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Megaliths of the Karamala Valley: Extant Burials and the Impact of Human intervention *

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Abstract

The culture of erecting megaliths is not unique to Kerala or other parts of India – it is universal practice. The basic structure of the megaliths, therefore, have a universality. Megaliths represent a culture that goes back to as early as 1000 B.C in south India. They were erected by people who had practised agriculture and animal husbandry. The paper discusses the state of megalithic sites in and around the Karamala valley in Tharoor Panchayat in the Alathur Taluk of Palakkad district, Kerala. The focus of the narration is on the extant burials and the impact of human intervention on their survival. It also describes the findings of the salvage excavation conducted under the leadership of the author and his six students and archaeologists in the state archaeology department – B MohanaChandran and K Krishnaraj– from January 9 to 15, 2015.

Keywords: Karamala, Tharoor, Stone circles, Cist burials, Menhirs.

Introduction

Megalithic communities of the southern peninsula do not seem to have lived beyond an average age of 40 years (Subbarayalu, 2014: 19). Their burial monuments are the most widely found archaeological evidences for the early history of Kerala. They were supposed to be a direct continuation from the Neolithic culture (Wheeler, 1947: 202). However, we do not know much about the Neolithic antecedents of the megalithic builders of the State, though there are evidences in the form of Neolithic tools. The megalith builders were once widely dis-

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tributed all over the Palakkad district of Kerala. Little remains of their habitational structures though they might have lived in groups. These monuments are the only major evidences for the reconstruction of belief systems as well as the way the earliest iron using agriculturists had lived in the regions including Kerala. The study of megalithic burials continues to be relevant for the fact that they represent iron phase in the south. Unlike in the north, there is no megalithic phase without the use of iron.

It is over two centuries since the first studies on the Indian megaliths were published. However, we have not been able to examine a large portion of the megalithic burials and the associated relics. It is exploration that has enabled us to make some conclusions on the megalithic culture. Exploration in the Karamala region was conducted in 2013-14 period. Surface finds and observations during the salvaging of artefacts persuade the author to argue that the megalith builders had excelled in the techniques of metallurgy, pottery, stone cutting, masonry and making of weapons and implements. The tops of Karamala in the Alathur taluk of Palakkad district alone account for about 30 burials. Most of the house compounds in the slopes of the Karamala contain burials.Among the types of megaliths found during exploration in the Tharoor region include dolmens, slab-cists, urn burials, stone circles and menhirs. The burial chambers made of gneissic granite are the most common type in the eastern parts of Palakakd, including Tharoor. Excavation to salvage the artefacts likely to have been destroyed was done by the State archaeology department in association with the author and his students during January 9-15, 2015.

People in the south had used terms such as Mudumakkalttali, Pandavakkulietc to refer to the megaliths. (Srinivasan, 1946: 9-16). In Kerala, the megaliths were also known as Nannangadi, Muniyaraetc. It was held that these megaliths were of the period dating back to 3rd century B C to 1st century A.D. (Rajan Gurukkal and Varier, 1999: 106). However, archaeologists have given much earlier dates to the burial monuments which according to them belong to Iron Age-Early Historic periods. V Selva Kumar, for example, dates the south Indian megaliths to the period from 1000 BCE to 300 BCE (Selva Kumar, 2010: 90). According to him, the megaliths continued to be erected upto 500 A.D (Selva Kumar 2010: 92). Archaeologists have not been able to clearly establish whether the stimulus for the Iron Age culture came from the north as had been argued by scholars such as R S Sharma. (Sharma 2007: 212). Megaliths, according to T Satyamoorthy,

represent a transition from the Neolithic culture (Satyamoorty, 1992: 7). Although we can agree with Sharma that the early historic kingdoms of the south including the Cheras coincided with the time of Mauryas, there is little credence to the idea that iron using groups made progress as a result of their interaction with the people from the north. The practice of agriculture using iron tools, for instance, could well go back to the period before the 5th century B.C. Carbon 14 dating and TL dating of pottery samples have given earlier dates for the megaliths in other States. Satyamoorthy had got a radio carbon date of 900 B.C for the remains tested after Mangad excavation. One of the recent carbon dates procured for a cremated bone carbonate sample from a rock cut chamber from Kakkodi by the State Archaeology department from Beta Analytic Inc, Miami in June 2015 pushes the megalithic burials back to 2490-2350 BP. Kuttikkol site has given a calibrated radio carbon date of 792 -551 BCE. The Niranamkulam date of 135-330 CE also gives us the idea that megalithic burial monuments continued to be erected in the State as late as the early 4th century A.D (Peter, 2019: 522-30). The cist burials were built by the megalith people using stones cut out of rock near the sites. According to R E M Wheeler, stone slabs for cist tombs were made 'by lighting a fire on the surface of the rock.' Iron wedges were inserted into the cleavages for separating the top layer. Sites, including Karamala valley, have indicated that chisels for putting holes on the rock could have been made.

