

MEGALITHISM IN KERALA-EXPLORATIONS IN THE GAYATHRIPUZHA RIVER BASIN

Sujatha. K.S* and Jidhu .M.U*

ABSTRACT

Gayathripuzha, one of the important tributaries of Bharathapuzha, originating from Nelliampathy hills, has not received much importance in the archaeology of Kerala. Surveys conducted by the authors with the support of Dept of History, University of Calicut have brought several megalithic burials into light. A brief outline of these discoveries is presented in this paper.

Keywords: Megaliths, Western Ghats, Cists, Dolmens, Kerala

Introduction

Megalithism is a burial tradition of the ancient time in the whole of South India as well as many parts of the world. Interestingly, the archaeological remains for the megalithic practices are available in various river valleys of South India. Here, we discuss the megaliths of the Gayathripuzha river valley, which is a sub-basin within the Bharathapuzha river basin of Kerala.

River Basin of Bharathapuzha

The river Bharathapuzha flows through a region of strategic importance. It starts from the Anamalai in the Western Ghats near Pollachi in Tamilnadu and its geography spreads over the districts of Palakkad, Malappuram, and Thrissur in present day Kerala and the river joins the Arabian Sea near Ponnani. The Kalpathipuzha, Gayathripuzha, Thoothapuzha and Tirurpuzha are the tributaries of the Bharathapuzha. The riparian plain that is formed by the river and the tributaries covers all parts of Palakkad, and partially the districts of Thrissur and Malappuram. The basins of Bharathapuzha and its tributaries are very rich with megalithic monuments. In Thrissur, the basin covers Talappilli taluk as a whole and this taluk was notable for large varieties of monument in Kerala.

Major sites in Bharathapuzha Basin

In this region, cists and dolmens with stone circles are found in plenty. Robert Sewell has listed large varieties of monuments in Thrissur and Palakkad area (Fig. 1). He also reports rock-cut caves of Thiruvilwamala region.¹ Even though, he had reported a large number of monuments in the Palakkad and Thrissur region, now we can find only very less number of sites, as many of the burials have been destroyed. The places such as Machad, Pazhayannur, Eyyal, Porkkalam, Anakkara and Cheramanangad are the notable megalithic sites of this region.

* Research Scholars, University of Calicut, Malappuram, Kerala 673635,
sujathajyothish@gmail.com; jidhumu@gmail.com .

The village-to-village survey conducted by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) in 1969-1970 was an important survey regarding the megalithic monuments of this area.² This survey identified several megalithic sites.

Shinu A. Abraham focused her study on the megaliths of the Palakkad Gap area and located some clusters of megalithic monuments. She describes the sites of Pallateri, Pallassana, Konnampara, Elavancheri, and Pallavur.³

V. Sanalkumar, who conducted a study in the Palakkad area, viewed this area as significant due to the presence of the Palakkad gap. He has explored several megalithic sites of this region. He mentions about the small and large caves and rock shelters of Gayathripuzha river valley as a probable residence of pre-historic settlers.⁴

