

Megalithic Cultures

बृहद्पाषाणिक संस्कृतियाँ



Dr. Anil Kumar

Professor

Ancient Indian History and Archaeology

University of Lucknow

anilkumararch@gmail.com

kumar_anil@lkouniv.ac.in

Introduction

- ✓ According to V. Gordon Childe the term 'Megalith' is derived from two Greek words, *me-gas* means large and *lithos* means stone and originally introduced by antiquaries to describe a fairly easily definable class of monuments in western and northern Europe, consisting of huge, undressed stones.
- ✓ In other words, the Megaliths usually refer to the burials made of large stones in graveyard away from the habitation area.
- ✓ Meadows Taylor believed that resemblances of the east and west were not merely accidental and that "the actual monuments of celto-scythian tribes are found in India and being examined are found to agree in all respects with those of Europe."
- ✓ James Fergusson argued that they were all "erected by partially civilized races after they had come in contact with the Romans." He also stated that it was difficult to comprehend "how and when intercourse could have taken place which led to their similarity."
- ✓ People like Dubreuil argued an Aryan origin for the megaliths.
- ✓ Elliot and Perry saw the south Indian megaliths and monumental stone architecture as one of the elements reflecting a manifestation of the Egyptian archaic civilization as far back as 1923.
- ✓ In 1872, Fergusson brought out his excellent work entitled "Rude Stone Monuments in all Countries: their age and uses. This first attracted the attention of scholars.

Types of megaliths

- ▲ The megaliths are, indeed, among the most widespread remains of stone both in time and space. Various types of megaliths are reported from different parts of India.
- ▲ These structures have been classified variously by different scholars resulting in varied typologies.
- ▲ There are large numbers of megaliths found all over world but we may group the similar types together. The types of megalithic structures can be divided into two categories, the "**Poly-lithic type**" and the "**Monolithic type**".
- ▲ Three basic types of megaliths can be identified in India, viz., a) Megaliths associated with chamber tombs; b) Megaliths unchambered tombs and c) Megaliths not associated with burials.

- ⇒ The **Chamber tombs** usually consisted of a chamber composed of two or four vertical slabs of stone, topped by a horizontal capstone.
- ⇒ If the chamber was found to be fully underground it is called a cist, if it was semi-subterranean it is called a dolmenoid cist and if it was found to be fully above the ground it is known as a dolmen.
- ⇒ The **Unchambered burials** are of three types, viz., pit burials, urn burials and the sarcophagus burials.
- ⇒ In pit burials the funerary remains were placed in a pit.
- ⇒ Sometimes the pit was found to be marked by a circle of large stones, which is known as a pit circle.
- ⇒ If it is found to have a heap of large stones piled on the top it is called a cairn.
- ⇒ If both the circle of stones and the piled –up stones are present it is known as a cairn-stone circle.
- ⇒ A **pit burial** marked by a single, huge free –standing stone is known as a *menhir*.
- ⇒ Urn burials have the funerary remains placed in an urn, while the sarcophagus burials consist of a terracotta trough, often with legs and a lid.
- ⇒ These last two types are identified as megalithic burials even if they are not marked with stones.
- ⇒ **Burials in rock-cut caves** are also counted among the megalithic burials.
- ⇒ The rock cut chambers are found mainly in the lateritic zones of Kerala and south Karnataka.
- ⇒ They are carved out in the lateritic deposits. They are sometime multichambered, pillared and provided with bench.
 - At Ummichiipoyh, a flight of steps were cut as entrance passage of the cave. The entrance is generally covered by cap stone.
- ⇒ Sometimes, the megaliths are **not connected with burials**. Some of them are simple arrangements of large stones in a geometric pattern.
- ⇒ Their precise significance cannot be determined. Perhaps they signified memorials for the dead.
- ⇒ Generally it is believed that they represented sacred spots for the associated society.
- ⇒ The separation of the abode of the living from the dead signifies a shift in the belief systems of the people.
- ⇒ However, it is rather difficult to go deeper into the religion and rituals they represented.