In Kerala, people had for long been familiar with the myth of interring the aged people into a Nannangadi (urn) with food and water. The megaliths of Kerala have survived to this day thanks largely to the fact that they were associated with such myths. The story that the megaliths were the last abodes of the very older people in the past has been handed down through the generations. Some have even feared that any damage to them would bring in troubles in their life. Asanumma of Vadakkumuri, on the southern slopes of Karamala, who died about seven months ago, had told this author in 2014 that the slab cists in her compound were the abodes of Kuttichathan. She even informed me that the Kuttichathan kicked the head of her mother. Some rituals had also to be performed with the support of her neighbour to ward off the problems caused by Kuttichathan. A few yards away is the compound of Manikandan where a cist burial is still found. Citing the place name Madathilpparambu, Manikandansays that the cist burial in his compound was built by Brahmins who had resided there previously. The construction of a dolmen, known as Vattakkallu (round stone), found at

Kolaroad in Tharoor village 2, is supposed to be the work of natives for threshing paddy. Kunjali, a native of Vadakkumuri told the author that these monuments were erected in the time of prophet Musa. Around 20 years ago, he had dug out a cist upto a depth of 2 m. He could find only pottery and iron objects. A trader himself, he used the `box' for ripening banana for two decades. This also implies that the force of myths has not been really strong to avert the process of destruction of the burials. Ali Muhammed was busy breaking the orthostats into pieces to make the floor for his cattle shed when this author spotted it a possible source of information on Iron Age life. Same was the case of Rayankutty who was about to cover the cist burial close to his house wall. Both these were salvaged (Fig. 1&2). However, excavation has not been effective in checking destruction of the monuments.

Fig 1. Cist at Ambattuparambu in 2014

Fig 2. Cist at Vadakkumuri in 2014

To cite an example, a cist had existed on the banks of a well in front of Sujatha at Madathilpparambu. Her son, while drawing water from the well, had almost fallen into it when the sides collapsed. Sujatha and her family members soon buried the entire thing in order to avoid damage to life (Fig. 3 &4). Jaleel, a native of Koranamkod situated at the bottom of the Karamala on the south said there was a cist in front of his house. It had to be removed during house construction. He could see only `hilt less knives' and `broken pottery' inside it.

Fig 3. Cist slab as well wall, Madathilpparambu

Fig 4: In covered state

Fig. 5 &6: Cists in destroyed state

Adjacent to that house plot is the compound owned by Ibrahim (also known as Thankamani). Work on a new house has just started there. Cist burial slabs are heaped together by its side. They were part of a big cist burial located on the north-eastern corner of the plot. The plots of Ibrahim and Jaleel were part of a compound known as Darbar-thodi which is now a rubber plantation (Fig 5 &6). Several cist burials had existed in it earlier. There is a heavy concentration of cist burials in the locality. Ibrahim at present lives in his ancestral house which is a tiled one. Behind it are found four big sized cist burials, two of which are having cairns on top. It has been the practice among the local people to dig into the cists hoping for some treasures. They never dig deeper into it. Ibrahim, for instance, had dug out the top portion of one of the cists and used the pit thus made for dumping ashes (Fig 8). He had found four separate chambers capped with slabs which he did not bother to take out. The contents of a cist in the compound of Manik-andan had also been dug out about 10 years ago.

Fig 7: Cist slab with chisel marks

Fig 8: Cist used as an ash pit

Nisamudheen's house, for example, was a small tiled house when excavation had been conducted in the adjacent compound owned by Ali Mohammed. There were a huge stone slab with chisel marks and some other cist slabs close to that house. No slab exists now. The stone slab was cut and the surface levelled (Fig. 7)


Fig 9: Cists in destroyed state


Fig 10: urn with cap stone

The house is now on top of it. Only an urn which had remained in front of his house is still found. Some of the contents of the burials have thus been buried forever. With the use of earth movers, the entire burials have been razed into the ground. The cist slabs are broken into pieces in some cases (Fig. 9&10).

