© 2020. *Social Orbit* ISSN 2395-7719, Vol.6, pp.61-82

Iron Age Early Historic Monuments of Kerala Region: Rethinking Analytical Gaps

Rachel A. Varghese
Research Officer
Kerala Council for Historical Research
Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India
E-mail: rachelvarghese84@gmail.com

Abstract

The Iron Age-Early Historic (IA-EH) monuments/memorials are the category of archaeological remains that have received most academic attention in Kerala. This overview article evaluates the existing published research in the area with an effort to discern the broad trends and gaps in analytical knowledge. With the aid of more recent studies, it goes on to discuss four possible avenues of research that can further our current understanding of these remains.

Keywords: IA-EH monuments, megaliths, Kerala, Anakkara, landscape.

Introduction

Kerala, as a region, had been largely marginalized in archaeological research in India until recent times. In the last few years, we see a spurt in the number of archaeological studies. The Iron Age- Early Historic (IA-EH) memorials/monuments are the single category of remains that have received the most attention in archaeological research from the region. Usually discussed under the overarching term megaliths, the IA- EH monuments refer to the diverse monument types with over-ground and subterranean features occurring in different combinations. Some of the over-ground expressions include Dolmens, Stone Circles, Menhirs, Cairns, Umbrella Stones, Hood Stones and Hat Stones. Urns, Rock-Cut Chambers, Pits and Cists are some of the subterranean features of IA-EH monuments. Monuments display architectural variations and are often found in combinations of two or more types. Apart from the structural elements, the monuments often have associated artefacts that help us make sense of the intended purpose of the monuments. The three major categories of associated finds include pottery, semiprecious stone beads and iron implements. The monuments found in the Kerala region are mostly secondary in nature. Whole skeletons have not been found from burials. The bone

remains are usually charred or fragmentary. The available evidence does not point to the direct burial of bodies. It is possible that many of these monuments were intended as memorials and might not have been without human remains. We have a handful of radio carbon dates from the region. This, along with comparative dating, suggests a large temporal span during which the people erected IA-EH monuments. We can assign a broad chronology extending from circa 5th century BCE to 5th century CE to the practice. But we do have dates that are earlier (Sathyamoorthi, 1992) and later (Uesugi et.al., 2020) than this.

Even though the region has a very long history of research on the IA-EH monuments, our understanding of their builders and the social context remains patchy and rudimentary. This paper evaluates the existing research on the monuments from Kerala region in an effort to identify the reasons for this gap in analytical knowledge. Here I will not give a complete overview of the research undertaken so far. The focus of the article would rather be on certain broad trends in research. Through an examination of some of the more recent works, I will chart out the possible avenues that further research can take in order to address the existing gaps.

Trends in Existing Research: A Brief Overview

The trajectory of academic interest in IA-EH monuments can be traced back to the 19th century and the colonial antiquarians as is the case of archaeological studies in most parts of the country. While some of these efforts amounted to mere collection of artefacts, in some instances they involved careful documentation of finds in a way that surpassed many of the post-independence period research. For example, in the first published report of the excavation of an IA-EH monument in Kerala by J. Babington (1823) at Chathaparamba at the border of Calicut and Malappuram Districts of Kerala, there is a rich description of the monuments along with detailed sketches of the monuments themselves and the goods found from within. Darsana (2006) has mapped the antiquarian research into the IA-EH monuments of Kerala which points to traits such as the employment of local knowledge, richness of description and efforts towards interpretation that characterized at least a few of these studies. Some of the early studies took the format of the listing of sites and other archaeological remains (Sewell 1882), while others were short articles published in different journals of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Britain and Ireland. Some of them are primarily descriptive in nature, and focus on drawing comparisons between sites and artefacts (Cammiade, 1930; Fawcett, 1896a; 1896b).

The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) as well as the State Departments of the Archaeology of Travancore and the Cochin State conducted a few studies after the1940s. The efforts of V.D. Krishnaswami, Anujan Achen and others made these studies more systematic. The excavation of the urn burial site of Porkalam was undertaken by B.K. Thapar in1948 (Thapar, 1952). The Archaeological Survey of India has reported a number of megalithic sites in Kerala in the post-independence period. These reports came up in the annual reviews of ASI titled *Indian Archaeology: A Review* (IAR 1990-91, 2002-03).The majority of the reports mention only the location of the site and type of monument. Some of them go on to describe the morphology of the monument. ASI has conducted a handful of excavations. There are no detailed systematic reports available for these excavations, except in the case of Cheramangadin Central Kerala where the report is richer in detail in comparison to the others. The State Department of Archaeology has also done a few excavations of IA-EH monuments. The report of Mangadu Excavation by Sathyamoorthi (1992) in Kollam District was published by the State Department of Archaeology in 1992.

Many of the important studies that we have on IA-EH monuments were part of doctoral research by scholars of different University Departments in India (George, 1975, Chedambath, 1997, Peter, 2002, Nihildas, 2014 and Ambily, 2017, for example). Most of these works involved explorations of large regions along with excavations in some cases. The site of Anakkara was excavated in 2008 and 2009 by the School of Social Sciences, Mahatma Gandhi University. The report of the excavations is forthcoming. In the last few years the faculty and students of the Department of Kerala have been undertaking systematic excavations (Abhayan et.al., 2020, Uesugiet.al., 2020), and explorations of the region as part of Kerala Megalithic Gazetteers Project (KMGP). The total number of identified sites in the region, according to Peter (2018), is well over one thousand.

