

## CHAPTER - V

### PART A : TYPOLOGY

The so-called "megalithic culture" of South India is represented by burials of considerable variety. Though the term "megalithic" as applied to this burial complex is inadequate because many structures such as dolmens or cists not even associated with burials are grouped under this term; and some urn and sarcophagus burials unassociated with stone structures qualified as "megalithic"<sup>1</sup>. Again the term "megalithic" is applied to all settlements which yield pottery and iron tools normally found in megalithic burials irrespective of whether these settlements or associated with burials or not.

It would I think, be useful to consider a broad definition of the term "megalithic" i.e., as a socio-religious expression of burying the deceased in cemeteries, in graves (which would include primary, secondary and symbolic burial) which may or may not have lithic appendage. One should also note here that the use of iron broadly coincides with this period and forms an "adjunct of this culture" (Moorti 1994 : 1). Therefore some archaeologists prefer to use the term "iron age culture" instead of "megalithic culture". So far as the typological classification of megaliths in India are concerned the attempts of Wheeler (1948) and Krishnaswami (1949 : 35-45) are noteworthy. Later, Leshnik (1974 : 226-227), Agrawal (1982 : 226-227) and Allchins (1983 : 331-33) recognize five basic types of burials i.e., pit burials, urn and sarcophagi burials, rock cut burial chambers, cist burials and stone alignments. Dikshit and Sundara include many more types like dolmen, menhir, topi kal and kudai kal. Moorti (1994 : 1) believes that the list can be reduced further still if one ignores some slight variations in the construction methods and takes into account the basic concepts of the nature

<sup>1</sup>Leshnik (1974) chooses to get around this terminological problem by using the term "Pandukal complex" when referring to the burials of the early Iron age in South India.

of the tomb itself. Moorti makes two broad categories i.e. (a) sepulchral monuments and (b) Non-sepulchral monuments<sup>1</sup>.

The problem of relevance here is : would various "types" of megaliths signify that different groups (tribes) had built them? or would they point to different cultural adaptations to regions? On the other hand, it could be that different functions (i.e. rituals) were served by different types. Finally, it may be that different conceptions of death were involved. Conversely, would the same type (for example, "stone circle" type predominant at Vidarbha) mean everywhere the same functions or rituals or procedures or concepts of death?

Local geological conditions, no doubt, had their impact on megalithic types : urn burials in south-eastern Tamil Nadu because of non-availability of suitable rock material and Topi Kal and Kudiakal typical of the Kerala lateritic belt because of the soft amenable rock available in that region (Sundara 1988 : 7). According to Sundara (ibid.) the passage and port-hole chamber types are also essentially due to geological conditions. And according to Deo (1985 : 89) cairn circle types in Vidarbha relate to the local rock formation (Deccan Trap). But Moorti (1994 : 15) is of the opinion that construction of megaliths depended upon the nature of a particular burial custom and not vice versa. So, the existing burial customs decided the type of burial monument to be built and not the geology of the area. However I am of the opinion that both the factors of geology and burial rites/custom need to be considered when looking at the construction of megaliths.

In Vidarbha excepting two dolmens, one at Pimpalgaon and the other at Trilontta-Khairi in district Bhandara and three slightly aligned damaged menhirs at Pachkhedi in district Nagpur, all megalithic burials

<sup>1</sup>The first category being essentially burial proper and second as commemorative in nature.

belong to the "cairn circle" ("stone circle") type (i.e., filled in pits surrounded by big boulders kept in juxtaposition).

At the macro-level the external features of the burials exhibit a distinctive homogeneity. But intra-site comparisons reveal some variations, not only in dimensions and deposition but also in internal features. For example at Khairwada<sup>1</sup>, besides the usual types of cairn circles were also noticed those which had loose pebbles piled up without the use of clay within the circle of boulders. Also at some sites like Raipur<sup>2</sup>, Bhagi Mahari<sup>3</sup> (and possibly Deolimet<sup>4</sup>) cairn circles also revealed cists; and sites like Kamptee<sup>5</sup> and Borgaon<sup>6</sup> revealed a rectangular stone sarcophagus each.