Physical features of Karamala valley

Karamala is one of the hills dotting the Palghat gap. It is located to the east of the Tholanur hills. The hills close to Karamala are Valliyamkunnu on the west and Pezhumkode on the north. On the east is Anchangadi and Kudappuzha hills. The hills around Karamala do not fail to produce the evidence of Iron Age-Early Historic burials. Megalithic burial types such as laterite stone circles, cairn circles, cist burials, dolmens, menhirs and urn burials are found in these areas. (Fig. 11 &12). Most of the hills in the Palakkad gap region were Iron Age burial centres. Some of the hills immediately around Karamala with a large concentration of megalithic burials are Muppuzha, Konikkunnu, Kottod, Mazhuthekkampara, Tholanur, Pezhumkode, Nechurmala and Veezhumala,


Fig: 11: Stone circle, Karamala


Fig 12: Stone circle, cists, Karamala

The topography of the region is marked by vast paddy fields between the hills. The fields begin from the end of the hills at the bottom. It is likely that some of the areas close to the hills were parambu lands as is evident from the presence of cist burials and cist slabs on the banks of paddy fields. The raised portions of land at the margins of

low lands must have been converted into paddy fields at a certain point of time. That may go back to centuries ago. A natural and wide stream, originating in the Pezhumkod hills on the north, flows on the western side of the Karamala hill. It proceeds towards the south and finally reaches the river Gayathri at Athippotta. The river, originating from the Anamalai hills, reaches the valley after its course through places such as Kollengode. Kollengode hills are also a source of water for the river. It is the river Gayathri, to which the other rivers – Kalpathippuzha and Yakkarappuzha – merge to form the Bharathappuzha.

The 5-6 m thick red loam deposits on the hill in some parts of the Karamala help vegetation. A few quarries had functioned on the south east of the hill. There, the soil cover has been removed considerably. The hill is sloping towards the west. The water from the hill flows into the stream below on the western side. According to the 71-year-old Balan, the hill has remained like this from his childhood onwards. A few houses are found on the north east and east of the hill. The eastern part of the hill is slightly like a table top. The western, southern and south eastern parts of the hill are decorated with stone circles of varying sizes. The western end of the hill is slightly plain and there a few cairn heaps are also found. Habitation in the area around the hill, especially on the north west, north-east, and the south, had started a few generations ago. Houses were fewer some five to six decades ago. That must have protected the megalithic burials until recently. On both sides of the Karamala-Ambattuparambu road are dotted with houses. The tiled houses on both sides have now been converted into concrete houses. This has resulted in the destruction of many of the burials. However, a considerable number of burials continues to survive. There has been relatively lesser pressure on land in the area. This situation is changing now.

Most of the people in the area are subsisting on casual labour, animal husbandry, cultivation and trade. The hill and the parambu lands on the southern slopes on the Ambattuparambu and Vadakkumuri were assigned to tenants on simple lease. Some of the settlers in the area are descendants of these tenants. About 22 acres of land on the hill on the south west are supposed to be in dispute. The hill also comprises forest lands. The Karamala valley includes many places other than Vadakkumuri and Ambattuparambu. The outlying areas such as Madathilpparambu, Koranamkod, Anchangadi, Kudappuzha and Cherakkod can also be considered as part of the Karamala valley. There also, house compounds and portions of hills are noted for cist burials. The outlying

areas forming paddy fields, streams etc are at a level suitable for retaining rainwater in paddy lands. That implies that the area has been fertile for a longer period. The presence of clusters of megalithic burials on the surrounding hills and their valleys also indicates that the plains below the Kollengode hills –forming the Gayatri river basin—have been among the well irrigated portions in the Palghat gap for the past several centuries.

The high lands and the mid lands in the region were centres of megalithic burials. K R Srinivasan and N R Banerjee, based on their survey and excavation of sites in Chingleput district of Tamil Nadu and other areas, had observed that `rocky high grounds' unfit for cultivation had been centres of megaliths. They even point out that arable lands and the required water sources were readily available for the people of the megalithic phase. According to them, `megaliths sprang up where population could thrive, and populations could thrive only where the climate was clement in the form of abundant rains to make irrigation possible.' (Srinivasan and Banerjee 1953: 109). The Alathur taluk, formerly part of the Palakkad taluk, has been a low rainfall region for the last couple of decades. (1951 Census Hand Book Malabar District: 3). That need not preclude the possibility of the region having given a haven for the early settlers. The megalithic burials indicate human presence on a considerable scale. Megalithic settlements on a larger scale could have existed there, though clear traces of habitation are wanting. The presence of iron slag sites on the south of the Karamala valley along with cist burials persuades us to think that the habitation sites of the people could not have been far away from their burials erected on the tops and slopes of the hill. Given the wider distribution of megaliths in the low lands just above the paddy fields, there is no basis in saying that the people had not settled on the plains. Historians have considered the megaliths as representative of a period when the society had been in the stage called chiefdom. Romila Thapar for instance describes the megaliths `the burials of chiefly families.' (Thapar, 2002: 230).

Fig 13, 14: Cists in good state of preservation

Fig 14: Cists in front of house, Vadakkumuri

Fig 15: Iron Slag, Keedakkunnu

Explored sites in the valley

The important sites in the Karamala valley are Karamala, Madathilpparambu, Ambattuparambu, Vadakkumuri, Keedakkunnu, Koranamkod (Fig 18).