Terminology and Rethinking the Culture-Historic Approach

As mentioned in the beginning, I use the term Iron Age-Early Historic (IA-EH) monuments to refer to the wide variety of memorial types which have, until recently been included under the umbrella term megaliths. The term IA-EH refers to the broad time span of construction of these monuments which corresponds to the beginning of the use of Iron in the sub-continent. In Babington's report (1823) the term used is *Pandoo Coolies*. Different terms are used to indicate specific types of monuments locally such as *muniyara, nannangadi,* etc. In the

early academic publications such as those of Babington, often anglicized corruptions of these terms were used. The local names continue to be in use in academic publications even now. While it is important to take note of the terminology used by the public, this has often resulted in confusion because sufficient descriptive data does not accompany many of the reports. Hence it becomes difficult to identify the monument types referred to from colloquial usages and interchangeable use of terms. There are a set of problems related to the usage of the term megaliths. Some of the types included within the category do not have large lithic appendages associated with them, as the term would suggest. Hence, the term megalith is a misnomer here.

Often usage of particular terminology is considered as a matter of choice and to be of little consequence to actual research. However critical appraisal allows us to see certain implications. The use of the term megaliths to denote the IA-EH burials/memorials from South India came through drawing comparisons with monuments of memorial/sepulchral nature with huge lithic appendages from different parts of the globe. By the early decades of the 20thcentury, the efforts of both colonial and indigenous scholars made the study of the monuments more systematic. By this time the term 'megaliths' was being employed unproblematically to incorporate a wide range of burial practices from South India. Hence, comparisons with practices across the globe that come under the term begin appearing in studies. In 1947, an article by Gordon Childe (Childe, 1947) was published in the journal Ancient India. With function and plan as the bases of classification, Childe brought together a vast amount of evidence from around the globe including that on the megaliths of South India. He found that a complex of traits, like collective burials and port holes, are regularly associated with the monuments. These differences and similarities form the basis of inclusion or exclusion of a category of monuments within the classification. The system of classification based on a complex of associated traits thus cannot accommodate a wide range of monuments, including many of the subterranean rock cut caves of Kerala. Childe proposes the likely origin of the megaliths to be around the Eastern Mediterranean and suggests a diffusion that was effected either by land or by sea by multiple possibilities of human agents. Krishnaswamy (1949) observed that the megalithic monuments of South India belonged to an altogether different cluster. He attributed their difference to the different 'currents of migration'. It was this 'contact' that led to the mixture of influences and rituals in these cultural regions. Changes are

perceived not as products of processes operating from within but as imposed through outside influences either by actual contact or through a diffusion of ideas.

Varying theories of diffusion have been proposed hence. Allchin and Allchin argued for maritime influence from the Middle East and B.B. Lal suggested Heliolithic diffusion. Haimendorf argued that the builders of megaliths came from the near East (Parapola, 1973). Apart from pondering into the direction and channels of possible diffusion, the studies that take the culture-historic approach have the limited scope of simple descriptive accounts. One of the main drawbacks of the culture historic approach is that, it does not focus on explanation or causality much. Change is always perceived to have been brought from outside. For instance, there is a persistent tendency to look for links with Indus Valley sites, in academic and more so in popular writings on archaeology in the region. While this particular trend does not usually come into the study of IA-EH monuments, the micro regional variations and the agential role of the early populations to bring about such variations do not get much attention in the culture-historic approach. The possibility of multiple and regional origins for IA-EH monuments is not compatible to the approach.

Understanding the Theoretical Gaps

Even though the IA-EH monuments of Kerala region have been researched for a little less than 200 years, our understanding of the builders of the monuments is still rudimentary. There have been a number of reasons for this including lack of attention to detail and context in the documentation of the monuments, the relatively marginal status of archaeology in the region, and the lack of habitation evidence that can be associated with the builders of the IA-EH monuments. However, I consider the theoretical gaps in the archaeological studies in the region as the most significant factor that limits our understanding of the period. More recently, there have been a few works that have theoretically analysed the available information on the IA-EH monuments. I will discuss these works later in this article. However processual and post processual approaches that have informed mortuary/monument studies in other parts of the globe have not been part of the studies in the region in a major way until recently.

One of the main reasons for this is the persistence of antiquarian tendencies and culture-historic approach to archaeology that I discussed above. Another reason is the circumstances that lead to a find. Many

of the IA-EH monuments are accidental finds, especially subterranean ones like urns encountered in the course of modern-day construction and agricultural activities. Many of them go unreported. Sometimes they are reported in local newspapers or to academic institutions and local authorities. In a limited number of cases, the finds are retrieved and stored in local museums or institutions through salvage operations. The circumstances of accidental finds usually limit the retrieval of any contextual information associated with the monuments.

While one might assume that disturbance caused to the site, would lead to the loss of any potentially useful information, this is not always the case. The salvage operation to retrieve an urn burial at Nannangadikkunnu in Palakkad District by the Department of Archaeology, Kerala University is a case in point (Abhayan et.al., 2020). While most part of the soil inside the urn was already scooped out and the urn was in a highly disturbed condition, the excavators through a careful process of excavation and documentation were able to reach valid observations regarding the original placement of the urn in the pit. The GPS location of the site, and the other sites in the region, as well as the landscape context, have also been noted. This opens up the possibility of future research, for instance in approaches based on comparative perspective and landscape archaeology. Interestingly, the excavators also suggest that the excavations were "aimed to provide awareness to the local people about the significance of this kind of remains" (ibid., 89). Articulation of Public Archaeology concerns has been rare in the region and including public awareness as part of the aim of a project is an important development in this direction. The possibility of Public Archaeology approaches in the research on IA-EH monuments will be taken up further in the last section.