Dolmen

- ✧ This is a type of megalith which is made in single chamber tomb, usually consisting of three or more upright stones supporting a large flat horizontal capstone.
- ✧ Dolmens were usually covered with earth or smaller stones to form a barrow.
- ✧ But in many cases that covering has weathered away, leaving only the stone “skeleton” of the burial mound intact.
- ✧ The word dolmen, which derives from Breton **t(d)ao**l meaning table and **men or min** meaning stone.
- ✧ Dolmens are present in the Middle East, North Africa, Asia (large numbers exist in Korea), and India.
- ✧ The structures functioned as burial chambers or as sites of ancient cult worship, for example to an earth or fertility goddess.
- ✧ It is a table stone/single slab of stone resting on some supporting stones or supported by several orthostatic boulders or slab which encloses a space or chamber beneath the table stone or capstone.
- ✧ The orthostats and capstones might be formed either of undressed rough blocks of stone or partly dressed flattish stones.
- ✧ There are many sub-types of this in Tamilnadu as Dolmenoid cist with multiple orthostats, Dolmenoid cist with four orthostats with U-shaped port-hole in the east or west, Dolmenoid cist

with four orthostats with U-shaped port-hole on the top corner of the eastern orthostats and Dolemenoid cist with four orthostats with slab-circles.

- ✧ It may or may not be fully or partially covered by a barrow or a cairn. A dolmen may be with or without port hole.

Cairn

- ✦ A Cairn is a human-made pile of stones, often in conical form. They are usually found in uplands, on moorland, on mountaintops, or near waterways.
- ✦ In modern times Cairns are often erected as landmarks. In ancient times they were erected as sepulchral monuments or used for practical and astronomical purposes.
- ✦ These vary from loose, small piles of stones to elaborate feats of engineering.
- ✦ It is a box grave built of stone slabs, normally below the natural surface.
- ✦ It is usually consisted of a single stone of orthostate for each side and covered by a capstone on top. Sometimes it may also have a floor stone.
- ✦ One of the orthostate is sometimes pierced with a circular or semicircular or trapezoidal opening.
- ✦ When the opening is semi-circular it is cut into the top of the orthostate immediately under the cupstone.
- ✦ Such opening is called a port hole, and the cist with such port-hole opening is called a port hole cist.

Cist

- ☆ A cist or kist was used as encasements for dead bodies.
- ☆ It might have associations with other monuments.
- ☆ It would not be uncommon to find several cists close with each other in the cairn or barrow.
- ☆ The presence of ornaments within an excavated cist, indicate the wealth or prominence of the interred individual.
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Urn burials

- ✦ Urn are made of terracotta.
- ✦ They are found placed in a pit with or without any kind of lithic appendages.
- ✦ The lithic appendages may be cist, dolmen, and cairn with or without periphery boulders or slabs. Urn burials are common in Tamilnadu and Kerala.
- ✦ They are also found in southern Karnataka.
- ✦ Adichchanalur is one of the unique and best examples of urn burial site in Tamilnadu.
- ✦ The size of urn may vary from small pot to large tall jars.
- ✦ Urns of such various sizes were recovered from Chingleput.
- ✦ Shape of an urn, especially made for burial having wide mouth, bulbous or globular body and conical or sagging base is generally called a pyriform.
- ✦ They often have decoration of bands on the neck.

Sarcophagus burials

- Sarcophagus burials are also made of terracotta, placed in a pit with or without any kind of lithic appendages.
- Sarcophagi can be boat-shaped, animal shaped or legged.
- It is boatshaped and contains skeletal remains of a child.
- A ram-shaped sarcophagus has been recovered at Sankavaram in the Cuddapah district. Legged sarcophagi are common in Chingleput district and in Coimbatore region.
- Sarcophagi placed inside stone circle were reported from Perambu, Kunnattur, Pallavaram., Sittampur and Kanthadu in Tamilnadu.
- They were also found placed inside cist and dolmen from North Arcot.
- In the legged variety of sarcophagus, the legs vary from minimum two to maximum 24.
- At Paiyampalli a sarcophagus with maximum 24 legs was reported.