1.Karamala

Karamala (N L10°30'45'/ E L 76°29'17') is home to well over 30 stone circles. The diameter of the circles ranges from 3 m to 6.30 m.In addition to these, a few cairn heaps have also been found. The stone circles are formed by granite boulders around cists. Some of them contain more than one cist.The cists do not have cap stones. The orientation of the cists is not exactly on the east-west orientation. The excavation of sites such as Kadanad has already indicated that the orientation of the cists also varies. A stone circle on the north-western slope of the hill (10°39'57'/ 76°26'50')is having two cist burials. One of them, having a diameter of 5.90 m, is divided into two chambers on the eastern and western sides. The eastern chamber is 90 cm in diameter. The western chamber is 2 m in diameter. The north-south length of the rectangular cist is 1.40 m. At about a distance of 90 cm is the second cist burial having two chambers on the southern and northern sides. The diameter of the cist is 1.55 m and length, 2.12 m. In front of the house of Rajan are found two cists. A cap stone, 3.40 m in length, could also be found. Towards the western side of the hill (N L 10°40'20'/E L 76°28'53') is a circle having a granite menhir on north-south direction, one m each in height and width and 20 cm thick. Pot sherds and terracotta pieces have been found around cairn heaps. Urn shards, fragments of miniature pots and bowls in red and black ware have also been found at the margins of the mounds. On the south east of the hill (N L 10°30'03'/E L 76°31'30') is a stone circle containing a port-holed cist slab. The square port hole is 50 cm in diameter. Total height of the 5-12 cm thick slab is 90 cm from the surface. The exposed portion of the slab upto the porthole is 40 cm. The north-south length of it is 83 cm. The other side slabs of the cist could not be found.

2.Madathipparambu (Karingulangara)

a) The burials in Madathilpparambu site, located at the foot of the Karamala valley on the southern side, are distributed over a few house compounds. The first compound (NL 10°39'54'/ EL 76°29'42'), owned by Manikandan, contains a cist burial the contents of which have already been dug out. Pot sherds could be found around the cist which is rectangular in shape (Fig 16). The north-east side slab of the cist, according to Manikandan, had a port hole.Theport hole bearing slab is not found now. The depth of the cist at present is 82 cm. The western side slab is 1.5 m in length whereas the slabs on the south and north are 1.30 m-1.40 m long. The thickness of the cist slab is 15 cm.

Fig 16: Cist, Madathilpparambu

Fig 17: Laterite stone circle, Madathilpparambu

b) The cist burial in the second compound adjacent to that of Manikandan is also in opened state. It is also rectangular in size with the east-west length of the slabs measuring 1.90 m. The north-south length of the slabs is one meter. All the slabs are intact.

c) Close to the compound of Manikandan is a laterite stone circle site (NL 10°40'12'/ EL 76°29'44'). On the east of the circle are two laterite clinostats, each measuring 2.30 m in width. The circle is found on the plot owned by Theethikkutti. One of the clinostats is a little higher, with a width of 1.30 m. It has a thickness of 50 cm. The diameter of the circle is 3.30 m. The clinostats are 40 cm high from the present surface. The circle has a rubble heap which is 75 cm high from the surface. (Fig 17).

d) Adjacent to this compound is the house site of Kundumpulli Devaki. Just one cist burial side slab could be found in it. The slab, which also formed part of the well in front of the house of Devaki was 1.72 m in height, 15 cm thick and 1.10 m in width. Parts of the slabs on the other side could also be seen. All of them have now been buried.

3. Ambattuparambu

The house compound of Ali Muhammed (N L 10°40'16'/ E L 76°30'12)contains a cist burial.When field work was conducted in

2014, the earth around the eastern slab had been removed upto the port hole. The cist slab measured 76 cm in height and 54 cm upto the port hole. Its thickness was 10 cm thick. The east- west length of the cist chamber was 1.80 m. Its width on the north-south direction was 1.05 m. Small pieces of the side slabs were found on the other sides.Following excavation, the owner of the plot buried the cist.

A cist slab with chisel marks and an urn had existed in the adjacent plot owned by Beevathu (N L 10°40'16'/E L 76°30'12). Only the urn remains now. The place where the cist slab had stood has been levelled for house construction.