Unlike Nannangadikunnu, many of the IA-EH sites we have much less contextual information. Often we do not have much information about sites except the name of the village where it is located and the type of the monument. Another major disadvantage is the lack of habitation evidence for the period from the region until recently. With the identification of the site of Pattanam in Central Kerala in the late 1990s and its subsequent excavations, we have non-mortuary archaeological remains from the region for the first time. While the site is of immense significance to understand the later phase in which IA-EH monuments were being erected, Pattanam has no direct association with the monuments.

Efforts towards Theorization

Given these broad trends there have been a few efforts at theorization in the study of IA- EH monuments. In K M George's doctoral work (1975) he identified forty-one new sites and excavated three monuments. He gives a brief description of the sites, and focuses largely on diffusion theories. The advantage of the work is that, by bringing together the available information on the sites, he is able to make suggestions on the nature of the distribution of different monument types. George argues that the monuments directly reflect social ranking as can be deduced from the amount of labour that went into the construction of each.

The next major excavation of an IA-EH monument in Kerala was undertaken in 1992 by Sathyamurthy (Sathyamurthy, 1992). The scope of the study as stated by the author is two-fold: "(i) probe thoroughly into the cultural complexity of a megalithic site in the vicinity of Western coast, (ii) to find out the chronology of Iron Age in Kerala, in order to trace the route through which Iron was introduced to South India" (ibid.). Here he employs the principle of hybridisation as a frame and through comparisons using earlier studies, radiocarbon dates from the site and nature of burial goods from different levels, brings out the chronological span of the site whereby it is assigned as a zone of first arrival and transition. While the question of chronology is important, the narrowly defined scope of the study limits its possibilities to a great extent. To give an example, by way of entering into the central problem, Sathyamurthy attempts a brief sketch of the life of the megalithic builders. Here, the reconstruction is based on evidence from the site alone, without reference to the information already available i.e., without effort to place it in a broader context. The report makes an important suggestion that the monument was put to repeated use. However, this aspect is also not addressed any further to understand the life history of the site.

Except for brief considerations, the research on Kerala megaliths seldom considered the environmental factors. Jenee Peter (2002) in her doctoral research, talks about the possibility of such considerations. Peter studies the Iron Age sites of Central Kerala, listing out a total number of 658 sites and in the course of her work identifies30 new sites through survey. The major aim of the thesis is to form a typological distribution pattern for the megalithic sites of the region with a focus on the environmental factors at work. Peter calls these the geographical determinants of the site and seeks to see how they

are reflected in the selection of the sites. She states that it is possible to compensate for the absence of habitation sites from the region by studying the burial sites along with their environmental setting so as to derive a pattern by which possible settlement areas could be hypothetically marked. The spatial extent of human settlements, she says, is delimited by the environmental and geographic factors. She considers space as something given meaning to by human agency. However she does not take these ideas forward in terms of data or at a theoretical level. Peter explores the possibility of the analysis of sites at three levels – intra-site, inter site and inter-zone. On the basis of the analyses she reaches at important assumptions regarding the location peculiarities of the sites. However, these remain at a speculative level due to the inadequacy of data at disposal, and point to the need of generating fresh contextual information on the IA-EH sites that are already known as well.

A rare work that focuses on Kerala IA-EH period with a strong theoretical orientation is the doctoral dissertation by Shinu Abraham titled *Social Complexity in Early Tamilakam: Sites and Ceramics from the Palghat Gap, Kerala, India* (2002). She conducted archaeological field survey in the Palghat Gap and documented numerous megalithic clusters and other sites along with a body of ceramics (Abraham, 2002, 2004). Abraham argues that if there existed in early *Tamilakam*[1] a system of sub-regional localized communities, these would be invisible when applying standard region-wide interpretations of the material culture. She introduces Heterarchy as an alternate model for social complexity. The concept of heterarchy was first introduced into settlement archaeology by Carole L. Crumley in 1979 as an alternative to band-tribe-chiefdom-state model of socio-cultural complexity. Heterarchy is defined as "the relation of elements to one another when they are unranked, or when they possess the potential to be ranked in a number of ways" (Crumley, 1995). Abraham conducted two seasons of field survey in the Palakkad gap area to generate a fresh body of data pertaining mainly to the megaliths of the region. The data was complemented by a surface survey for ceramics which had not hitherto been attempted in Kerala. A significant outcome of the ceramic survey was that Abraham was able to identify possible location of non-burial/habitation sites on the basis of lack of the association of certain pottery clusters with burial sites. Moreover, by limiting the regional scope of the study, Abraham was able to do an effective distribution analysis taking into account environmental correlates as well as inter

and intra site variability. One important aspect that Abraham's work demonstrated was that surface explorations can themselves generate important information that opens new avenues of analysis.

Avenues for Further Research

In the previous discussion I looked at a selection of existing research on the IA-EH monuments to identify the gaps in research and certain broad trends. In the following section by looking at my own fieldwork at the site of Anakkara in 2010 and some of the new studies that are coming up, I examine the possible avenues of further research in the region.

