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UNEARTHING THE MEGALITHIC HERITAGE OF SOUTH INDIA: A FOCUS ON THE ROCK-CUT CAVES OF NORTH MALABAR

Sujamol Joseph *

INTRODUCTION:

Kerala embraced the realm of academic archaeology slightly late. Despite the exception of a few mentions of the region's unique megalithic sites, the area is seldom mentioned in India's archaeological literature. Kerala is well-known for its abundance of megaliths, which are prehistoric monuments. As early as 1819, Babington was the first person to document Kerala's megalithic structures. Situated between the Arabian Sea and the Western Ghats, the Kerala region is a southwestern band of India that varies in width from 30 km in the north and south to roughly 130 km in the center. Kerala can be categorized physio graphically into three distinct natural divisions: lowland, midland, and highland.

According to archaeology, the most widespread Iron Age cultural characteristics were dispersed throughout Kerala's whole region. The Iron Age, also known as the Megalithic Age, is distinguished by the custom of erecting large stone monuments to the deceased. Megaliths were not the only burials of the era, though. In a broader sense of cultural affiliation, the term "megalithic" is misleading. The dead were interred in megalithic graves. Burials of the deceased have been observed in many cultures and across time periods. Megalithic monuments were seen during the Iron Age and the Early Historic era that followed. Additionally, there is a very thin line separating these two cultural periods. The scholars and excavators who made an attempt to document these monuments had done a commendable job by faithfully recovering them. The monuments and burials called 'Megaliths' are the predominant archaeological remains of the Iron Age that represents a formative phase in the history of Peninsular India in general and Kerala in particular.

Since the Iron Age lasted for more than a thousand and a half years, the artifacts found in graves would suggest a diverse material environment. Around the middle of the first millennium B.C., the Iron Age culture most likely made its way to Kerala, where it remained prominent for roughly ten centuries, until the middle of the first millennium A.D. The honour of developing some of its unique varieties is attributed to Kerala. Rock-cut caves, kudaikals, or hood-stones, and topikkals, or umbrella-stones, are the distinctive megalithic structures of this region that are unique to this region. In addition, this area is home to several dolmens,

* Assistant Professor, Department of History, Nirmalagiri College, Kannur, Kerala.

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porthole cists, menhirs, and urns.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Babington wrote a famous paper titled Description of the Pandoo coolies in Malabar, which was published in 1823. The comprehensive antiquity drawings in this article are regarded as the earliest examples of several Indian antiquities (Babington,1823). Robert Sewell made the next groundbreaking attempt. It was reported that he sent out 7,500 notices to people throughout the Presidency in order to gather information on various cultural items. Later in 1882, he published the information gathered as the List of Antiquarian Remains in the Presidency of Madras. He provided a list of around 300 locations on the divisions of Malabar, Cochin, and Travancore, many of which were megalithic burial sites (Sewell,1882).

In 1887, William Logan, who served as the Malabar region's Collector of Magistrate, published the Malabar Manual. Logan made a significant contribution by not only describing the sites that were investigated and excavated, but also by providing an insightful analysis of them. Logan also made an effort to comprehend the characteristics of the rock-cut caverns. They were, as he correctly noted, the "death houses" of a "family who burned their dead"(Logan, 1887). A. Aiyappan's 1933 article on the rock-cut cave tombs at Feroke, South Malabar, is another significant piece. He talks about the grave items and the excavations of two rock-cut tombs in Feroke, South Malabar. Aiyappan presents arguments in favor of the caverns' megalithic nature. In his 1936 writings titled The Rock Cut Caves of Malabar, M.D. Raghavan made an effort to investigate the Iron Age culture of the Malabar region. He researched the rock-cut caverns of Panunda and Punnol and extensively detailed the construction process. He believed that the central pillar supported the structure's stability. Additionally, he concurs with Logan that these caves were built by a pre-intrusive Vedic Brahmanical culture (Raghavan,1936).

An essay on South Indian megalithic types, V.D. Krishnaswamimade an effort to categorize the monuments according to their morphology and inherent characteristics. Additionally, his findings showed how the megaliths in the north and south differed from one another (Krishnaswami ,1949). Y.D. Sharmaconducted a thorough investigation of the Cochin rock cut caves. He mostly discussed the general physical characteristics and building details of these monuments (Sharma (1956). B.K. Gururaja Rao's book Megalithic Culture in South India is the next significant study. He has given a brilliant overview of South India's megalithic culture. He covers the regional surveys of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Mysore, and Andra Pradesh in this work. He also talked about chronology, grave items, and megalithic kinds (Rao, 1972). South Indian Megalithic Burials' Pandukal Complexwritten by Leshnikis another important study. He offers a thorough explanation of South Indian

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megalithic tombs in this text, complete with tables, charts, maps, and other useful visuals (Leshnik, 1974). It was acknowledged that these burials represented a significant chapter in the history of the South Indian peoples.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this article includes extensive field visits to survey and document rock-cut caves and megalithic monuments in Kerala's northern regions, particularly Kannur and Kasargod. The study involved direct observation, photographic documentation, and measurements of the sites. Additionally, it relied on a review of relevant literature, including historical accounts and archaeological reports, to contextualize findings. Comparative analysis of similar monuments across South India was also conducted to identify unique regional features and patterns.