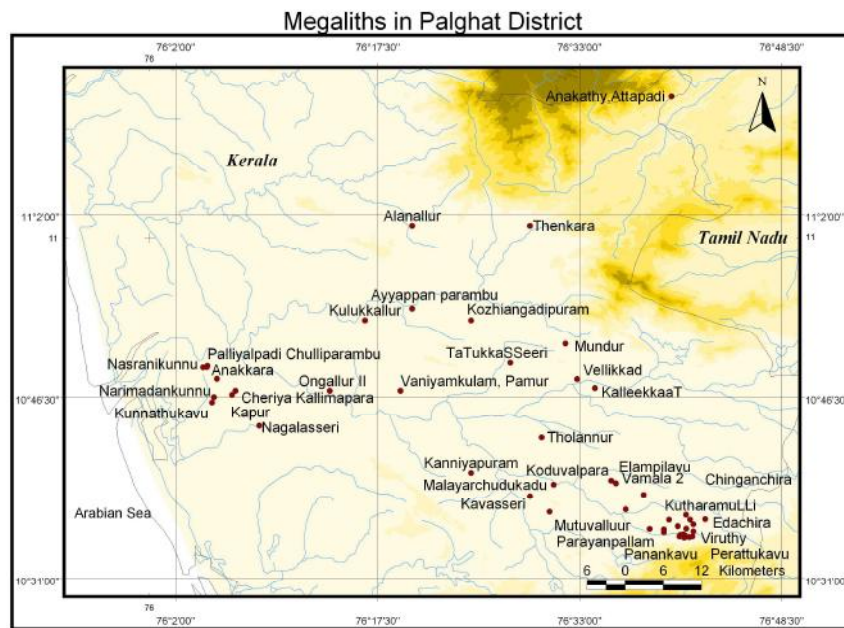


Fig. 1 Megaliths in Palakkad district

The available evidence shows that the region has distribution of several types of megalithic monuments. The surveys are not complete as some of the areas have not been explored. Many sites of this basin have not been explored earlier.

Excavated sites of the Bharathappuzha River Basin

There are a lot of megalithic sites in this area, but only a few of them have been excavated. The sites of Thiruvilwamala, Pazhayannur,⁵ Machad,⁶ Porkkalam, Cheramanangad, Anakkara have been excavated.⁷ The reports available for these sites show some similarities in the grave goods of these sites. Kollengode was excavated by the Kerala State Archaeology Department.

Two nearby sites of this area Nadappakundu in Pazhayannur and Machad have seen scientific excavations by R.N. Mehta and K.M. George in 1978. The iron objects, including a metallic hook from Pazhayannur, were tested and the purity of iron is calculated to be 99.62 %. Apart from these, iron daggers, chisels, hook, nails and one rod

like object were reported from Pazhayannur and Machad.⁸ Similar kind of chisels were reported from Porkkalam in Thrissur district of Kerala, and Takalkat in Maharashtra. The analysis of iron objects from Pazhayannur indicates that the iron technology was more advanced. Leshnik argued that the iron metal proportions of Kerala sites and Adichanallur are not very different; only slight variations are found, and hence, the source could be the same.⁹ But this view is not widely accepted, because in Kerala, iron ore is available from a number of places. At the same time, the sample of artifacts from Machad, Pazhayannur and Eyyal are similar with those from Chingleput.¹⁰ Perhaps the typology of certain artifacts show similarities across South India.