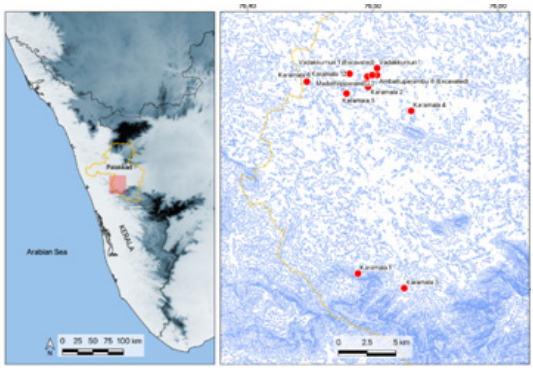

Fig 18: Distribution of sites

4.Vadakkumuri

The cist burials found in Asanumma's compound are in a disoriented state (N L 10°40'16'/E L 76°30'12). Two cists could be found in it (Fig. 20). Only one side slab of a cist remains for the first one. In the case of the second cist, the side slabs on the north, south and east are found. The northern side slab is one meter long, while the slab on the south is 2.04 m long and 22 cm thick. Only a 50 cm long piece remains of the eastern side. A middle slab portion could also be found. It is 85 cm long and 12 cm thick. Another 1.50 m long, 10 cm thick slab on the east of a cist could also be found.

Two cists were noticed in the compound of Velayudhan. Two more cists could be found in the compound of Vasu. Only two slabs of a cist could be noticed in the comound of Aziz. The northern side slab was 20 cm thick. The north-south diameter of the cist was 1.40 m. The northern slab was 22 cm in height. Only two side slabs (western and southern) were found in the compound of Rayankutti. (N L 10°40'16'/ E L 76°30'12). The western slab was 90 cm long while the southern one 1.50 m long. The cist has now been buried (Fig 19).


Fig 19: Cist, Vadakkumuri


Fig 20: Cist, Vadakkumuri

5. Keedakkunnu

Keedakkunnu (N L 10°40'16'/E L 76°29'58) is to the south east of the compound of Ali Muhammed. It is noted for the presence of a 20 cm thick, 82 cm high and 2 m long cist slab and heavy deposits of iron slabs.

6.Koranamkod

Koranamkod on the south of Karamala is a very important megalithic site. A cist burial was found in front of the house of Asan Muhammed. It was located on the path way leading to his house. There were two cist burials in the compound of Muhammad Kani. There was also a cist burial in Pokker's house compound. Leelavati's plot had contained three cists. Only three slabs of the first cist had existed. The northern side slab was 2 m in length. The slab on the western side was 1.30 m long. It was 8 cm thick. The northern side slab was 15 cm thick. Only two side slabs of the second cist burial were found. The slab on the north was 2 m long where the one on the west was 1.30 m long. The third cist burial too had two slabs. On the west was a 1.50 m long slab. A 1.50 m long slab could be found on the east as well. Only a cist slab could be found in the vegetable garden of Dharman (Fig 21). There were seven cist burials in the plot of Kabeer. Five were destroyed when it was converted into a rubber plantation. Only two cist burials remained. One of the surviving cists had a 20 cm thick, 1.20 m x 1.60 m long cap stone. The other cist burial had two side slabs having a length of 1.40 m on the north-south and east-west directions. The slabs were 15-20 cm thick. The destroyed and removed slabs of the other cists could be found in the plot. Of these, one was a cap stone.


Fig 21: Cist, Koranamkod

There are four cist burials in the compound of Ibrahim. Three of these are intact. Though the largest of the four cists had been dug out a few years ago, not much was exposed. Two slabs of this cist remain. The cist burial was erected with a clear east orientation. The chamber has a diameter of 1.55 m on the east west. Both the eastern and western side slabs are 2.25 m long. The second cist burial had two side slabs in an exposed state. They are in north-east and south west orientation. The north-east side slab has a length of 1,86 m and is just 7 cm thick. The south-west side slab is 1.55 m long but is 22 cm thick. The north-south diameter of the cist is 1.25 m. There are three side slabs for the fourth cist burial. It is oriented north-west and south-east. The north-west side slab is 16 cm thick and 1.15 m long while the one on the south-east side is 1.94 m long and 14 cm thick. The diameter of the cist on the north-east direction is 1.50 m. The slab on this side is 1.5 m long and 9 cm thick. The cairns on top of the three cists have not been removed completely. The cists seem to have been remaining undisturbed. No cap stone could be found.