IRON AGE IN KERALA

From one end of the territory to the other, the Iron Age remnants are the most common in Kerala as well. Iron Age archeological artifacts, such as grave markers and funeral items, can be found everywhere. According to the relative chronology and extensive distribution of early Iron Age burial monuments, the highlands and red soil regions of Kerala must have been inhabited by humans by this time, say by the middle of the first millennium BC (Rajan & Varier, 1999). However, because archaeologists have not yet found any Iron Age dwelling sites in the area, the human nature situation of the time is quite limited.

The burial remnants from the Iron Age, which lasted for more than a thousand and a half years, would suggest that the material environment was diverse. The most common archaeological relics from the Iron Age, which marks a pivotal period in the history of Peninsular India in general and Kerala in particular, are the monuments and burials known as "Megaliths." The Iron Age, also known as the Megalithic Age, is distinguished by the custom of erecting large stone monuments to the deceased. Many of them lack lithic associations, or if they do, the lithic remnants are too small to qualify as megaliths. Therefore, it is generally not thought that the word "Megaliths" is acceptable to refer to all of the Iron Age monuments and tombs. The name "megaliths" is used here because it has been widely recognized, even if many of the burial kinds are not actually megaliths, that is, those composed of enormous stones.

DISTRIBUTION PATTERN OF MEGALITHIC MONUMENTS TYPES IN KERALA

The distinction of including some of its own types is attributed to Kerala. Each of the three distinct parallel strips that make up Kerala's topographical and physiographic features has unique monuments, the type of which is mostly dictated by the materials that are available. The area is home to a variety of burial sites, including urns, pits, cists, and dolmens identified by stone or crain rings, menhirs, alignments, and rock-cut caves. Burials

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and monuments with an urn or pit and a single-chambered dolmen or cist are typical among Kerala Megaliths. A few sites also have several pits, urns, and dolmens within a stone circle or enclosure, as well as cists and dolmens with two or more chambers.

Six categories of megalithic monuments in South India were categorized by V.D. Krishnaswami. which includes the Rock Cut Cave, Umbrella Stone, Hood Stone, Menhirs, Port Hole Cist, and Multiple Dolmens. According to an Encyclopedia of Indian Archaeology, there are various kinds of Megalithic monuments. These include menhir, alignment, urn burials, porthole cists, transepted cists, umbrella stones, hood stones, multiple hood stones, dolmen, multiple dolmen, and rock-cut caves. A. Sundara notes that megalithic tombs come in a variety of forms. Based on their fundamental stone architectural construction, they can be broadly divided into two categories. 1. Manufactured or excavated megalithic burial chambers, such as topikkals, dolmens, topikkals, and rock chambers; these are often orthostatic passage/porthole chambers.2. Unchambered burial pits, menhirs, kudaikkals, sarcophagus urns, single or multiple with or without lithic appendages (Sundara, 2001).

ROCK CUT CAVES AND ITS FEATURES

There are rock-cut caves across Kerala, but they are more prevalent in the northern part of the state. The megalithic grave items have been discovered in these particular kinds of graves. The laterite stone of the districts of Thrissur, Malappuram, Kozhikode, Kannur, and Kasargod is where they are typically found. Although there are many different kinds of rock cut caves, they can be broadly divided into two categories: single chambered and multi-chambered.

In order to create a cave, a stepped rectangular pit is first scooped out of the laterite outcrop. The required solid mass is then hollowed out through a narrow aperture cut, usually on the pit's eastern side. The aperture could be rectangular or square. The final recess frames the entrance proper through which the subsequent bulk hurled out. In a rectangular shape, it may take the form of recesses cut in a graded succession, with the inner recess being smaller than the outer. The cave's floor, which might be rectangular, semicircular, or nearly round, is often 30 to 60 cm below the outside pit's base. Megalithic and funerary caves are the only types found in Kerala. An open well that is generally square or rectangular in shape, cut vertically out of the rock, and equipped with a set of steps for descending to the floor makes up this burial cave.

Although there are many different kinds of rock cut caves, they can be broadly divided into two categories: single chambered (figure:1) and multi-chambered(figure:2). Typically, a cave's sides have rock-cut benches that range in height from two to six feet. However, some features are varied. There is only one bench in some of the caves, two or three in

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others, and none at all in others. While some caves feature a central pillar, others have a circular aperture in the roof in its stead. Usually domed, the ceiling converges towards the top in the middle, either onto the top opening or the pillar.

Figure:1 Single chamber at Kuttikol, Kasargod

Figure: 2 Multi-chamber at Panuda, Kannur

Based on a thorough examination of the numerous unique and similar features of Kerala's rock cut caves, particularly those around Cochin, Y.D. Sharma ranked the caves in the following order: a) centrally pillared caves b) centrally pillarless caves c) top-opening caves d) multi-chambered caves. The following categories were added to the above:

e) Caves near Chovvanur and on the outskirts of Calicut that lack the top aperture and central pillar. f) Caves that have a top opening in the roof and a central pillar, like the one on the Malaparamba, Chevayur road, five miles from Calicut.