Topikals

- ▲ It is a Hindi corrupt Tamil word (*Topi* a Hindi word meaning cap, and *Kal*, a Tamil word for stone).
- ▲ According to Babington it is also known as 'hatstone'.
- ▲ It is restricted to Kerala region.
- ▲ Topikals and Kudaikals are characteristic chamber burials mainly found in Kerala.
- ▲ Topikal is made by vertically placing three stones, triangular in shape, that incline inwardly at top, and on the top a plano-convex cap stone is placed.

Kodaikals/Hood Stone

- ✓ Kodaikals are actually pit or underground chamber that is covered by a plano-convex capstone.
- ✓ Inside the pit grave goods with a large pot are placed in vertical position.
- ✓ A dome-shaped dressed laterite stone resting with its flat surface/face directly on the ground.
- ✓ This type of burial is restricted to the Kerala region.
- ✓ It bears a resemblance to the handleless hollow umbrella called the Kundan-Kudai.
- ✓ Babington calls it 'umbrella stone'.

Menhir

- ☆ A Menhir is a stone Monolithic standing vertically. It is the simplest of all megalithic structures.
- ☆ It consists of a single but huge stone called monolith, planted on the ground, as rule, at or near the burial spot.
- ☆ It may be miniature in size or gigantic in height, with its base fixed into the earth.
- ☆ It could also exist as part of a group of similar stones.
- ☆ They have different sizes with uneven and square shapes, often tapering towards the top.
- ☆ Menhirs are widely distributed across different continents viz., Europe, Africa, and Asia.
- ☆ Menhirs are mentioned in ancient Tamil literature as *nadukal* and are often called *Pandukkal* or *Pandil*.
- ☆ Menhirs are upright monolithic stones of varied height.
- ☆ Menhirs are generally devoid of any skeletal and cultural materials.
- ☆ However, in some cases in Kerala and southern Karnataka menhirs are found erected on pit burials.
- ☆ There is another variety of monolithic stones known as triangular stone.
- ☆ Such triangular stones are found at several places in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka.
- ☆ Association of triangular stones with mortuary practice is difficult to ascertain because of lack of excavations.
- ☆ However, their location close to megalithic burials suggests their association with megalithic culture.

Megalithic Alignments

- ▲ Alignments are considered as monuments.
- ▲ In alignments, several monolithic stones are placed parallel in patterns of square or diagonals.
- ▲ One of the early discoveries of alignments near Hyderabad was made by Allchin.
- ▲ Alignments are found in Raichur, Gulbarga, Mahabubnagar and Nalgonda districts of Karnataka-Andhra region.
- ▲ At Hanamasagar in Gulbarga district an alignments was found having 1000 upright stones.
- ▲ At Maski and Piklihal alignments revealed no association with burial or offerings.

Rook cut caves

- The practice of placing the dead in tombs (caves) cut out of lateritic rock in Kerala is definitely to be associated with the megalithic structures.

Stone Circle

- A Stone Circle is a monument of standing stones arranged in a circle usually dated to megalithic period.
- The arrangement of the stones may be in a circle, in the form of an ellipse, or more rarely a setting of four stones laid on an arc of a circle.
- The type varies from region to region.
- As the name signifies, it is a circle (but sometimes oval or irregular in plan) built of juxtaposed stones.
- It is normally but not always be adjacent to a burial ground. It is known as *Sindibor* the Bondos of Odisha

Stone seats

- ✦ The stone seats of Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland are mere stone slabs ceremonially placed under a village tree and apart from serving a ritualistic need are useful as seats for travelers.
- ✦ Sometimes they overlie a pot or pit containing bones or decapitated heads (collected during the raids) prior to their removal to clan ossuary or village chief's or the head hunter's residence.