A. Landscapes and Spaces

The IA-EH monuments have been studied out of their spatial context in most cases. We do not have indications of the associated landscape features or of the spatial organisation of sites within a locale. Such information would have facilitated important conclusions, as in the case of the Palakkad Gap Survey (Abraham, 2002) discussed above. One of the theoretical gaps in the studies on prehistoric archaeology of Kerala is in addressing the question of space. Landscape is often dealt as a static setting for events and actions. Space has come to be understood in the last few decades as dynamic – it is as much a mental construct as it is a material one (Harvey, 2001). Space is constituted experientially and can be restructured. Such restructuring of the landscape is mediated by the architectural forms, and the specific setting of the monument becomes a locus imbued with symbolic meaning sustained by the spatial organization within and among the sites and in relation to the landscape. Symbolic architectural forms, like the IA-EH monuments can be understood as restructuring space in important ways.

With this understanding in mind, I conducted a short fieldwork at Anakkara in Palakkad District in 2010 [2] . The site of Anakkara first came into archaeological notice in the 19th century. Robert Sewell mentions four rock cut caves in his *Antiquarian Remains of the Madras Presidency* (1882). However, we don't have further details about these monuments. In 2008 and 2009, the School of Social Sciences, Mahatma Gandhi University conducted two seasons of excavations at Anakkara. In 2008 (Shajan et.al. 2014), three trenches were laid out for excavation, two in the private property named Chuliparamb and one in the adjacent private property under the ownership of Sainudeeen. The trenches correspond to three monuments, one Umbrella Stone, mul-

tiple hood stone circle and one urn burial. The lid of the latter was accidentally spotted by the land owner while taking out soil for construction purposes.

In 2009, the team further excavated the hillock of Nasranikunn (10049'29.39"N; 76002'01.77"E) in Anakkara. Nasranikunn is a roughly flat-topped hillock with a maximum height of 70 m above MSL. In 2009, three monuments and a quarry/ ritual (?) area were visible over the hillock. The Mahatma Gandhi University team, of which the author was a member, excavated one of the monuments, a slab circle which was found to enclose a three-chambered rock cut cave (ANK09VI) and documented an area with multiple quarry marks and post holes (ANK09V) on the table land. The other two monuments had over-ground stone appendages. The excavated remains from the two seasons, that include ceramics, iron implements and semi-precious stone beads are currently housed at the museum of the School of Social Sciences of the Mahatma Gandhi University.

In the year 2010, a short season of fieldwork with the specific aim to document the spatial/ landscape aspects of the cluster of sites at Nasranikunn was undertaken. The details of the work done and the inferences are discussed elsewhere (Varghese 2013, 2018). Here I will only discuss the methodology adopted in brief to highlight how survey-based observations can supplement excavation data and the larger body of knowledge regarding IA- EH monuments, even if such surveys are constrained by contemporary factors. The major constraint for the fieldwork at Nasranikunn was the massive landscape alterations that happened around the time due to construction and large scale quarrying, along with contemporary divisions of property. These factors severely limited the possibility to understand past landscapes.

As part of the 2010 fieldwork, the two monuments in the cluster which were not already assigned numbers, were designated as ANK-10VII (slab circle of dressed laterite) and ANK10VIII (menhir erected on a low mound). Specially designed data sheets were used to record information regarding the landscape context, location (with GPS points) monument orientation and aspects of visibility of each monument. Aspects of visibility include a) viewshed (See figure 1) (the 3600 view of the landscape with monument at the centre in order to understand how it is oriented in relation to landscape features), b) monument inter-visibility, and c) reverse viewshed (recording the visibility of sites from four cardinal directions and prominent landscape features). The recording of each monument was done by taking GPS locations, plotting the

visible features of the monuments, photography of the architectural elements and setting, and descriptive recording of the monuments and their surroundings. ANK09VI, the excavated rock cut cave within a slab circle, had already been plotted by the excavation team in 2009. Scaled drawings of the over-ground features of the other two monuments were done (See Figure 2). While the over-ground features do not reveal the nature of the monument in its entirety, scaled drawings were deemed important because rapid landscape alterations and possibility of site destruction could lead to the loss of information and measurements of the distances among the monuments. The quarry/ritual area, ANK09V was found to be covered by construction debris and only the measurements of the spread and distance from other monuments could be noted.

Using the information generated through these methods, spatial analysis of the site was done at three levels:

1. At the macro regional level, the Nasranikunnu cluster as a whole was examined in relation to the other known monuments from the region and the major landscape features. In the course of the walk-over survey, an urn burial and a cap stone were located on the hillock of Nasranikunn. The GPS location for these, finds along with those of dressed laterite slabs (part of a monument) originally located in 2009 were noted. Macro regional analysis was severely limited due to landscape alterations and the conclusions reached were tentative in nature. However, it could be observed that the monuments of the cluster could not be considered isolated. Given the commanding location of the Nasranikunn complex (by virtue of its higher altitude) in relation to the other monuments, and its position in the landscape (that provides a high degree of visibility), a tentative argument could be made that the complex had symbolic domination over the landscape of Anakkara.

