

Origin and Authorship of Megalithic Culture in India

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Abstract. Etymologically speaking the word ‘megalith’ is derived from two Greek words megalithos meaning huge and lithoi meaning stone; hence, it denotes a huge stone. The term ‘megalith’ may be explained as ‘a grave or memorial erected in stone, whether dressed or in its natural form containing, enclosing or erected over the funerary assemblage’. Thus, it appears that the megaliths are essentially connected with some lithic appendages. But this impression is not correct as the Megalithic monuments are not always in stone. Due to the commonness observable in their funerary assemblage, concept and construction methods, graves without lithic appendages can also be included in this category.

Date of origin of this megalithic tradition, however, is problematic. Some believe that this tradition was spread to this region from the west. Gordon Childe thinks that the early centres of Megalithic architecture were situated near the Mediterranean, the Atlantic and the North Sea. According to him, it was from this region that the dolmen and the port-hole slab reached the Indian peninsula. The megaliths in India, according to Gordon Childe, are not likely to be affected by land borne impulses from Iran but were rather exposed to maritime influences. Rao places the origin of this culture somewhere in the east of the Mediterranean Sea.

Received : 30 July 2023

Revised : 22 September 2023

Accepted : 11 October 2023

Published : 30 November 2023

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Kumar, V. & Kumar, R. (2023). Origin and Authorship of Megalithic Culture in India. *Journal of History, Archaeology and Architecture*, 2: 2, pp. 173-180.

INTRODUCTION

Birth and death are the two most bewildering and important events in a man's life. Ever since the inception of the institution of a family and social character in his life, man has developed an inalienable attachment towards his kith and kin. Though, we do not know much about the reaction of the ancient community to birth, we have before us a large volume of material that speaks of his reaction to death. Since very primitive times, each community chose to follow a certain mode of disposal of the dead. A dead body was given ritualistic and ceremonious treatment in accordance with the current beliefs, customs and traditions. This attachment found expression in the careful selection of the place as well as the mode of disposal of the dead body. Beginning with the pit and urn burials of the Neolithic-Chalcolithic times, various changes occurred in the mode of disposal. These changes had culminated in the development of a peculiar way of disposal by the time of the Iron Age, which is widely known as the Megalithic culture. Megalithic culture has its own identity as far as burial practices are

concerned. Though there is a certain variation in the mode of construction of the burial, the Megalithic culture shows uniform characteristics, which are observable universally. This resemblance in burial construction led to a common nomenclature of 'megalith'.

The word 'megalith' is derived from two Greek words *megalithos*, mega meaning huge and *lithoi* meaning stone; hence, it denotes a huge stone. The term 'megalith' may be explained as 'a grave or memorial erected in stone, whether dressed or in its natural form containing, enclosing or erected over the funerary assemblage'. In the words of A. Sundara, "*the term 'megalith', in archaeology, is, as is well known, defined as a tomb built with big stones in natural forms or roughly dressed or even a grave marked with a prodigious rude stone or an excavation in soft rocks containing remains of dead human beings. It is also applied to erections of huge stones, memorial or religious in function. Besides graves without any lithic appendage, but by virtue of pottery their possession of certain other complex traits, especially pottery, commonly found in the other types of megaliths, are also classed as megaliths*" (Sundara, 1975:52-54). The discussion on megalithic burial in India started with the publication of Babington's article on Pandoo Coolies. In this article the term megaliths is absent. In many of the notes on Indian megaliths that were published subsequently till the third quarter of the nineteenth century the word does not figure. What is apparent in all discussions as seen in the existing literature on megaliths is the treatment of the term megaliths in lighter vein and a preference of the term Pandoo coolies instead of megaliths. Thereafter there were periodical attempts to define the term 'megaliths'. M. Wheeler in 1948 describes megaliths as "those monuments, which are built of rough, large and undressed block of stones" (Wheeler, 1948:181-308). Taking insights from New Archaeology and structural anthropology U.S. Moorti defines megaliths to "mean a socio-religious expression of burying the deceased in a grave which may/may not have lithic appendage." The influence of the same theoretical position can be seen in Shereen Ratnagar. She suggests that "Megaliths may be studied not only as evidence for migration routes, but as territorial markers appearing in situations where external threat, or intensified culture contact, or extension of agriculture, lead to competition over land or crucial resource areas, so that descent groups acquire a new importance as owners and controllers of resources."