Megalithic and iron slag sites around Karamala and Tharoor region

In the low lands on the east of the Karamala valley is Kavungalp-parampu where cist burials were dug out in 1975-6. Iron bars, sickles, a lamp like object etc were among the grave goods found, according to local people. Close to it is a place called Ambalakkad where cists were found on the path ways and private compounds. At Kudappuzha, belonging to Tharoor village 2, a cist was found on the pathway leading to Anchangadi. Situated to the west of Siddic's house, only an east-west side slab in exposed state remains now. It is 2 m long and 15 cm thick. Kolaroad is also a site close to it. It forms part of the hills immediately connected to the Karamala hill. A dolmen could be found at Kolaroad. It is 40-60 cm in height on the east and 63 cm high on the north. The dolmen is slanting towards the south and west. It is 53 cm high from the surface on the south and 50-55 cm high on the west. The slab thickness is 35 cm. The gigantic dolmen's cap stone is 1.70 m in diameter on the north-south and its length is 2.90 m on the east-west. Boulders, 35-40 cm in thickness support the dolmen cap stone on the east.There are courses of boulders and slabs below the cap stone. The floor slab, if any, is not exposed. Above a course of boulders on the floor, is a 45 cm long, 43 cm wide flat slab on the north-western corner. On the south-western corner is a huge stone boulder, 40 cm thick and 53 cm long above the floor boulder. On the south east side is a 60 cm long, 40 cm thick boulder. On the east, almost in the middle, is a 40 cm long, 30 cm thick boulder.

About one kilo meter to the south of the Karamala valley is Cherakkod. It is an important site known for urn burials and cist burials. Two urns were found in the house compound of Balakrishnan at Pulichikkundu in the locality. Two slabs covering an urn burial could also be found. The rim portion of an urn was found in an exposed state in the adjacent compound of Basheer. The diameter of the exposed rim portion was 38 cm. A cist, encircled by laterite blocks, could also be found in another plot owned by Prabhakaran Nair. Close to this compound was a plot known as Keedakkunnu. As in the case of Ambattuparambu, Keedakkunnu here is also noted for the presence of iron slags.

Salvage excavations at Ambattuparambu and Vadakkumuri and findings

The two cists uncovered at Ambattuparambu and Vadakkumuri were in compounds where deep digging had not been undertaken for cultivation. It was about 11 years ago that Ali Mohammed bought his land (Fig 22). Before that, the land was used only for cultivating the rice variety Modan and horsegram. Rayankutty had settled in the compound (TRR 2) around the year 2000. (Fig 23). The only crops grown in the compound were tapioca and vegetables such as brinjal. A 3.5 x 3.5 m square trench, with a diagonal of 4.95 m, was laid for TRR 1. A smaller trench, 2.5 m on all sides and 3.5 m diagonally, was laid for TRR 2.

Fig 22: Cist at Ambattuparambu

Fig 23: Cist at Vadakkumuri

Salvage excavation of two cist burials in the private compounds in the Karamala valley was carried out jointly by the State Archaeology department and the department of History, Govt Victoria College, Palakkad during 9-15, January 2015. Apart from the author, a few students of the department of History also took part in it. Th cist close to the house wall of Rayankutty (TRR 2) was found to be the least disturbed despite it having been under the roots of tamarind and rosewood trees. This cist was uncovered after removing the roots.

Structural features and grave goods

On account of the limited nature of salvaging work, we do not get a clear picture of how the pit was dug for the cists. The area around the cist was not dug for recovering artefacts. There is no trace of any passage. That may indicate that the cists could also be of an earlier date. The arrangement of the orthostats indicated their swastika shape (Fig 24). The excavation revealed that both the transept cists with double chambers were port holed and oriented in the east west direction. Both the cists had circular port holes at the base of the middle slab which was low and thin as compared to the other orthostats. There were two port holes each in both the cists. They were on the slab on the south-east corner of the eastern slab and at the bottom of the middle slab in both cists. The arrangement of grave goods was same in both the cists. Pottery could be found carefully placed on the floor slab at the western and eastern portions of the southern chamber. In the case of TRR 2, a pot was also found placed at the south western corner a little above the floor slab. Pottery could be found in the middle chamber of the northern chamber of TRR1. The bottom chamber of the northern chamber of TRR 2 could not be opened. Swords, blades and knives were found on a bench prepared almost at the middle of the northern chambers of the cists. No beads could be found in them.

Fig 24: Cist at Ambattuparambu

There were two monolithic side slabs on the eastern side of TRR 1. The side slab at the bottom was upto the level of the bench in the northern chamber. Above this bottom slab is the other monolithic slab, which bears a semi-circular slab. Such side slab is not generally found in the other sites.

The port hole of the first cist TRR 1 was having a semi-circular port hole on the south east corner of the eastern slab. It had a diameter of 40 cm.The port hole bearing eastern slab was placed on top of the bench slab in the northern chamber. Below the semi-circular port hole was erected another orthostat to form the cist wall on the east. Pottery and iron objects could be found on a stone bench in the northern

chamber. The southern chamber was filled with soil upto the floor slab. Except the eastern and southern orthostats, the other orthostats were not monolithic. The eastern orthostat was 14 cm thick. The northern and southern side slabs were 12 cm thick, while the slab on the west was just 10 cm thick. Its middle slab was just 2-4 cm thick. Total length of the cist on the east-west direction was 1.80 m. The north-south diameter of the cist was 1.17 m. The port hole on the south-east corner was covered by a 54 cm long, 37 cm wide and 10 cm thick slab.