2. At the second level, the cluster was studied closely to understand the relationship among the sites within the complex and the quarry/ritual (?) area through aspects of orientation, inter-visibility and viewshed. The three monuments were found to be having a conscious pattern in terms of orientation, being placed roughly along a straight line. ANK09VI was found to be associated with a visually less elaborate monument ANK10VII, through proximity. This suggested hierarchical arrangement of monuments. Rather than being conclusive statement, the observation about hierarchy remains an informed speculation at this stage. This is because the over-ground features of ANK-10VIIand ANK10VIII, and because we do not know enough about the

original level of elaboration of the monuments. Similarly, we do not know about the subterranean features of the monuments. The choices of the monument builders regarding the hierarchy of the monuments would also have depended on subterranean features. While the over-ground features of the monuments do not seem to have any orientation towards the landscape features, the subterranean features of ANK09VI has an eastward orientation. Upon the table land the monuments are located at the area that has most visibility, even as the vegetation cover might block them from view. This indicates a conscious choice in their placement in landscape.

3. At the third level, spatial organization within a single monument was examined. This is the excavated monument ANK09VI. Spatial organization was studied in conjunction with the observations made by the excavators in 2009. Six levels of organization could be identified within the single monument that would have allowed differential and progressively limited access to people at the time when the structure was originally constructed and ritually transformed into a memorial/ monument. The monument was also seen to incorporate landscape features architecturally, such as the slope of the hillock to achieve a dome shape, and incorporation of a natural groove to achieve hemispherical division of the space within the inner circle of the monument.

From this brief analysis it emerges that the architectural grammar and the location choices of sites have signification in the symbology of the monuments. While the inferences drawn in the case of Nasranikkunn complex are tentative, it is possible to extend the methodology to the study of other sites by similarly recording over-ground and contextual information. Comparative analysis and studies in conjunction with detailed excavation reports and study of burial goods will increase the analytical potential of such data.

This significance of landscape and context is taken more into account in some of the recent studies. The Kerala Megalithic Gazetteers Project (KMGP), which we discussed at the beginning of this article, is an important instance. The project specifically aims to address the existing lacunae in research[3]. Among the many objectives of the project, are explorations to locate and document the already reported sites, identification of new sites and the creation of an integrated database. As part of the project, excavations are also being conducted. The documentation of sites identified through exploration is done or is aimed to be done in a detailed manner with geo-coordinates, information on access to the site, details current ownership, geo-morphological data,

photographic documentation, measurements, drawing and through distribution maps that look at spatial patterning.

Study of spatial patterning can give important information on aspects like whether or not specific areas were designated for the monuments, were monuments public or private in nature, how they related to the landscape and what the factors are that determined internal differentiation among monuments of a single location. The latter aspect can be very important in the case of spaces where multiple and varied monuments co-occur, like the site of Cheramanangad in Thrissur district, where we have umbrella stones, hat stones, hoodstones and circle stones occurring in close proximity in a limited space obviously dedicated for the purpose.

As the region lacks in habitation evidence, such studies will allow the researchers to make suggestions regarding settlement choices and mentalities of the builders of the monuments. The focus of KMGP on such aspects highlight the importance given by the excavators to the spatial context and landscape of the sites and can provide an analytically significant information on the IA- EH monuments and their builders in the region.

B. Architecture

As we discussed above, most of the reports from the region do not give us much information beyond the village where a monument is located and its broad type. However, within a single broad type ofmonuments, there can be considerable architectural variation. For instance, there are two protected rock cut cave sites near Kunnamkulam that are only a few kilometres apart from each other- Chovvannur and Eyyal. The Chovvannur cave is single chambered and has a recessed entrance towards the east with a veranda. The other walls of the chamber are circular and the ceiling is vaulted. The chamber has two benches—one each on the northern and southern sides. On the western side, there are five circular blocks cut out of laterite, possibly intended as stands for vessels. The Eyyalcave has two chambers excavated into a laterite boulder. The outer court leads to the main chamber, which faces east, and there is a smaller chamber to its right. The main chamber has a bench of irregular width that runs along all three sides of each chamber, except on the side where the entrance is. The two caves show considerable architectural variation though they are both considered within the broad type of rock cut caves. Some rock-cut caves can have more elaborate structures than these two. One example is the cave at Nasranikkunnu in Anakkara that we discussed above. Similarly, com-

binations of over-ground and underground features will not get reflected by assigning a monument asa single type. Monuments can also show variations and similarities in terms of burial goods, independent of their typologies.

Observations based on choices of raw material, organization of space within a monument and architectural elements, can give important insights into aspects like technological advancement, expertise and mentalities, these are rarely explored in the studies on IA- EH monuments of Kerala. We saw how in the case of Nasranikkunnu, a close analysis of the spatial organization of a single monument can help us to reach informed inferences regarding aspects like differential access. In the case of the cist burial site Enadimangalam excavated by the Department of Archaeology, University of Kerala as part of the KMGP, through careful and slow excavations and detailed recording, the excavators arrive at inferences on facets like tool technology. Importantly, such observations regarding architecture are possible even in the case of monuments that are disturbed.

The recent excavations of two rock-cut caves at Kuttikol in Kasargode district (Usuegi et.al. 2020) is an important example that illustrates the potential of careful documentation of architectural elements at the time of the excavations. In this case each architectural element is carefully documented and contour maps and plans the monuments are also made. The excavators are able through this exercise reach logical assumptions regarding the function of architectural elements which are currently not in their original position owing to later disturbances, and regarding tool technology by paying attention to aspects such as chisel marks on the surface of the monuments.