✚ A unique type discovered at Katapura was **anthropomorphic figure carved out of single slab**. There are several sites reported having anthropomorphic figure distributed in central Godavari Valley to Tamil Nadu. They are found associated with cist and dolmen entombed by circle. Morphologically, these huge anthropomorphic figures on stones have resemblance with the anthropomorphic figures of copper hoard culture.

However, all typological classifications made by different scholars suffer from problems created by the complexity, diverse structures and distinctiveness of the megaliths in each region. In different parts of the world, there begin the customs of erecting megaliths on a large scale among different communities from the Neolithic times onwards and this continued in the bronze age and up to the prehistoric period. But in some parts of India particularly in Odisha, Manipur, Meghalaya and Nagaland, Megalithic culture is still practiced by different tribal communities in the same way or in some modified forms. Among these tribal communities Megalithism is a living culture.

Distribution pattern of Megalithic sites in India

- ✓ The first excavation of Megalithic monuments also took place more than a century ago.
- ✓ In the last quarter of the 19th century, Dr. Jagor first excavated in the classic site of Adicanallur in the Tirunelveli district, Tamil Nadu.
- ✓ The extensive site of Junapani, near Nagpur in Maharashtra was also excavated on a small scale by Rivett-Carnac.

- ✓ Simultaneously, extensive exploration in the Madras region continued, resulting in the publication of the list of antiquarian remains in the Presidency of Madras by Sewell in 1882.
- ✓ At the turn of the century, Robert Bruce Foote brought out an excellent Catalogue of antiquities, including megaliths.
- ✓ In the later years of the 19th century, Alexander Rea (1902-03) excavated a number of megalithic sites in South India.
- ✓ The classic site of Adichanallur was also re-excavated in 1903-04 by Louis Laticque. The remarkable variety and distinctive natures of the Indian Megalithic cultures were then placed before the world by Rea in 1915, when he published the Catalogue of the Prehistoric antiquities from Adichanallur and Perumbair.
- ✓ A decade later, Hunt (1924) published the result of the excavation of Megalithic graves in Andhra Pradesh.
- ✓ By the end of the first quarter of the 20th century, a number of Megalithic sites had been excavated.
- ✓ However, the first attempt to place the South Indian Megaliths in a chronological framework was by Sir Mortimer Wheeler, who excavated the sites of Brahmagiri and Chandravalli in Karnataka.
- ✓ In 1962, it appeared that the megaliths, that is, huge stone monuments, were a special feature of South India.

Preliminary classification had shown regional types. Wheeler's excavation at Brahmagiri showed that these were not as old as once believed. This was confirmed by subsequent excavations at Sanur, Maski and other places. While studying the Karnataka megalithic monuments A. Sundara concluded that "the varied tomb types in different geological zones are essentially due to the traditional affiliations rather than environmental influence."

The megalithic builders at Hallur and further south at Paiyampalli, were not only adept at quarrying all kinds of stones, but they made a judicious use of these rocks. They employed a particular stone for a particular part of the tomb. Excavation of four sites at Heggadehalli revealed some new types of burials, which seem to be unique.

An extension of the South Indian Megaliths to Vidarbha has come to light by the excavation at Junapani and subsequent full-fledged excavations at Khapa and Muhurjhari. The excavations at Khapa and Mahurjhari and another site at Naikund have supported that the megaliths belonged to a particular section of the community or people in each region. At Khapa, situated on the left bank of the river Krishna there are a number of megaliths in the form of stone circles, whereas on the opposite side at Takelghat, there is a habitation site. The excavation of the habitation site on the opposite side at Takalghat gave some idea of the houses these people lived in.

On the evidence of C-14 date from Takalghat, is placed around 556 B.C. Takalghat megalithic culture is believed to be similar to that of Hallur in Karnataka. Compared to Khapa, Mahurjhari from Nagpur is considered as a megalithic haven. The megalithic monuments found in Pune district might be just memorial structure.