At Raipur, megalith 1 revealed a slab-like cist in the centre and megalith 2<sup>7</sup> and 7<sup>8</sup> yielded central chambers made of huge boulders. No

<sup>1</sup> IAR 1981-82 : 51-52.

<sup>2</sup> Deglurkar and Lad 1992 : 11.

<sup>3</sup> IAR 1982-83 : 61-62.  
IAR 1983-84 : 57-58.

<sup>4</sup> A personal visit to Deolimet, a few Km. west of Nagpur city (though not excavated) revealed cairn-circles and also just cairns i.e., with no bounded stones. A ground survey with Dr. Ishmail of Nagpur University revealed the possibility of a passage dolmenoid cist here. Unfortunately, since this particular site falls within the boundary of a Defence Ordinance factory, permission has not been granted to excavate. But, on the other hand, since this area is protected the circles are still intact.

<sup>5</sup> Pearse, G.G. 1869 : 428-29.

<sup>6</sup> IAR 1980-81 40.

<sup>7</sup> Megalith 2 was also distinguished by exceptionally huge peripheral boulders (42 in number) and an unusually heavy packing of bouldery rubble.

<sup>8</sup> Megalith 7 was one of the biggest stone circles in the complex. The peripheral boulders of this circle (45 in number) were also exceptionally large and the inside filling unusually heavy. This boulder also has a vertical stone wall enclosing it from outside, a feature not even observed at Bhagi Mahari or anywhere else in the megalithic complex at Vidarbha.

skeletal remains or artefacts were recovered from cists or chambers except some fragmented pottery from megalith 1, a sole iron lamp from megalith 2 and a broken muller stone in the chamber of megalith 7<sup>1</sup>. A curious feature noticed in the chamber was the presence of irregular pieces of soft and brittle whitish sandstone placed in an ascending order at irregular intervals in the stone filling<sup>2</sup>. The cists at Bhagi Mahari<sup>3</sup> are often combined with rock alignments forming irregular oval or square internal chambers, either single, double or quadruple. They differ from the Raipur rock chambers, which are a single unit, in the size and the method of laying the boulders. The chamber-boulders at Bhagi Mahari are invariably smaller than the peripheral boulders of the circle and are laid horizontally, thus spatially larger but depth-wise smaller. The Raipur chambers, on the other hand, are raised with huge vertically propped boulders, larger than, if not the same size as, the peripheral boulders. However, except for one instance, the chambers of Bhagi Mahari do not yield human remains.

Megalith 3<sup>4</sup> at Borgaon is marked by a huge trough, cut out of a massive boulders, placed right in the centre of the stone circle. At Kamptee too, Pearse<sup>5</sup> recorded an oval shaped barrow, surrounded by a stone circle which had 'trough-like stone things'. Also recorded at this cairn are a quantity of nearly perfectly preserved coconut husks. This serves as a witness to the widespread contact since the closest coast, according to Pearse would have been 500 Km. distant; As also an indicator of some kind of ritual

<sup>1</sup>Deglurkar and Lad 1992 : 11.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *IAR* 1982-83 : 61-62 ; 1983-84 : 57-58.

<sup>4</sup> *IAR* 1980-81 : 40; and *PI* XXVB.

<sup>5</sup> Pearse, G.G. 1869. "Notes on the excavation of a stone circle near Kamptee, Central Provinces of India" in *Ethnography Society of India*. Vol. 4 : 428-29.

involving the breaking of a coconut at certain occasions (obviously death related) as in present times.

It seems that the topological deviants like cists and chambers within stone circles are associated with the performance of some kind of metaphoric burial in the absence of a corpse. Though the precise nature of the rituals is difficult to discern it may have involved lighting of the lamp, the breaking of a coconut, floral and food offerings, sacrificial killing of a horse or some other animal and the placement of votive objects.