C. The Burial Assemblage

It is only rarely, that burial assemblages associated with the IA-EH monuments have received adequate attention in the region. Babington's (1823) report contains detailed drawings of artefacts the kind of which are absent in many recent archaeological reports. Plenderleith, in 1896, published a short note on the chemical composition of the glaze on black polished pottery from urn burials in Wynad (Plenderleith, 1896). The burial assemblage allows the researcher to explore aspects like craft specialization, exchange relations, ritual personal choices, social differentiation and sometimes aspects of the everyday through extrapolations. In some of the more recent studies, there have been efforts towards careful documentation of artefacts. The excava-

tions at the sites of Niramakulam (Kumar and Ambily, 2014, Uesugi et.al. 2019a, 2019b), Kuttikkol (Uesugi et al., 2019b, 2020), and Nannangadikkunnu (Abhayan, 2020) are examples.

Post excavation studies that focus entirely on burial assemblage have largely been absent in the region. Uesugi et.al (2019b) proposes a ceramic chronological sequence for the finds from IA- EH monuments, primarily through the study of typology of excavated ceramics from Kuttikol and Niramakulam and the radiocarbon dates from the site. A recent PhD dissertation submitted to the Tamil University, Tanjavur titled *Megalithic Pottery of Central Kerala by* Jaseera CM (2020) is another important effort. The researcher analyses the available body of Iron Age- Early Historic Ceramics from the region to build a typology of the ceramics from the region. She also draws analytical inferences integrating multiple approaches to ceramic studies regarding technology and use. Such an exercise is important because it allows a frame of reference to study new bodies of data that will be generated from the region. Ina detailed study of stone beads excavated from Niramakulam (Uesugi, 2019a), morphological classification, examination of drilling technology and comparative analysis have been attempted. Further studies in this direction and on other artefact classes like iron implements are awaited

D. Life Histories and the Present Lives of Monuments

In his Section President's Address at the 80th Session of the Indian History Congress, V. Selvakumar (2019) discusses how archaeology can be effectively employed in conjunction with other bodies of evidence and present landscape/settlement patterns to build a discussion on the development of settlements, and the construction of cultural landscapes of human geography in the Lower Kāvéri valley. This work deals with both time and space with fluidity. Rather than focusing on individual sites, the discussion is on archaeological landscapes evolving through time. This also allows the author to move beyond conventional periodization of history and into the contemporary. A similar sort of exercise would be very valid for the region represented by present-day Kerala.

In the case of IA-EH monuments this would mean looking beyond the actual boundaries of the monument into the landscape as I discussed above and also seeking to understand the life history of the monument as not frozen, but evolving through time. Such an approach would mean looking at the ways in which people interacted with monuments over

time up until the present. In the case of Enadimangalam, the excavators talk about possible reuse of the monument in later phases . The conventional understanding is that monuments which are disturbed in later phases lack archaeological potential. Observations as the above, tell us about the ways of relating with monuments over time and allows one to think beyond the period of their original construction.

Contemporary interactions between archaeology and the people have also evolved as an important subject matter of study in archaeology during the last five decades. Public Archaeology, the disciplinary field that looks at the ways in which archaeology relates to the public in the contemporary period, is a well-developed area of research and practice across the globe. Researchers have looked at the contemporary lives of monuments to draw attention to the poor state of preservation and threats of destruction (Rajesh K. P., 2019).But we do not have studies that specifically focus on the monument- people interaction from the region. Even so, we have information regarding the ways in which people interacted with the IA-EH monuments. There are passing references, even from the colonial writings, on how the burial remains had been perceived in the recent past. Babington (1823) mentions the prevailing beliefs that the monuments were the work of the Pandavas or of other celestial beings. He also mentions the prevalence of a legend that the monuments were abodes to old people who in the past diminished in size so much that they were not fit to live in the outside world. Hence these old people were to be placed inside the monuments along with the implements they used in real life. The myth that themicaceous sand in the pottery associated with the burials was pure gold that turned into sand on exposure to human eyes was also prevalent (ibid). Similar legends are also mentioned by Logan (1887). These early researchers, however, were not free from the colonial penchant for attributing ignorance to the local population. They tended to see these myths and legends as evidences of ignorance, and concluded reductively that the local population was not capable of informed awareness of the past. People engage with the remains in a variety of ways, which may or may not be informed by the knowledge produced by archaeologists. Often, archaeologists make use of such popular notions prevalent in an area to uncover the existence of archaeological sites.

There are numerous instances of accidental or deliberate destruction of IA- EH monuments or neglect leading to eventual destruction. However, there are also multiple other ways in which people relate to the monuments. The Kannimara Shrine in Marayur, which is now a

place of worship, is a reused dolmen (See Figure 3). Local myths associated with monuments are still prevalent. For instance, ANK09VI, excavated in 2009 that we discussed above was assumed to be a well by many of the locals prior to the excavations. There was no fear of approaching the monument. During the course of the excavations many inhabitants narrated a story that had been passed on to them of an underground tunnel and assumed that the rock cut cave within the stone circle opened the entrance to the said tunnel.

It would be wrong to assume that public understanding of monuments is limited to myths and ritual appropriations. There is also strong academic interest on the part of communities; this interest in turn facilitates archaeological studies and ensures continued protection of the monuments. The site of Anakkara during the excavations was frequented by schoolchildren, media, as well as a large number of citizens from the area and far off places.

The local television network made and aired a documentary on the ongoing excavations.