A new dimension to the megalithic problem in India was revealed with the discovery of megaliths in the districts of Banda, Allahabad, Mizapur and Varanasi located in south-eastern Uttar Pradesh. The monuments called as cairns and cists are comparatively sparsely distributed near the junction of the northeast slope of the Vindhya, and in the Ganga plains. There are differences in the materials used for constructing the structures.

It has been found at all excavated sites at Varanasi, Allahabad, Mirzapur and Banda that their makers dug fairly deep pits, deposited the funerary goods and covered them with hemispherical cairns of boulders bounded by stone circle. In case of a cist, a similar pit was dug and a box-like chamber was prepared with orthostats. The box was packed with small stones, and covered with massive single stone slab resting directly on the four uprights.

Interestingly, unlike in the south India, south-eastern Uttar Pradesh megaliths reflect the cultural change. The basic types- cairns, stone circles and cists-remain the same, but the grave goods consist, instead of microliths, iron objects like sickle, adze, arrowhead and dagger. There was

a significant variation in the livelihood pattern between the two zones. Iron had replaced stone and copper and, as the evidence from Kotia in Allahabad shows, these were made local iron smiths. On the opposite bank of the River Belan at Koldihwa and Khajuri megaliths belonging to Chalcolithic cultures were found.

It is obvious that these regions are not exclusive of each other. Some common elements can be traced among the cultures. Similarities and dissimilarities of ceramic fabrics and typology, presence and absence of iron, and concentration or otherwise of certain megalithic types in certain regions.

In South India the earliest iron objects appear in connection with the megalithic sites. At most of the sites the earlier Neolithic phase overlaps with the megalithic cultural levels. In Tamil Nadu the megaliths are found in the sites of Amritamangalam, Sanur, Adichanallur, Kodumanal, Tenkasi, Kayal, Kalugumalai, etc. In Kerala, megalithic burials have been discovered in Pulimattu, Tengakkal, Muthukar, Peria Kanal, Machad, Mangadu, etc.. Karnataka is rich in megalithic remains and important sites include Brahmagiri, Maski, Hanamsagar and Hallur. In the Andhra Pradesh Kadambapur, Nagarjunkonda, Gallapalli and Amravati can be identified as the major megalithic sites.

Chronology

- ▲ Based on the archaeological evidence (first on the basis of Brahmagiri), these cultures are placed between the 3rd century B.C. and the 1st A.D., Megalithic culture of south India had a much larger chronological span.
- ▲ The habitations site at Hallur gave a C¹⁴ date of 1000 B.C. for the earliest phase of these cultures
- ▲ Two radiocarbon dates for the sites at Naikund and Takalghar places Vidarbha megaliths in 600 B.C.
- ▲ In Tamilnadu, Paiyampalli recoded a C¹⁴ date of 4th century B.C.
- ▲ On the basis of explorations and excavations, the date of the megaliths is pushed in north Karnataka region as early as 1200 B.C.
- ▲ The available archaeological data suggests that the period of their maximum popularity lies somewhere between 600 B.C. and 100 A.D.

Grave goods from Megalithic burials

- The megalithic burials have yielded a variety of objects, which prove to be very important in the of megalithic culture.
- It is observed that right from the later Palaeolithic period, an intentional burial was accorded to the dead for manifold motives.
- The megalithic people were construct elaborate tombs.
- They furnished them with as many essential objects as they could afford.
- They thought this practice to be necessary as they believed in after-life of the dead. And so, dead were suitably provided for a place to live in with goods of their essential needs.
- In the Indian megalithic especially in south India, the grave good consisted of a large variety of pottery, weapons and implements mostly of iron but often of stone or copper, ornaments and food as indicated by the presence of paddy husk and chaff and other cereals, skeletal remains of animals.