The term 'megalith' in general may be explained as 'a grave or memorial erected in stone, whether dressed or in its natural form containing, enclosing or erected over the funerary assemblage'. Thus, it appears that the megaliths are essentially connected with some lithic appendages. But this impression is not correct as the Megalithic monuments are not always in stone. Due to the commonness observable in their funerary assemblage, concept and constructional methods, graves without lithic appendages can also be included in this category. The varieties of megaliths of Europe include the temples of Malta, the stone alignments of Brittany, stone circles of Britain (that include Stonehenge) and the like.

Megalithic culture has no regional bounds as its cultural remnants are found all over the world. These monuments are found in Europe, Africa and Asia, including in the far eastern countries. In the neighbourhood of the Indian sub-continent, the presence of this culture is noticed in Iran and Baluchistan, extending up to Pakistan. In northern India, this culture is sporadic in occurrence as compared to south India. But the presence of this culture is evident from a scanty distribution of Megalithic monuments in the Aravali range, the Himalayan foothills, the Kashmir region and in Sindh in north-western India. Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh and the north-eastern states have also reported megaliths. Megalithic practices are observed by aboriginal tribes of India even to this day. The *Kurumbaras* of Arcot district erect small dolmens. Adjoining the north-eastern state of Arunachal Pradesh this practice is noticed among *Gadaba*, *Bondo* and *Munda* tribes in districts of Koraput and

Keonjhar in southern Orissa. The north-eastern states are rich in this tradition. *Khasis* in Assam and *Mundas* in the Chota Nagpur region erect *menhirs* over the burials. Recently these have also been discovered in excavations from sites in Almora and Kashmir. The survival of the Megalithic practice for over 2,000 years after its active period is interesting.

CHRONOLOGY OF MEGALITHIC CULTURE IN INDIA

Based on archaeological evidence (first on the basis of Brahmagiri excavation, dating the megaliths on the basis of a characteristic ceramic (pottery) type – the Black and Red Ware (BRW), which is available in all types of megaliths in South India.), these cultures are placed between the 3rd c. BCE and the 1st c. CE. But, Megalithic culture of South India had a much larger chronological span.

The problem in ascertaining the chronological span of the megalithic cultures in South India lies in the fact that only a few radiocarbon dates are so far available from megalithic habitations. The habitations site at Hallur gave a 14 date of 1000 BCE for the earliest phase of these cultures. This phase is correlated with the graves at Tadakanahalli, 4 kms away from this site. Two radiocarbon dates for the sites at Naikund and Takalghat places Vidarbha megaliths in *circa* 600 BCE. In Tamilnadu, Paiyampalli recorded a 14 date of *circa* 4th c. BCE. On the basis of explorations and excavations, the date of the megaliths is pushed in North Karnataka region as early as 1200 B.C. As the megalithic culture overlapped with the end phases of Neolithic-chalcolithic culture, it is found in association with neolithic-chalcolithic wares at the lower end and with the rouletted ware (Romano-Indian rouletted grey ware pottery is the iconic marker of the overseas reach of the subcontinent at the turn of the first millennium CE) at the upper end. In other words, the late phase of these cultures merges with the early historical period. On this basis the time bracket of the megalithic cultures in South India may be placed between 1000 BCE and 100 CE. However, the available archaeological data suggests that the period of their maximum popularity lies somewhere between 600 BCE and 100 CE.

ORIGIN AND AUTHORSHIP

The Megalithic culture with its worldwide distribution has always posed a challenge to archaeologists regarding the place of its origin and the people responsible for it. Though there are regional variations, the theme and character of the Megalithic monuments remains the same throughout the world.