The public demanded lengthy explanations from the archaeologists on site. They also assisted the work by providing amenities to the excavators. Figure (4) shows dolmens in Kovilkkadav of Marayoor district where school children have written messages on the monuments near their school compound with an appeal that they be protected. While the practice in itself might be damaging to the monuments, the shaping attitude tends towards preservation. A detailed study from a public archaeology approach that documents the multiplicity of public approaches to the IA- EH monuments is wanting from the region.

There is a prevalent notion that Kerala, as a region, lacks archaeological potential. Apart from institutional limitations, the marginal status of archaeology in Kerala can be seen as a product of multiple factors including continuing antiquarian tendencies, failure to explore interpretative possibilities of archaeology and a preference for spectacular remains. Especially for the Early Historic Period, the IA- EH are often considered as secondary to the text-based studies on social formation, and are used as corroborative evidence to such studies. This is at the expense of the methodological and theoretical potential of archaeology. My effort in this paper has been to understand the reasons for the analytical gaps in the study of IA- EH monuments in Kerala. We see that many of the recent works have started to address these lacunae by taking up questions related to landscape, architecture, burial assemblage and so on. A deeply theoretical approach is essen-

tial to further the directions initiated in these studies. Life histories of monuments and public – archaeology relations, that have largely been ignored till now, are important aspects that will allow us to have a fluid understanding of the monuments in terms of temporality. This article, through selected studies, seeks to bringout the yet to be tapped potential in archaeological studies on IA- EH monuments. While indiscriminate excavation with the aim of retrieval of artefacts can only be damaging to the archaeology of the IA- EH monuments, fresh efforts are needed for integrating available archaeological information, detailed documentation and systematic and careful excavations (when necessary) and post excavation studies. These, along with a strong theoretical foundation, can add on to the existing analytical knowledge of the period in the region in important ways [4].

Figures

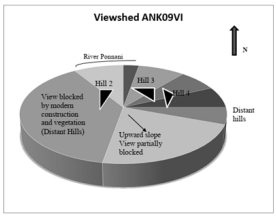

Figure 2: Example of Diagrammatic Representation of Viewshed Analysis. Author 2010

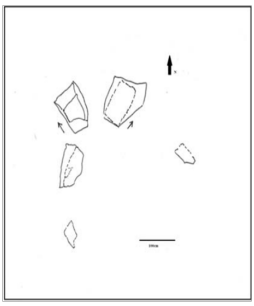

Figure 2: Scaled Drawing of ANK10VII Varghese and Damodaran 2010

Figure 3: Kannimara Dolmen Shrine, Idukki. Photo Author 2015. Courtesy: sahapedia.org

Figure 4: Dolmens, Kovilkadav, Idukki District. Photo: Varghese 2015. Courtesy: sahapedia.org

Notes

1. Tamilakam is conceived as a singular geographical entity represented by the present day states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala and is assumed to exhibit more or less uniform characteristics. This is an assumption that relies heavily on the corpus of early Tamil poetry called the Sangam literature.
2. This work was part of the author's Master's dissertation titled Interpreting the Ritual Complex of Nasranikunn: A Study of a Megalithic Complex in Central Kerala, submitted in 2011 in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Masters dissertation as part of the Erasmus Mundus Masters in Quaternary and Prehistory. The fieldwork was supplemented by the information from the unpublished reports on Anakkara excavations in 2008 and 2009 and personal communication with the team members. The author acknowledges Professor Rajan Gurukkal, Director of Excavations, for the access to unpublished information, photographs and his insights regarding site. The field work of 2010 was conducted with the assistance of Sreelatha Damodaran, Research Scholar, Department of History, University of Calicut and the work was conducted under the supervision of Dr. George Nash, Visiting Faculty, IPT, Portugal.
3. The project is currently ongoing, and the information discussed here is primarily on the basis of a lecture delivered by Dr. G.S. Abhayan, principal Investigator, Kerala Megalithic Gazetteers Project titled 'Kerala Megalithic Gazetteer Project and the Excavation of a Cist Burial at Enadimangalam' on 20 June 2019 as part of the KCHR Public Lectures on Revisiting Iron Age in South India at Thiruvananthapuram and through personal communication with the investigators.
4. See footnote 3.

References

Abhayan, G. S, Ajit Kumar, S. V. Rajesh, C. P. Remya, et.al. 2020. "Salvage Archaeological Operations of Megalithic Burial Urn at Nannangadikkunnu, Palakkad District, Kerala." In S. V. Rajesh, G. S. Abhayan, Ajit Kumar, and Ehsan Rahmath Ilahi (Eds.) *The Archaeology of Burials: Examples from Indian Subcontinent, 1* (86–103). New Delhi: New Bharatiya Book Corporation.

Abraham, Shinu A. 2002. *Social Complexity in Early Tamilakam: Sites and-Ceramics from the Palghat Gap, Kerala, India*. PhD Thesis, University of Pennsylvania.

Abraham, Shinu A. 2004. 'Applying Anthropological Models of Social Complexity to Early Tamilakam: Palghat Gap Survey' *The Journal of the Centre for Heritage Studies,* 1: 1-19.

Ambily, C. S. 2017. *Holocene Archaeology of Pamba Basin*. PhD Thesis. Thiruvananthapuram: Department of Archaeology, University of Kerala.

Babington J. 1823. 'Descriptions of Pandoo Coolies in Malabar' (Transactions of the Literary Society of Bombay 3: 324-30). As reprinted in *AdhAram: A journal of Kerala Archaeology and History*: Vol 1 (6-16).. Kottayam: Kerala Puratattva Samiti.