Characteristics

1. Agriculture

- a. Their economy was based on agriculture.
- b. The megaliths people were responsible for the introduction of the advance methods of agriculture on a large scale, based on irrigation.
- c. The megalithic people introduce the **tank-irrigation** in south India and thus brought a revolutionary change in the agricultural system.
- d. Rice, an essentially irrigational crop, served as their staple food.

- e. Paddy husks and rarely paddy grains are reported from a number of excavated graves from all over the region.
- f. The archaeo-botanical evidence indicates the cultivation of other crops too as Ragi, wheat, millet, barley, horse gram, black gram, green gram, common pea, grass pea, jujube, lentil, cotton, etc.

2. Pastoralism

- a. Megalithic sites have yielded evidence of the remains of the domesticated animals like cattle, sheep, goat, dog, horse, buffalo, ass, etc.
- b. On the basis of the analysis of these faunal remains at different sites, it is inferred that cattle including buffalo predominates over other domesticated species at these sites.
- c. The occurrence of remains of domesticated pig and fowl suggests pig rearing and poultry farming on a small scale at many of the sites.

3. Hunting and Fishing

- a. Equipments of hunting like arrowheads, spears, javelins and sling balls would indicate hunting was in practice for food supply.
- b. The occurrence of skeletal remains of wild fauna from different sites indicate these wild species were hunted and formed part of their dietary system.
- c. The evidence in the form of terracotta net sinkers from Takalghat and fish-hooks from Khapa and Tangal besides the actual skeletal remains of fish reflect that fishing was also practiced.

4. Industries and Crafts- Metal, Wood Ceramics and other objects

The industrial activities such as smithery, carpentry, pottery making, etc. formed other economic activities of megalithic society.

a. Metal

- i. There are many megalithic sites which were the production sites of metals like iron, copper, gold, silver etc.
- ii. The available archaeological evidence in the form of crucibles, smelting-furnaces, and presence of material like iron ore pieces, iron slag, copper slag and traces of copper, gold mines or the mineral resources at or near to these sites is suggestive of smithery.
- iii. The available archaeological evidence indicates the utilization of metal implements such as axes, ploughshares, hoes, sickles, spades, etc.
- iv. Adichannallur burials and Nilgiris yielded bronze objects the use of bronze at these two sites are exceptions.

b. Woodcraft

- i. A wide variety of items related to woodcraft indicates another skilled profession practiced by megalithic people.
- ii. The evidence shows that the axes, chisels, wedges, adzes, anvil, borers, hammer stones, etc., formed the main tool-kit for working on the wood.
- iii. The archaeo-botanical evidence show that the information regarding plant species like Acacia, Pinus, Brassica, Stellaria, Teak, Satinwood, etc. were known to these communities.
- iv. Postholes are observed at Brahmagiri and Maski indicating the presence of timber constructions for domestic buildings.

c. Ceramics

- i. The ceramic fabrics associated with the megalithic culture are black-and-red ware, burnished black ware, red ware, micaceous red ware, grey ware; russet coated painted ware, etc.

- ii. The prominent shapes encountered in black-and-red ware are varieties of bowls, dishes, lids, vases, basins, legged jars and spouted vessels.
- iii. The burnished black ware comprises elongated vases, goblets, and circular ring-stands, knobbed and rimmed lids.
- iv. The evidence of pottery kilns from at least two sites, *viz.*, Polakonda and Beltada Banahalli can be taken as supportive evidence for the practice of this craft.

d. Other Objects

- i. The evidence of bead making industry attested at two megalithic sites- Mahurjhari and Kodumanal are suggestive of the practice of this craft.
- ii. The availability of a large variety of beads show that agate, carnelian, faience, serpentine, shell, steatite, amethyst and terracotta were utilized in the preparation of beads of different shapes.
- iii. Apart from the use of semi-precious stones, some of the shapes have also been worked on precious metals like gold, shell, horn, bone and glass.
- iv. The mat impressions left on the base of jars indicate that the art of mat weaving was practiced.
- v. Terracotta discs, figurines, gamesman, miniature pots found from graves attest their use as toys for entertainment.
- vi. Thus, we can say that the megalithic people practiced many other craft industries apart from highly specialized agro-pastoral economy.