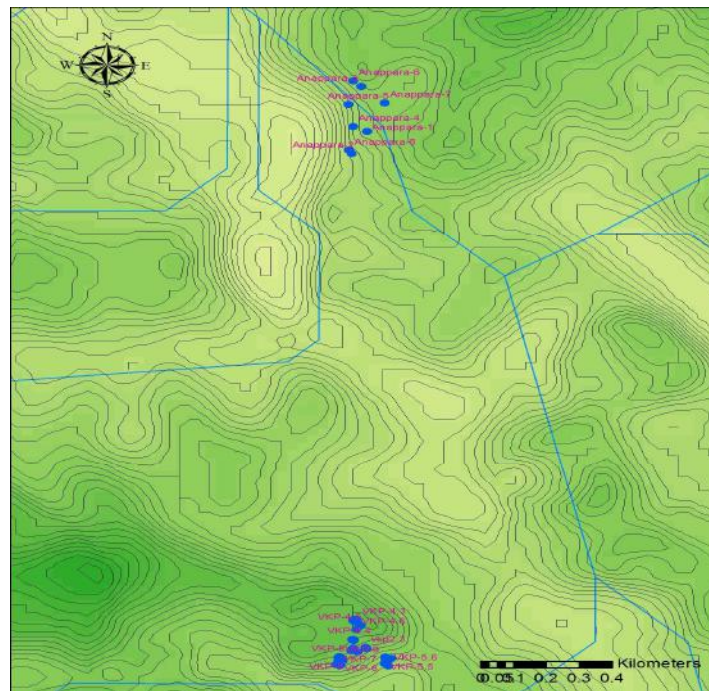


Fig.2 A map showing the distance between Anappara and Vellarkulam sites

Current Survey

Against this backdrop, we explored the two megalithic sites, called Anappara in Thiruvilwamala panchayath and Vellarkulam in Pazhayannur Panchayath in Thrissur district (Fig. 2). The study area lies in the basin of the river Gaythripuzha, one of the tributaries of Bharathapuzha. This river is locally called Cheerakuzhipuzha in Pazhayannur and Thiruvilwamala panchayaths of Kerala. These areas lie very close to Thrissur-Palakkad district border.

Pazhayannur and Tiruvilwamala are two sites that have already been included in the archaeological map of Kerala and the two presently reported sites lie very close to them. It is generally accepted that slab cists are the typical megalith forms of the Palakkad region¹¹ and most of them are located very close to the Nelliampathy and Ayirur hills (near Nenmara), which are part of the Western Ghats.

Anappara

Anappara (10° 42' 50.1' N Latitude and 76° 25' 05.1" E Longitude) is in Kaniyarkode village near Thiruvilwamala. Here we identified 12 cist burials with stone circles that have not been reported before. Anappara lies 5 km to the west of Thiruvilwamala. The site is surrounded by paddy fields and the Gayathripuzha river, and now more lands in this area have been converted into rubber plantations. Here the soil is predominantly lateritic in nature, but layers of red soil are occasionally met with. They use huge granite and laterite blocks for making stone circles, at the same time only granite slabs were used for the orthostats of the cists. A granite exposure was found in the nearby areas.

Description of the Monuments

The megaliths at this site have been heavily damaged. Many disturbed cists and circles are visible here, probably, due to large scale conversion of lands into rubber plantations. The cist or the rectangular chamber within the lateritic or granitic circle is the most common type of megalith found here. The stone circles were mostly made of undressed laterite and granite blocks of different shapes and size. The cists were made of dressed granitic rock. Twelve megalithic slab cists were explored here. Most of the monuments are found with one cist inside a stone circle. But interestingly, we find some double cists (Fig. 3) or two chambered cists made out of granitic rocks, within granitic stone circles instead of laterite. The slabs are not projecting outside (above surface) very much. The gap between the two chambers on the eastern side is 85 cm, and on the west, 91 cm.

One more double-chambered cist is found at this site, but it is highly disturbed and smaller in size. Some broken pieces of pottery and iron slag have been found (Fig. 4), nearby the cist. The presence of iron slag on the surface led us to the assumption of a possibility of the existence of iron industry. BRW pottery was also found here.



Fig. 3 A View of double chambered Cist from Anappara.

Finally, granite exposures with some quarry marks are located nearby these sites. They might have been the result of cutting of granite slabs for the orthostats of the cists. The site lies very close to the river Gayathripuzha. During the explorations, we could locate a lateritic stone quarry at a distance of around 5 to 7 km from the site.¹²



Fig.4 A Large block of Iron slag from Anappara

Vellarkulam

Vellarkulam (10° 41' 32.3"N latitude and 76° 24' 23.9" E longitude) is about 5 km north of Pazhayannur in Pazhayannur-Thrissur road. The megalithic site is on top of a hill. The site is surrounded on all sides by hillocks. Now the site is under forest department and they have planted *Accacia* and Cashew nuts. It was heavily forested before. This site is located within a distance of around 8 km from Anappara. The site at Vellarkulam is locally known as *punam*.

The monument type found at this site is dolmen or dolmenoid cists with capstone (Fig. 5). The area where the dolmens are found is locally known as *Palaakkundu* or *Nannangadikundu*. On the slope of this hilly region there is a small hill stream or *thodu* which is dry in the summer season.