Cammiade, L. A. 1930. ". Urn-Burials in the Wynaad, Southern India." *Man*, 30: 183–86.

Chedambath, Rajan. 1997. I*nvestigations into the Megalithic and Early Historic Periods of the Periyar and Ponnani River Basins of Kerala*. PhD Dissertation. Pune: Deccan College Post Graduate and Research Institute.

Childe, Gordon V.1947. 'Meglaiths." *Ancient India*, 4 (July 1947- January 1948): 5-13.

Crumley, Carole L. 1995. "Heterarchy and the Analysis of Complex Societies." *Archeological Papers of the American Anthropological Association*, 6 (1): 1–5.

Fawcett, F. 1896a. "Rock-Cut Sepulchral Chambers in Malabar." *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland,* 25: 371–73.

Fawcett, F. 1896b. "Rock-Cut Sepulchral Chambers in Malabar." *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland,* 25: 371–73.

George, K. M. 1975. "Archaeology of Kerala Upto 1500 AD." PhD Thesis. Baroda: Maharaja Sayaji Rao University.

Indian Archaeology 1990–91: A Review. New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1995.

Indian Archaeology 2002–03: A Review. New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 2009.

Jaseera C. M. 2020. *Megalithic Pottery of Central Kerala*. PhD Thesis. Tanjavur: Tamil University.

Krishnaswami V.D. 1949. "*Megalithic Types of South India." Ancient India*, 5: 35-45.

Logan, William. 1887 [1951]. *Malabar: Vol*1. Madras: Government Press

Nihildas, N. 2014. *Archaeology of the Anjunad Valley, with Special Reference to the Megaliths and Rock Art, Idukki District, Kerala.* PhD Thesis. Pune: Deccan College Post Graduate and Research Institute.

Parapola, Asko. 1973. *Arguments for an Aryan Origin of South Indian Megaliths.* Tamil Nadu: State Department of Archaeology

Peter, Jenee. 2002. *Dimensions of Megalithic Culture of Kerala in Relation to Peninsular India: An Interdisciplinary Approach*. Ph.D Dissertation. Baroda: M.S. University.

Peter, Jenee. 2018. "Social Hierarchy and Mortuary Variability: The Iron Age Culture of Peninsular India with Special Reference to Kerala." *Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology*, 6: 515–28.

Rajesh, K P. 2019. "Misfortunes of the Megaliths of North Malabar: Revisiting the Umbrella Stones (Kodakkal) Site of Perambra, Calicut District." *Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology*, 7: 352–92.

Sathyamurthy T. 1992. *The Iron Age in India: A Report on Mangadu Excavation*. Thiruvananthapuram: Department of Archaeology, Government of Kerala.

Selvakumar, V. 2019. "Historical Archaeology in India: Iron Age-Historical Landscapes in the Lower Kāvéri Valley". Section President's Address, 80-th Session of the Indian History Congress. Kannur, December.

Sewell, Robert. 1882. *Lists of the Antiquarian Remains in the Presidency of Madras*. Madras: Government Press.

Shajan, K.P. V. Selvakumar, P. Radhika, K.P. Rajesh, K and Sreelatha Damodaran. 2014. "Archaeological Excavation at the Megalihic Site of Anakkara, Palakkad Dt, Kerala, South India: A Preliminary Report of 2008 Season". *Tamil Civilization*, Vol. 25 (1-4 Apr. 2013 - Jan. 2014): 25-51.

Thapar, B K. 1952. "Porkalam 1948: Excavation of Megalithic Urn Burial." *Ancient India* 8: 3–16.

Uesugi, Akinori, Ajit Kumar, G S Abhayan, S V Rajesh, and Yasuji Shimizu. 2020. "Excavations of Rock Cut Burials at Kuttikol, Kerala." In S V Rajesh, G S Abhayan, Ajit Kumar, and Ehsan RahmathIlahi Eds.). *The Archaeology of Burials: Examples from Indian Subcontinent*, II (396–419). New Delhi: New Bharatiya Book Corporation.

Uesugi, Akinori, C.S. Ambily, Ajit Kumar, G S Abhayan, and S V Rajesh. 2019. "Stone Beads from Megalithic Burial at Niramakulam, Kerala." In S V Rajesh, G S Abhayan, PreethaNayar, and Ehsan RahmathIlahi

(Eds.). *Human and Heritage: An Archaeological Spectrum of Asiatic Countries (Felicitation to Professor Ajit Kumar), Vol. 1*. New Delhi: New Bharatiya Book Corporation.

Uesugi, Akinori, C.S. Ambily, Ajit Kumar, S V Rajesh, and G S Abhayan. 2019. "A Study of Ceramic Sequence in the Megalithic Culture of Kerala." *Man and Environment*. XLIV (1): 21–32.

Varghese, Rachel A. 2013. *Interpreting the Ritual Complex of Nasranikunn: A Study of a Megalithic Complex in Central Kerala*. Master's Dissertation published as a limited monograph as part of Cadernosde Quaternárioe Pré-História, Série Arqueologia, vol.14. Portugal.

Varghese, Rachel A. 2018. "Monuments in Space: Towards Developing a Methodology to Record Spatial Information on Archaeological Sites". In Devadevan, Manu V. (Ed.) *Clio and Her Descendents: Essays for Kesavan Veluthat.* New Delhi: Primus Books.