It may also be noted that the 'chambered' megaliths stand apart from others, not only in respect of their inner chambers, but also in respect of their dimensions, filling, number and size of peripheral boulders and artefactual content — not necessarily within the chambers but outside. For example, at Raipur, both megalith 2 and 7 were rich in copper objects. Besides megalith 2 also yielded gold and beads of jasper, carnelian and crystal in large numbers. And megalith 7 had heavy iron tools and weapons.

A micro-level study of Vidarbhan megaliths, thus, revealed some variations within the dominant stone circle type. This might have had to do not with different "people" or "social groups" or "tribes" but rather with the execution of different rituals concerning the burial of the dead. I believe that different architectural form of megalithic burials in Vidarbha and beyond came into being out of a far wide range of activities and rituals, only some of which need leave direct archaeological evidence.

## PART B : " THE STONE CIRCLE : A MISLEADING "TYPE"?

The similarities and differences between the Vidarbhan stone circles and the megalithic stone circles further south in the Peninsula need to be noted in order to investigate if the "stone circle" is a meaningful archaeological entity where large regions are involved. And if it is the same material phenomenon wherever it is reported. Let us compare the Vidarbhan stone circles with those at Brahmagiri in northern Karnataka, in terms of burial structure, layout of the bodies and grave goods.

Our choice of a "stone circle" site for comparison outside Vidarbha was severely limited by excavation reports so far available. Infact, practically no stone circle site other than Brahmagiri is described in detail. Though only 4 pit circles were excavated at Brahmagiri, they have all been well described (their features as well as variations are reported; Grave goods are recorded systematically; And the classification of human skeletal remains is clear).

The Vidarbhan site selected for comparison with Brahmagiri is Mahurjhari. The particular site has been chosen because, firstly, it is an extensively excavated site<sup>1</sup>. Secondly, the sizes of the cemeteries at Brahmagiri and Muhurjhari appear to be comparable. Lastly, the Mahurjhari megaliths, too are well described. There is a systematic description of all the megaliths along with an orderly record of the objects found in them, all of which make detailed analysis possible.

<sup>1</sup> Excavation at Mahurjhari were undertaken by Deo for two consecutive seasons, i.e. 1970-71 and 1971-72. The total number of stone circles excavated during this period was 15. Excavation was resumed by Deo and Jamkhedkar at this site in 1978-79. Altogether 12 stone circles were excavated in 1978-79. This brings the total number of excavated circles to 27. Thus, Mahurjhari, is one of the most extensively excavated iron age sites in Vidarabha.

*Structural features of the stone circles :*

Stone circles at Brahmagiri are typified by a single circle of boulders with very small rubble packing (No. VII has an actual "wall"). At Mahurjhari, we have a single and double circle of boulders without rubble packing. Double row of stones forming a double circle is evidenced at megalith 2 (locality I) and megalith 1 (locality II). Many of the boulders used in the formation of stone circles have cupmarks<sup>1</sup>. None of the boulders at Brahmagiri have such cup marks.

The stone circles at Brahmagiri appear to be smaller than those at Mahurjhari. The diameter of the stone circles at Brahmagiri is between 6.15m and 9.53m. At Mahurjhari the inner diameter of the stone circles ranged from about 8 or 8.4m to 16.2m. The smallest stone circle at Mahurjhari is megalith 5 (locality III) having an inner diameter of 8m and an outer diameter of about 10m. Therefore, as one can see that the diameter of the stone circles at Mahurjhari is far greater than those at Brahmagiri. Even the diameter of the smallest stone circle at Mahurjhari is greater than most of the stone circles at Brahmagiri. Is it possible that this difference is due to the nature of funeral ceremonies held at the sites?

At Brahmagiri rubble was placed on the ground level inside the stone circle but it did not extend into the center. This is not the case at Mahurjhari. Here, the pebble filling (which is spread over a filling of black soil) is present over the entire surface within the stone circle. The exception being megalith 2 (locality I) in which the pebble filling was found to be removed from the central portion of the circle. But according to the excavator (Deo 1972 : 6) it is a natural depression in murrum.