Fig 25: Cist at Ambattuparambu

Fig 26: Iron trident, Ambattuparambu

Pottery types found in the cist included bowl, ring stand, dish, lid, small sized water vessels etc. Black ware ring stand, a medium sized pot and a few bowls, including a black ware bowl, were found on the bench in the northern chamber of the cist. Below the benches were also arranged pots. The benches in the northern chamber were made with three slabs. Just below the slab in the middle were found pots in the opening of the porthole of the bisecting slab. They were arranged in line opposite to the porthole. Another pot was placed close to the porthole. Behind it were two water vessels and a deep bowl in a row. The rim of the bowl had a diameter of 20 cm. It was 10 cm high from the floor slab. Two black ware ring stands and two small bowls were also found. One of the bowls was placed in an inverted form over the mouth of the water vessel which was resting on the black ware ring.The southern chamber had pottery on the floor slab by the side of the trident on the western side and by the side of the port hole on the middle slab. Pots were in broken state.

The blades in the northern chamber of the cist was 27 cm long. The tanged dagger was 23.5 cm long.Both these were found on the bench in the northern chamber. The iron trident found in a standing position close to the wall of the middle slab at the south-west corner of the southern chamber was one meter in length. It was almost like the one found by J Babington at Neelachaparambu in Kozhikode in 1819

(Fig 25). Its shape and quality of preservation as also the occurrence of iron slags in the vicinity indicate that the megalithic communities of the time had excelled in metallurgy. Babington had attributed Saiva trait in the trident unearthed by him. Other scholars, including Rajan Gurukkal and Raghava Varier also attributed ritual significance to trident (Gurukkal and Varier, 1999: 135). Given the fact that trident bearing Saiva Bhagavatas had existed only in the second century B.C, there is no basis for this assumption. (Saletore, 1943: 491). Saivism was a product of fusion of elements from the north and the south. D N Jha, for instance, says that this fusion occurred in the beginning of the Christian era. (Jha, 2004: 142). Around the 5th-7th centuries A.D, Saiva worshippers grew in number in the south (Thapar1990: 160).Archaeologists have taken trident more as a weapon (Satyamoothy, 1992: 23).

The depth of the cist at TRR 2 upto the floor slab was 2.50 m. The middle slab was 1.84 m long, 7-10 cm thick and 1.50 m above the floor slab. There were no iron objects in the southern chamber of the cist while the sword and other iron objects were found in the northern chamber. Sandy soil could be found at the bottom of the southern chamber. The four monolithic orthostats of the cist were very heavy and high. Black ware could be found at a depth of 1.50 m from the datum point in the north western corner of the cist. The western slab was 1.60 m long and 10-12 cm thick. The northern slab was 1.80 m and 10-16 cm thick. The southern side slab was 1.96 m long and 10-18 cm thick. The eastern side slab's length could not be measured as it was close to the house wall. The length of the slab from inside the cist was 60 cm and its thickness was 12 cm. There was a variation in the diameter of the cist on the western and eastern sides. It was 1.16 m on the west while it was 1.28 m on the east. The length of the cist in the inside was 2 m. Loose soil was found in a circular pit around the porthole side while gravelly soil was found inside the cist. Only miniature pots, both red ware and black ware and bowls could be found inside the cists. Iron slag could also be found inside the cist at a depth of 1.62 below the datum point. The 62 cm long sword found in the northern chamber had a sharp edge and was placed east west in orientation. Its hilt was on the eastern side.

The pottery types included black polished ware, red ware and black and red ware. Fragments of bowls, lids and small and medium sized pots could be found in the cists during digging. Some of them seem to be water-pots. A black ware rim fragment could be found at a

depth of 1.62 m from the datum point. Pottery could be found in the western end of the southern chamber on a bed like structure, 1.82 m below the datum point. In addition, two pots could be found close to the port hole of the middle slab in the same chamber. The chamber also contained a ring stand. A 62 cm long and 5.7 cm wide sword was found in the northern chamber. Its hilt measured10 cm in length. A 6.3 cm long, 3.1 cm wide and 5 mm thick iron point facing the west was found in the southern chamber at a depth of 2.5 m. In addition, a blade and a knife were found on the south west corner of the same chamber. On the south east corner was found a spear head 6.6 cm in length, 5 mm-2.3 cm in width and 5 mm in thickness. Two daggers, one placed over the other, were also found in the same corner. The dagger above had a length of 34 cm and a width of 4 cm while the respective measurements of the length and width of the one below were 39 cm and 4.5 cm. They were facing opposite directions, with the dagger below facing the south west.

