

Megalithic Burial Practices and Cultural Evolution in the Salem Region

Mr. K. Karneshwaran¹, Dr. J. R. Sivaramakrishnan²

¹Ph. D, Research Scholar Department of History Annamalai University Chidambaram-6008002

²Research supervisor Assistant Professor Department of History Kunthavai Naacchiyar Govt. Arts College for Women (Autonomous) Thanjavur.

Abstract:

The Iron Age in Tamil Nadu represents a critical phase of cultural and technological advancement, marked by the transition from a Neolithic subsistence economy to a more complex society rooted in agricultural surplus and urbanization. This period, corresponding to the rise of megalithic culture, witnessed the construction of monumental burial structures and the refinement of iron tools, significantly impacting settlement patterns and social organization. The Salem region, rich in megalithic sites such as dolmens, cairn circles, cist burials, and urns, provides invaluable insights into the burial and funerary practices of the time. Literary evidence, particularly from Sangam literature, corroborates archaeological findings, revealing a profound belief in the afterlife and the social significance of hero stones. This study synthesizes archaeological and literary data to examine the megalithic remains in Salem, emphasizing their role in shaping the cultural and historical landscape of Iron Age Tamil Nadu.

Keywords: Iron Age, Dolmens, Cairn Circles, Cist Burials, Urns, Hero Stones, Sangam literature.

Introduction:

The Iron Age in Tamil Nadu follows the Neolithic era, during which Black-and-Red pottery became the dominant style. Transitioning from a hunting lifestyle to settled agricultural practices in the Neolithic Age, communities began to utilize iron for creating advanced tools and implements. This innovation resulted in surplus food production, which fueled population growth and led to the expansion of settlements into urban centers. This period corresponds with the Megalithic culture in the region. The term "Megalith" comes from the Greek words "megas," meaning large, and "lithos," meaning stone. Later, those megalithic structures evolved as hero stones (nadukal). Still hero stones worshiped by people of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Andhra. The majority of megalithic monuments are located in South India.¹ Megalithic tombs and monuments were typically built using large stone slabs or blocks, either in their natural form or roughly shaped. In India, the Iron Age, especially in the first millennium BCE, was a time of significant social change leading to the rise of urban societies and states in various areas.²

Megalithic and Iron Age-Early Historic cultural remains are found at various sites in the Salem region, where numerous burial and habitation sites from the Iron Age to Early Historic period have been identified. This article provides a description of these sites' characteristics and examines the settlements associated with the Iron Age-Early Historic culture in the region, exploring their broader significance within the context of Iron Age culture in Tamil Nadu. The study primarily focuses on the megalithic monuments in the area, given the limited number of habitation sites and the excavations.³

Megalithic site in Salem:

The study of megalithic remains in the Salem region began with Robert Bruce Foote, who, although primarily focused on Paleolithic artifacts, is noted for his accurate descriptions of megalithic monuments. He observed that the western and northern parts of the Shervarayan hills were rich in dolmens. In his evaluation of Salem's archaeological significance, Foote concluded that the region had more Iron Age

remains than Neolithic ones (Foote 1916: 61). His exploration centered on the western and northern areas of the hills, where he discovered many dolmens. He also examined three sites—Kilmondampadi, Karadiyur, and Moganad.⁴ In 1875, Justice M.J. Walhouse built on Foote's work by uncovering additional dolmen and cist burial sites in the Shervarayan hills. His reports noted that many of these burials included subsidiary cists surrounding the main burial chambers (Walhouse 1875).⁵ In 1882, the Government of India tasked Robert Sewell with documenting antiquities across Tamil Nadu. His visits to Dharmapuri and Salem led to the discovery and recording of numerous new sites, which he later published (Sewell 1882).⁶

The Tamils, a significant cultural group in India, have made substantial contributions to Indian civilization. Their influence can be traced back to ancient times, coinciding with civilizations like the Indus Valley, Elam, Sumerian, and Egyptian. Scholars like H.R. Hall, P.T. Srinivasa Iyengar, Sir John Marshall, Henry Heras, N. Lahovary, Asko Parpola, and I. Mahadevan have recognized and validated these contributions. Recent excavations at Adichanallur and other sites have further supported this historical connection.⁷