These dolmens are found within a granitic circle on the top of a granite exposure. The dolmens are largely scattered in this area, but as clusters. Most of the dolmens are found within a packed enclosure. For example, the dolmens numbered from 7 to 13 are found as one cluster. Quarry marks are also found on the surface of this granitic exposure. The undressed stones are in a clear circular shape and it was filled with black soil. The burial structure was also filled with small stone pebbles. Natural soil is not available on the top of the hill, so the soil can be assumed to have been brought from somewhere else. This packing was most probably given to protect the burial from rain water erosion.

Some monuments are found disturbed here, many slabs have lost their capstones. Portholes are seen on the western side of some dolmens, but they are partially

damaged. On the surface part of one dolmen, some pieces of BRW pottery are found. Along with this found some rusted pieces of iron (Fig. 6) which might have been part of a knife.¹³ Within the forest monuments are scattered here and there for a long distance. Many monuments are found preserved without human interventions, may be due to the inaccessibility of the forests. The popular beliefs regarding the site also help in the preservation of the monuments.¹⁴

Another cluster of dolmen was found very near to the place called, Kallamkulam. It is in the lowland and laterite stones have been used for stone circles and granites for orthostats like the monuments at Anappara. These are the general picture of our explored sites. The study is a preliminary attempt. Therefore, further exploration and excavations are required in these areas to understand and date these burials.



Fig.5 A Dolmen from Vellarkulum

The geography of Vellarkulam site and the excavated sites of Pazhayannur (Nadappakundu) and typology of monument are similar. These two sites are part of the reserve forest, and the availability of granite rock was, probably, the main reason for the use of granite slab for the cists. These types of chambers and dolmens were largely reported from Tamil Nadu region. The burial artifacts like etched carnelian beads, lids, dishes, bowls, iron tools and weapons are available from Pazhayannur, Machad, Porkalam and Eyyal. They have also been found in Salem, Chingleput and Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu and also in some parts of Karnataka.¹⁵ In order to confirm the nature of the burials and the grave goods at Vellarkulam and Anappara, excavations need to be conducted.

The presence of large number of monuments in Thrissur and Palakkad is accepted as significant, because these districts are on the western entrance of the

Palakkad gap connecting with Tamil Nadu and beyond. The explored sites of Pazhayannur and Thiruvilwamala are almost 25 km distance from Chiramanangad, the centre of *Kudakkals* and *Toppikkals* (megalithic burials). But the types of monuments such as *Kudakkals* and *Toppikkals* are not generally found from Palakkad district, except some places like Ongallur and Anakara.



Fig. 6 Iron remains from Vellarkulam

We do not know why these burial types are not found in Palakkad district. It may be due to the fact that the practitioners of cist burial culture are not from same background as the makers of *kudakkal* and *toppikkal*. From this, it is clear that the megalithic burials of Palakkad show more similarities with the burial types of Tamil Nadu, especially those from Coimbatore and Erode region (which formed part of the ancient Chera country). The dolmens found in Vellarkulam share same typological similarities with the burials from the Palani hills.

Conclusions

The burial types of Palakkad are very similar to those found in Coimbatore and Erode districts of Tamil Nadu. It is possible that migration of the megalithic people or the spread of ideas might have led to this similarity in typology. The wide distribution of megalithic monuments stresses the need for further explorations and excavations in the area.

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Endnotes

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² The Unpublished report of Village to Village Survey conducted by ASI, 1969-1970, preserved at ASI Thrissur Circle, Form D.

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- ¹¹ Subbayya, K.K. 1978. *Archaeology of Coorg with special reference to Megaliths*, Mysore:Geetha Book House publishers:7.
- ¹² Field work conducted on 26/11/2011.
- ¹³ Field work conducted on 27/11/2011.
- ¹⁴ Local people tell a story about the burials. When there was a time without the existence of 'kālan' (Yama or god of death). People grew in age and became smaller and smaller till they reached the size of a small monkey or frog. Then they were sealed in pots by the younger man.
- ¹⁵ Satyamurthy, T. 1992. *The Iron Age in Kerala- A Report on Mangadu Excavation*. Tiruvananthapuram:Department of Archaeology, Government of Kerala :23.