Gordon Childe thinks that the early centres of Megalithic architecture were situated near the Mediterranean, the Atlantic and the North Sea. According to him, it was from this region that the dolmen and the port-hole slab reached the Indian peninsula (Childe, 1948: 4-13). The megaliths in south India, according to Gordon Childe, are not likely to be affected by land borne impulses from Iran but were rather exposed to maritime influences. D.H. Gordon associates this culture ‘with the people whose ships piled between the Indian coast and in southern Arabia in the first half of the first millennium BCE and through them in some way with the megalith-builders of the west’ (Gordon, 1958). Haimendorf also favours immigration by sea or the southward movement along the western coast of India. Rao (1972:137-183) also places the origin of this culture somewhere in the east of the Mediterranean Sea. On the basis of the similarity noticed in the graffiti marks found on Megalithic pottery with the alphabetical signs of the pre-historic writings found in the Mediterranean region, Yadu Vanshi concluded that the people responsible for the Megalithic culture in India were the original settlers of the Mediterranean region. Similarly, depending on the study of graffiti marks G. Yazdari believes that the Turarian people were responsible for the spread of the Megalithic culture. Sunadra (1977:52-54) also believes that the Megalithic culture in India was introduced from the Mediterranean region.

Elliot Smith holds the view that the megaliths had their beginning in the proto-dynastic Egypt from where they spread to other places. Longhurst (1915:39-41) favours the Egyptian culture as the producer of megaliths in the Deccan around 1000 BCE. G. S. Ghurya in his article on, 'Funerary monuments of India' states that Indian megaliths are ultimately connected with Egyptian funerary monuments.

Whereas many scholars strongly propound the Mediterranean origin for Megalithic practices, Haimendorf has come out with the theory that the Megalithic practices of South East Asia started in the late Stone Age. He says that the 'centre of diffusion of megalithism originated somewhere in Eastern Assam, North Burma or South-west China'. According to him, 'The megalithic types of stone circles and *menhirs* of the South-East Asiatic type, which still flourishes among Godabas, Bondos and Bastar Gonds reached peninsular India in Late Neolithic times and from an eastern direction, whereas the dolmen and the port-hole reached India from Mediterranean regions'. In his paper 'The problem of megalithic cultures of Middle India' Haimendorf further states that the purpose and meaning of the Megalithic monuments of the Gadabas and Bondos have the same basic idea as that of the Assam tribes (Heimendorf 1945: 73-86).

Among the many theories advanced for the origin of megaliths in India, one proposed by Wheeler gives a definite date for the beginning of the Megalithic culture of south India on the basis of the stratigraphy furnished by excavations at Brahmagiri, to the beginning of the third century BCE, but on the question of the origin of Megalithic architecture in India, he is silent although he mentions the possible resemblance of Indian Megalithic types with the Megalithic structures of western Asia and Europe. He attributes the presence of iron and black and red ware in the southern Megalithic culture to the Gangetic plains and Malwa respectively. The culture was represented at the site by pit circles and cist circles. Similarly Gordon (1958: 266), Gupta (1971: 4-18) and Ramachandran (1971: 107-109) quote parallels in cairns, cist and rock-cut underground caves in south Arabian countries.

Gupta (1971) favours the Gulf of Oman area as the immediate source or springboard for Indian megaliths. South-eastern Arabia with its outlets in the Gulf of Oman may be taken as the epicentre of the Baluchi Cairn as also peninsular Indian megaliths. It was in the islands in the Gulf of Oman that several traditions from Palestine, Mesopotamia and southern Arabia came along with traders and got fused. The graves discovered in south Arabian sites have actually yielded items from these regions. Thus, through the natural outlet of the Gulf of Oman, the people seem to have moved out eastwards following the traditional sea route along the Makran coast. The Megalithic tradition traveled up to the Western Ghats of India. But we do not visualize the voyage across the high seas from the Gulf to the Western Ghats, although its possibility cannot be ruled out completely.

Banerjee (1965: 21) suggests that the megaliths in India were possibly inspired by the cairn burial of Baluchistan, Persia and Baluchi Makran and were introduced in south India from the north and flourished between circa 700 BCE and 200 CE. Due to the presence of a technologically advanced iron industry with the south Indian megaliths, Banerjee bases his arguments around the antiquity of iron in India and thus extends a migration theory from the north to the south. While examining Banerjee's view one can only mention port hole, cist and cairns whereas the other types are completely omitted. Heine Geldern agrees with Banerjee that the port hole cists of south India are derived from port hole slab graves of Tepe Sialk and the port hole dolmens of Caucasia. It is likely that the western Asiatic maritime communities practicing Megalithic architecture entered south India through the Persian Gulf or southern Arabia in the hope of founding a new colony. They might have reached the Western Ghats towards the close of the second millennium BCE and in the long-run this Megalithic idea penetrated the hinterland of Mysore and the other regions of the Deccan and south India.