5. Trade

- a. Carnelian beads reported from coastal sites, which were points of exchange, indicate us to the presence of trade activities.
- b. The availability of bronze suggests the arrivals of copper and an alloy, either tin or arsenic from somewhere.
- c. The archaeological remains like the rouletted ware, amphora and other ceramic materials found at many sites like those at Arikamedu are evidence for this.
- d. Inter-regional and intra-regional exchange of goods were fairly well established in south India by the 3rd century B.C.

6. Religious beliefs and Practices

- a. The elaborate architecture of their graves, the grave goods and other metal and stone objects throw light on the religious beliefs of megalithic people.
- b. The megalithic people had constructed monuments with great effort and devotion.
- c. They believed that the dead had a life after death and the living had to provide them with their necessities.
- d. Animism is reflected by terracotta figurines of animals decorated with garlands and ornaments.



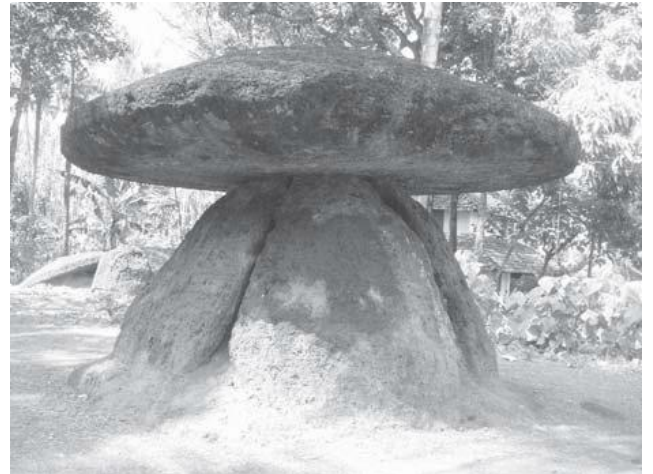
Dolmen



Cist



Cist entombing by stone circle at Kodumanal, TamilNadu



A Topikal from Kerala



topikkal in Kerala



Rock-cut



Menhir in Manipur



Kudaikal from Kerala



Urn

A



Legged sarcophagus



Figure 1: The overall view of the Nilurallu alignment as seen from the western side.



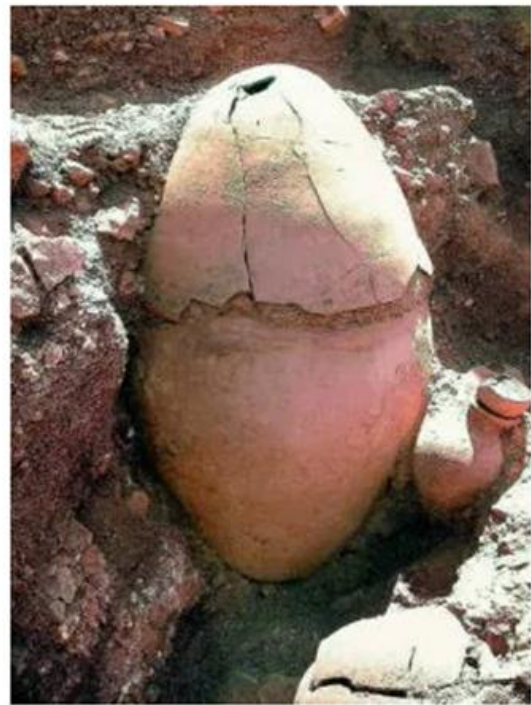
Anthropomorphic figure from Mottur



An earthen pot and its lid. in Adichanallur Tamilnadu



Black-and-red Ware



Urn