Burial Monuments:

Tamilnadu possesses numerous burial monuments scattered all over the State comprising all the traditional regions kurunchi, mullai, marutham, neithal and paalai regions. These monuments consist of dolmens, cist burials, cairn circles, menhirs etc. In some instances, Urn burials with sarcophagus interment are found. Kurinchi and Mullai regions comprised of hill and forest regions which were favorable for the construction of the burial monuments like cairn circle, dolmens, dolmenoid cist all requiring rocks for the erection of burials. Cairn circle, stone circles, barrow and cairn circle entombing cist are also found in the slopes of mountains and in plain areas (probably by transporting the broken rocks from the nearby hills). Urn burials are identified mainly in the Marutham and Neithal regions which comprises of agricultural land and sea bounded areas. Urns are considered as the oldest forms of burials as the ancient settlements were in river - fed areas which pioneered in the erecting memorials for the dead. The burial grounds are generally called as Kaadu, Purankaadu [cairn packing and cairn circles]. The term Muthukaadu in Sangam works signifies that though the people die and society is destroyed, only the burials will remain as permanent memorial.⁸

Purananuru (3:21, referring to "pathukkai" or cist burial; 228:1 and 10-15; 238:1 and 256:1-7; 221:13; 223:3; 232:3 all referring hero stones); Pathirupathu (44:22-23), Narrinai (271:11-12), Akananuru (109:7-8 and 157:5, both referring to cist burials). The types of burial monuments varied across regions. Cairn circles, dolmens, cist burials, and menhirs were common in hilly and forested areas, while urn burials were prevalent in agricultural and coastal regions. These burial grounds were often referred to as "Kaadu" or "Purankaadu." The Sangam literature highlights the enduring nature of these burial monuments, symbolizing the memory of the deceased.

Types of Megalithic Burials in Salem:

The typology of the megaliths in the Salem region, as established by British explorers in the nineteenth century, remains largely valid today, with only minor variations. Overall, the burial sites in Salem are diverse in nature. The explorers' observations reveal that most megalithic structures can be classified as either cairns or stone circles. The differences between the two types are primarily based on their construction methods, which can be further subdivided as follows.

Dolmen:

Dolmens are primarily found in hilly regions such as the Kalvarayan Hills, Yercaud, Mallachathiram, and the Shervarayan Hills. These structures served as burial chambers or ceremonial spaces. Excavations of some dolmens have revealed artifacts, including human remains and ceramics, suggesting their use in rituals or as monuments for notable individuals. Their construction reflects the ancient society's reverence for death and beliefs in the afterlife.

Cairn Circle:

A prominent type of megalithic grave, cairn circles are found in Salem viz. Singipuram, Thelunganur, Thumbal. They are typically constructed with irregular stones arranged in circular or oval patterns, often with cairn packing in the center. The size and design of the cairn circle depend on its contents, which may include urn burials or cist burials. These structures vary in diameter and serve as significant markers of burial practices.

Cist Burial:

A cist burial consists of a stone box-like grave typically located underground. It is constructed with upright stone slabs (orthostates) on all sides and a capstone on top, sometimes with a floor stone. One of the orthostates may feature an opening that can be trapezoidal, semicircular, or circular. When this opening is positioned near the capstone, it is called a "port hole," and such a structure is referred to as a port-hole cist. A notable example is found in Korappallam, Mangadu, and Thumbal in Salem district.

Burial Urn:

Urn burials were a widespread funerary practice in Tamil Nadu during the megalithic period. Cremated ashes and bones were placed in urns, often accompanied by items such as beads, pottery, iron spears, and other weapons, indicating a belief in the afterlife and the need for provisions. Sites in Salem like Pethanayakan Kallanatham, Palayam, and Thedavur have revealed urn burials, providing valuable insights into the era's cultural practices. Burial urns were sometimes interred alongside stone circles, dolmens, and cairns and are known in Tamil as Muthumakkal Thazhi.

