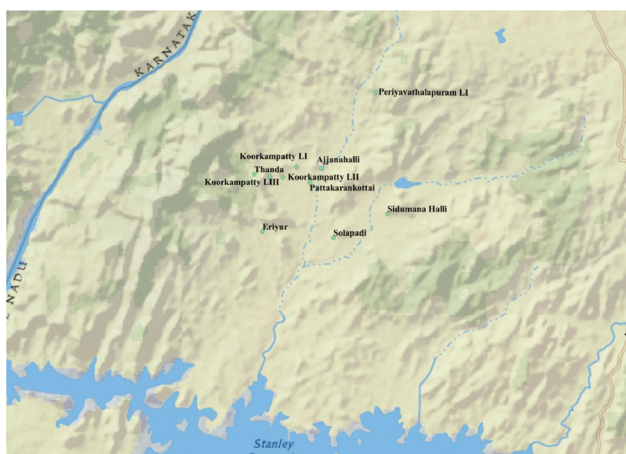


Figure 7: Physical map indicates water bodies of the Study area

Conclusion

Archaeological exploration conducted at this taluk has revealed ten Megalithic burial sites with more than

ten burials from each site. Among the ten Megalithic sites three sites namely Periyavathalapuram, Thanda and Sidumanahalli are almost completely destroyed. The complete destruction of Megalithic burials from Periyavathalapuram, Thanda and Sidumanahalli for treasure hunting is mainly due to the fact that the Megalithic burials are located in deserted places, away from the present habitation and are situated in the Reserve Forest region. Irrespective of the elevation of the landscape the Megalithic builders of this region preferred Cairn-Circle type burials. The site of Periyavathalapuram and Thanda are situated more than 300 metres AMSL and the burial types are same. From all the vandalized burials, grave goods like fine quality of Black-and-Red ware, All Black ware, Red Slipped and Red ware potsherds were recovered, and some of these potsherds have graffiti marks on them. The associated finds with these burials in the form of potsherds indicate that these burials could be placed in a time frame from 1100 BCE to 500 BCE. As this article is based on initial systematic exploration works, more intensive exploration and excavation work would throw much more valuable information on the Megaliths from this region.

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