K.J. John has identified two additional types of rock cut caves in addition to these. They are:

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1) A rock-cut cave tomb that resembles a trapezium and has a typical entrance. The rectangular top entrance extends the entire length of the pit. This kind of tomb can be seen in the Malapuram district at Pallikkal.

2) A rectangular room with two sections, separated by a central wall and furnished with individual rock benches. This kind of tomb can be seen in the Calicut district at Chruppa.. We can observe a variety of cave kinds in Kerala's northern region. Both similarities and differences can be seen based on exterior and interior characteristics. More intricate examples of rock-cut caves can be seen at locations such as Eyyal and Kattakambal. A single open well serves as the entrance to multiple chambers that have been scooped out in these locations; there are two chambers at Eyyal and four chambers at Kattakambak. Panunda in the north Malabar region has a twin chamber with a top opening and no pillars.

The funeral monuments built by the Iron Age people to honour the deceased are among their most significant architectural accomplishments. In the north Malabar region, where rock cut caves are more common than umbrella stones, hat stones, and urn burials, notable iron age monuments were discovered.

Granite regions were the original home of the creators of megalithic monuments. After arriving in a lateritic zone, they modified their burial tomb to fit the new surroundings and made the most of the materials available there (Sharma 1956). For example, they kept using granite for the top opening of the lateritic caves or for the side slabs or cap stone of the cist. The native rock of the new area, laterite, was incredibly pliable and could be carved into any shape. They discovered via experience that it was simple to hollow out a rock's interior into a cave, improving the safety of the deceased's bones.

The rock cut caves are widely distributed across the laterite strata, primarily in the Malabar and Cochin districts. Shaft burials, rock cut tombs, and rock cut chambers are other names for these. It is evident from analyzing these caves that there are some variations in terms of interior characteristics and size.

The cave builders found it easier to cut a circular or oblong floor because of the domed ceiling. It should be noted that caves with a horizontal ceiling typically have a rectangular floor as well. Whether taken from the umbrella's staff or the hut's center pole, the central pillar was seen to be crucial to the structure's longevity. Later, laterite was sometimes thrown away when its flexibility was fully recognized. Only a few of the multi-chambered caves have it. It is evident throughout the Malabar and Cochin.

A natural extension of the basic solitary cave is the multi-chambered cave. It's possible that these caves were meant to serve as family burials, much like double dolmens, however this interpretation cannot be strongly recommended just yet.

The degree of architectural expertise attained by the Iron Age peoples is demonstrated

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by the megalithic monuments. Malabar's rock-cut caves looked like homes. The degree of modern home building is represented by the pillar, entrances, bench-like berths, etc. carved out of the laterite rock. The enormous funeral monuments assume the expertise and skill of their builders in a number of areas, including the identification, cutting, shaping, and transportation of the raw materials used in their construction. To move the massive granite slabs from their quarry to the graveyards, they must have employed specific tools like iron rods and wooden rolls. Megalith construction must have required the development of a wide range of tools, some of which have been found in the grave goods.

Furthermore, their ability to quarry, hoist, transport, and erect the massive stone slabs and buildings is unquestionably evidence of their technological and petrological expertise. Their flawless plan, which included ground preparation, chiseling and smoothing the surface, treating the slab, laying the floor slab, erecting the orthostats, and capping the top, demonstrated their engineering prowess. This suggests that they possessed a measuring device of some kind. In addition to demonstrating their proficiency in ceramics, the grave goods also demonstrate a good understanding of their forms, varieties, embellishments, and paints.

Key characteristics of the rock cut caves have already been covered elsewhere. There may be two or three seats in the Cochin caves, each having three legs carved out of the rock. The hollowed-out area between the legs forms the benches' bases. The adorned seats are not seen from the northern side of Malabar. However, there is a soil pit-like bench.

Another significant aspect is that, whereas most caves have three or four recesses, the Cochin caves only have one. The caves in Malabar face north or northeast, whereas those in Cochin face east or east-southeast.

The lack of systematic excavation was one of the most significant constraints our endeavor faced. The North Malabar region is the exclusive study area. Numerous rock cut caves have been discovered in the northern region, particularly in the Kannur and Kasargod regions. It was unable to be adequately preserved, though. The monuments have been destroyed as a result of human activity near the site, recent construction projects, a dense population, willful destruction of monuments due to ignorance, etc.

CONCLUSION

The study of Kerala's megalithic monuments, especially the rock-cut caves, highlights the area's distinctive contributions to South India's Iron Age culture and rich archeological legacy. These burial sites, which are mostly found in North Malabar, demonstrate the Iron Age people's inventiveness and well-developed engineering abilities. A profound respect for the deceased and a comprehensive understanding of construction methods are evident in

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the architectural characteristics, which include multi-chambered patterns, central pillars, domed ceilings, and rock benches. These caves represented the social and cultural customs of the era in addition to being places of burial. The findings unearthed at these locations provides invaluable insight into Iron Age technology, material culture, and funeral customs. They also emphasize the necessity of conserving these monuments as an essential part of Kerala's cultural and historical identity.

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