Menhir:

The simplest type of megalithic structure, a menhir, is a single, large stone (monolith) erected vertically on the ground, often near a burial site. These stones can range from small to massive in size and are placed with their base embedded in the ground. A notable example is found in Semmanappatti, Sirapalli, Kullampatti in Salem district.⁹

Sangam Literature:

Poems about the afterlife are common in Sangam literature. Tamils in ancient times had a profound belief in the soul and the afterlife. Not just Tamils believed in an afterlife; many other cultures around the world did as well, including Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Mayan, Inca, Aztec, Chinese, and Minoan. It's the reason they construct large tombs and fill them with so many grave goods.

The idea of life after death was widely accepted in Tamil society. Once the soul has lived in another world, it returns to take on a new form through reincarnation. This idea serves as the justification for naming a newborn after someone who died in a family, with the assumption that the kid is the deceased person's incarnation. For example, in Tamil Nadu, a grandfather's name is given to a grandson. This custom is still followed in many places in India.

"Even if this life ends and next life comes

You will be my husband,

And I will be the one

who complies with your heart!" (Kuru. 49.).

"with fame in this world, and obtain the
next world without any blemish!" (Agam. 66.).

Ay is not like a businessman with a fair
prices who think that the good done in
this birth will help the next one. (Puram. 134).

These Sangam literatures talks about the afterlife. They believed after the death of someone they go to another world and he or she born in this world again.

Among the references to the continuance during the post - Sangam centuries of the funerary and burial practices of the Sangam period are the following:

Manimekalai (5th century A.D), the famous Buddhist epic refers in chapter 6 (66-67) to the various kinds of burials namely cremation (cuṭuvor), post excarnation burial (iṭuvor), burying the deceased in a pit (toṭukulip paṭuvor), rock chamber or cist burial (talvayiṇ aṭaiṭṭor), urn burial encapped with lid (taliyir kavippor). Even in the Sangam age (when kingship and a well ordained society had emerged) the above modes of burials survived. [This practice might even have influenced the construction of temples, employing the stones available locally or nearby regions.]

Thevaram (7731), of the 7th century refers to a burial ground as Muthukadu, which occurs in Purananuru (356:4) and signifies that though the people die and society is destroyed only the burials will remain as permanent memorial.¹⁰

The practices of burial and funerary rites, prevalent during the Sangam period, persisted well into the post-Sangam era. Several literary sources attest to this continuity.

Hero Stones in Sangam Literatures:

Hero stones, or "Nadukal" in Tamil Nadu, are very important both historically and culturally. These stones may be discovered in many parts of the state; some of them go all the way back to the Sangam era, and others are from the medieval era. Hero stones are strongly linked to historic Tamil battles, loyalty, and community defense in Tamil Nadu. They also symbolize the Marti Carrying.

Tholkappiyam, the oldest Tamil grammar (dated to circa 300 B.C or earlier) has as one of its three parts, Porulathikaram dealing with Akapporul, on the love life of the ancient Tamils; and Purapporul on ancient Tamil polity and society. The Porul portion 60:19-20 describes the stages in the erection of burial monuments for heroes, chiefs and kings.¹¹

Pictures:



Dolmen 1



Dolmen 2



Cairn Circle 1



Cist Burial 1

Conclusion:

The Salem region's megalithic sites stand as a testament to the ingenuity and cultural depth of Iron Age Tamil society. Burial practices such as dolmens, cairn circles, and urn burials reflect both regional variations and shared beliefs in the afterlife, as illuminated by Sangam literature. These monuments symbolize reverence for the deceased, societal values, and evolving spiritual ideologies. The integration of archaeological evidence with literary sources enriches our understanding of this era, revealing a society that balanced technological innovation with deep-rooted cultural traditions. The enduring legacy of megalithic culture, exemplified by hero stones and elaborate funerary rituals, highlights its significant role in Tamil Nadu's historical narrative, providing a bridge between past civilizations and the present-day cultural ethos. The deep-rooted Tamil cultural and spiritual heritage is evident in the reverence for warriors and the transformation of hero stones into objects of worship. These stones serve as tangible reminders of bravery and sacrifice, connecting communities to their history and reinforcing values like courage and protection. As religious practices evolved, the commemoration of fallen heroes became an integral part of the regional cultural system.

Endnotes:

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