At the time of salvage digging, the pots taken out from the cists could not be examined for ascertaining whether they had contained bone remains. The report of the digging has not yet been finalised.

Discussion

The cist burials indicate a general trend found all over the south. It is the availability of the material for construction that must have persuaded the megalithic builders to construct these stone houses for the remains of the dead. It is highly unlikely that the cist burial builders of Karamala would have lived on its tops as they are dotted with burials all over the hill. There is, however, no means of establishing that the megalithic communities of the valley had also discontinued the Neolithic practice of burying the dead within their habitations.Their habitation might not have been too far away as is evident from the deposits of iron slags found close to cists. They indicate iron-smelting on a bigger scale in the area. There is a possibility that iron making did not require import of raw material from outside. Most probably, iron ore could have been available in the vicinity. Iron objects found in the cists must have been made indigenously. Most of the iron objects found in the two cists–tridents, swords, daggers, blades, spear head etc--seem to belong to the category of weapons. They indicate the existence of a society in which warfare had been an important trait of culture. It is, however, difficult to imagine the people of the megalithic period as being engaged in `hunting/gathering supplemented by shifting cultivation

and animal herding' (Gurukkal and Varier, 1996: 102). Such a reading of the megalithic culture was made by historians when not many absolute dates for the burial remains had been made available. The latest absolute dates indicate that the iron using people of the megalithic culture in the south, including Kerala, had existed long before the coming of the Mauryans to the Deccan. Although the carbon dating of objects from the Mangad excavation suggested an earlier date, it was rejected citing that `no other reliable evidence has come up' (Gurukkal and Varier, 1996: 128). Theirs was an uncritical adoption of anthropological concepts for the study of megalithic culture. Kerala, in their view, `was almost entirely forested but interspersed by tracts of marshy, grassy and water-logged terrain' (Gurukkal and Varier, 1996: 146). If that was so, where would the megalithic people of the Karamala valley have lived?

The extant cists in the area are covered with cairn packing. It is clear whether the cists could have been buriedwithout capstone.Archaeologists have asserted that cap stone would have been placed over the pottery and bone remains in the cist tombs of the south (Wheeler, 1947: 188). There are examples of urn burials with cairn packing elsewhere (Subbarayalu, 2014: 16). The circle of slabs or boulders must have been removed. The cists in the Vadakkumuri and Ambattuparambu localities had retained much of their interred goods due to the fact that habitation in these sites has a short history. The excavated cists were bigger cists as they are divided into two chambers. Archaeologists like Rajendran have expressed the idea that cist slabs do not retain `any marks of use of iron implements.' (Rajendran, 2000: 85). Chisel marks on cap stones and cist slabs in sites in Palakkad district, including Ambattuparambu, disprove this notion. The monolithic cist slabs of a gigantic size erected at Vadakkumuri demonstrate their engineering skill as well.

The occurrence of large number of wheel-made miniature pots and other smaller pottery types in the cist burials has been noticed in many sites. Archaeologists have observed that the materials used in making the pottery were laterite and clay (Rajendran, 2000: 84). Bowls and ring stands made of Black Ware were found were found in the burials excavated in the Karamala region. Small sherds of black ware bowls could be found in the cairn heaps. This clearly establishes black ware as typical megalithic burial pottery in Kerala as well. The occurrence of pottery is universal in the Neolithic and megalithic buri-

als. What distinguishes the megalithic pottery is the manner in which they are placed. The bowls, lids and pots might have been intended as ritual offerings to the dead. It is unfortunate that the report of the digging could not be finalised.Excavation of cists elsewhere has revealed that bones were kept in the smaller pots and bowls. Rajendran had recovered bone remains in three pots and a bowl from the cists excavated at Arippa (Rajendran, 1995: 685). No such remains could be examined in the case of pottery from the Tharoor cists.

Underlying the practice is a belief in the after-life of the dead. In fact, the megalithic people all over the south had not used stone or bricks for constructing their houses (Subbarayalu, 2014: 23). Stone workers, potters, iron workers, warriors etc could have formed important groups in the society that had lived in the Karamala valley. Kinship-ties alone could not have been sufficient to erect such massive structures with utmost precision. There could be some skilled people outside of kinship ties for providing labour in fixing the orthostats in such way that even the thinner middle slab has continued into the present without any damage.

Conclusion

The excavation of the two cist-tombs for salvaging relics which would have otherwise been lost reveals that our megalithic heritage requires a little more care on the part of those who are supposed to be the custodians of these relics from the past. Joining together bits and pieces from the megalithic sites is a fruitful exercise in the sense that they throw light upon several issues including the transition from the Neolithic Culture to Iron Age and the exact links between these monuments and the early historic culture of the south usually referred to as Sangam Age.

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