Dikshit in his paper on 'The origin and distribution of Megaliths in India' (1969: 10) opines that the Indian megaliths appear with two different traits introduced by different people at different times. While some of the types seem to have been imported, quite a few evolved independently. Urn burial and inhumation in pits are indigenous contributions of the Neolithic-Chalcolithic communities of south India. It is likely that the western Asiatic maritime communities practicing Megalithic culture entered south India through the Persian Gulf or through southern Arabia.

Leshnik (1969: 498-511) and Heine-Geldern (1965: 87-115) have elaborated on the central Asian theory and state that the nomads of central Asia are the authors of Indian megaliths. Allchin and Soundara Rajan take the Indian megaliths as a developing complex with several streams of influence combining in them. Obviously, the evidence is extremely slender and the theories are generally based on some formal similarities in architectural features and rarely on pottery and tools and weapons. In fact, the most difficult aspect of the problem is the chronological and spatial gap between the west Asian and Indian examples: while most of the typical Indian megaliths belong to the Iron Age of post-1000 BCE date, most of the west Asian megaliths end around 1500 BCE, i.e., during the last phase of the Bronze Age. It is as yet not certain when and how iron technology developed in India, the theory of its Greek origin around 500 BCE proposed by Gordon and Wheeler having long been rejected since at sites like Hallur and Atranjikhhera iron is dated at 1000 BCE. But whether it has an indigenous origin or had a two-way entry into India, one over land and the other maritime, from west Asia is yet to be established on independent grounds. Similarly, typical megalith types are practically absent between the Gulf of Oman and Sind.

From this discussion it appears that a majority of the scholars are inclined to place the origin of the Megalithic culture in the Mediterranean region, which seems to be correct. While accepting the Mediterranean region as the centre of origin of the Megalithic culture in general, extra precaution may be necessary in dealing with Indian megaliths as there seems to be more than one source and route of introduction of this culture in the Indian sub-continent. On typological consideration, we can trace the area of inspiration to at least four types: (i) stone circle, (ii) dolmen, (iii) *menhirs*, and (iv) terracotta Sarcophagus. Whereas the position of the dolmen is clear, there can be no doubt in assigning its origin to the Mediterranean region, but the other three types may be considered separately to make the point clear.

STONE CIRCLES

It is usually believed that stone circles of central India have been directly influenced by those of Baluchistan, Pakistan and the Makran region. But it appears that this question may need re-thinking because, firstly the cairn circles of Baluchistan, Pakistan and the Makran region typologically differ from central Indian cairn circles. Had these central Indian burials got their inspiration from the western region, they would have certainly showed a similarity in the burial construction.

It appears that we have to look at Western Europe as the place of origin for the central Indian megaliths rather than to the western region. The most convincing evidence is provided probably by the characteristic cup-mark found on the megaliths of both these regions. Much similarity is also observed in the construction of burial monuments and even in funerary assemblage. Taking into consideration the evidence discussed we may be justified in speaking of Western Europe as the region which lent impetus to the megaliths of central India. A glance at the distribution of Megalithic sites throughout the world would show that a majority of them are concentrated on sea coasts. It has already been suggested by scholars that the Megalithic culture reached India through maritime contacts. But these Megalithic practices were not observed in the coastal regions because in the western region of Maharashtra Chalcolithic culture was already predominant, as evidenced at Jorwe, Navdatoli and

Navasa by the time Megalithic practices arrived there. The Chalcolithic people might not have taken kindly to these newly introduced practices initially, which would explain the paucity of Megalithic remains in this region. Taking into consideration all the features there seems to be greater justification for regarding Western Europe as the region which influenced the Vidarbha megaliths.

MENHIRS

Menhirs are found sporadically in almost all parts of south India. They are found in abundance in the regions of eastern Madhya Pradesh, Chota Nagpur and the north-eastern states. They are also noticed in Jammu and Kashmir. The excavator of Burzhom near Srinagar is inclined to believe that the *menhirs* at this site were erected towards the end of the Neolithic period. Considering the early date of *menhirs* in north India and the absence of such Megalithic monuments in the variety on the western fringes we may safely conclude that the practice of erecting *menhirs* entered India somewhere from the eastern direction and probably by an over land route.

SARCOPHAGUS

Chaldea (a region in Iraq) is the only region which appears to have lent inspiration to this type of burials in India. Except in south India and in the regions of Chaldea, these types of burial coffins are not reported from anywhere else. Again, we have to theorize maritime contact for the introduction of this practice as the intervening region between south India and Chaldea.

Thus, from this discussion it follows that various types of Megalithic burial practices were introduced from different places. A majority of Indian Megalithic types were introduced via the sea route, while only one type, i.e., *menhirs* seems to have been introduced via the land route, that to from the eastern direction.

A word may be said here regarding the people who introduced these practices in India. The coincidence of this distribution of Megalithic monuments with the regions inhabited by the people speaking the Dravidian language led Haimendorf to think that the Megalithic builders of India were Dravidians and that they migrated from Baluchistan. Banerjee and Subrahmanyam also agree that the Megalithic burials were constructed by Dravidians. Asko Parpola painstakingly collected literary and archaeological evidence for the Aryan origin of Indian megaliths. Whether the Dravidians had already settled in south India before they adopted the Megalithic culture or they imbibed it first and migrated to this region from elsewhere is a problem that does not admit a definite answer.

The study of the skeletal remains from Harappa has revealed Dravidian elements and according to some scholars they compare favourably with specimens recorded from various equally ancient sites in western Asia like Ur, Al Ubaid and Kish as also with those recovered from somewhat later ones in India, such as Adhichanallur and Maski. Sen (1969: 94-98), who compared the skeletal remains of the Megalithic people with those of the Harappan population, also finds some similarity in the racial composition. This evidence may show that the Dravidians had reached the Indian sub-continent before the second millennium BC and without Megalithic burial practices.

An interpretation of this evidence leads us to believe that the Dravidians were the inhabitants of south India by the time the Megalithic culture reached this part and they imbibed this culture from some other regions of the world. Otherwise there is no convincing evidence to prove migration of large hoards of foreign people into south India with Megalithic practices.

It has already been pointed out that various forms of Megalithic practices have been borrowed from different regions through different routes. The induction of the Megalithic culture in India certainly cannot be attributed to any single specific group trafficking this cult. It can be attributed

only to indigenous folks collecting these concepts from foreign shores and lands with which they might have come into contact. When we examine classical Indian literature we find interesting details regarding the erection of a monument over bones or relics. The *Satapatha Brahmana* mentions the proper time prescribed for the erection of a monument. About the direction for the selection of the site for such a monument, the text says that it should have charming objects to its north or south or water to the west or north. Further, the site should not be visible from the village (XII.8.1:29.1.2). A few scattered references are found in the *Rig Veda* in connection with the funeral practices of the Aryans. While making *losta-citti* (i.e., laying the clods of earth) the *Rig Veda* refers to *sthuna* or pillar indicating a wooden post (X.13.12 and X.18.13). In the excavations of two burial mounds at Lauriya Nandangarh a wooden post was found in the centre of each of the two mounds at the spot where the bones were deposited.

CONCLUSION

Though a lot of sporadic work has been done in the field of Megalithic studies, what has been lacking is a coordinated and concentrated attempt to resolve the problem of the origin and authorship of the megaliths in India. In this venture archaeologists and social and physical anthropologists have to lend their hand for a proper solution to the problem of the origin and authorship of megaliths in India. It is for archaeologists to study the structural typology of the monuments and try to work out a typological sequence on this basis. This should be supplemented by a thorough classification of pottery types and other material like beads, and more especially iron tools. Attempt should also be made to analyze the iron tools and ores used, as also their knowledge of carbunishing. Side by side, a study of the skeleton remains on an area-wise and type-wise classification should be attempted to find out if different racial types were responsible for different types of Megalithic monuments and pottery. After such an analysis is done it may be possible to correlate and place in proper perspective the various Megalithic types and material that have already been brought to light. A broad evolutionary sequence may then be worked out. This in turn can be of great help in studying the data already available from areas outside so as to tackle the question of the origin and authorship of the Indian megaliths.

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