<sup>1</sup>Cupmarks have also been noticed on boulders at other stone-circle sites in Vidarbha, e.g., Raipur. Outside of Vidarbha they have been reported from Tinnevelly district in Tamil Nadu where they were found on boulders forming a part of a cairn-circle (Paddayya 1976 : 37) and also on some boulders in the Shorapur Doab which were found in areas close to stone circles and ashmounds (ibid. : 35-38).

At Brahmagiri, the body was placed in an unlined pit, oval or round, with an east-west axis. The depth of the pit varies from 1.85m to 2.145m and the diameter (on one side) varies from 2.44 to 3.66m. At Mahurjhari there is no actual burial in a pit. Many of the skeletal remains are found placed right on the level surface of murrum or disintegrated rock as is evidenced at megalith 9 (locality III), or at megalith 1 (locality IV). An exception is megalith 2 (locality 1) in which in a depression in the murrum were found numerous bone fragments (amongst which one was of the equide family)<sup>1</sup>. But as mentioned earlier, the excavator (Deo) thinks this was a natural depression and not a deliberately made one.

Therefore at Brahmagiri there is provided a marked-off, three dimensional space for the dead person within the stone circle. This is missing at Mahurjhari. Infact, it is very rare to come across such stone circles in Vidarbha where one can evidence a separate, set-aside space for the dead. Rare instances include megalith 1 at Junapani<sup>2</sup>, and two such at Raipur<sup>3</sup>. At Raipur is evidenced a cist at the centre of one circle and a chamber of boulders at another. However both the cist and the chamber were devoid of any mortal remains. At both the cases, the dead were buried outside the central structure near the periphery of the stone circle. At Bhagimahari<sup>4</sup> too,

<sup>1</sup>A marked point of difference observed in the skeletal remains and animal skeletal remains at Brahmagiri and Mahurjhari is the complete absence of animal skeletal remains at the Brahmagiri pit circles; whereas at Mahurjhari animal skeletal remains, particularly that of the horse is common occurrence.

<sup>2</sup>At Junapani (IAR 1961-62 : 32), megalith 1 has an irregular shallow pit measuring 8.80m x 3.50m in the northern half of the circle. The pit included funerary deposits but no skeletal remains. Instead two of the three ancillary pits in the southern half of the circle contained human and skeletal remains.

<sup>3</sup> Deglurkar and Lad 1992 : 9.

<sup>4</sup> IAR 1982-83 : 61-62.

two twin set of chambers were discovered in the middle of stone circles, and a small ring of stones in the centre of another. This too revealed no mortal remains. Could these cists and chambers then have been examples of symbolic burials? or were they being used for the purpose of performance of burial rituals alone?

If we are to accept the generalization made by structural anthropologists that in all ritual space doorways or boundaries or periphery makers are of prime importance because they separate the contaminated from the pure, the dead from the living, the sacred from the profane, the timeless from the time bound then it is interesting that in Vidarbha barring a few instances the dead were not given any sacred enclosure other than (or within) the circle of boulders.

A universal feature of the Brahmagiri pits, conspicuous by its absence at Mahurjhari is the presence of an east-oriented shallow ramp leading to the brim of the pit (east end) covered by either one or two door slabs or chunam packing. These door slabs have been called "false doors" by the excavator (Wheeler) as they cover no structural port-hole as such. Leave alone Mahurjhari, at none of the stone circle sites in Vidarbha is this feature noticed.

At Brahmagiri, the floors of the pits have (except pit circle III) four to five stone slabs laid out symmetrically to form the corners of an oblong or rectangular space, probably supporting wooden posts, which Wheeler contends were the legs of a bier. He suggests that bodies were macerated by being placed on wooden biers (Wheeler 1947 : 197). According to Wheeler the pits were used for primary excarnation, and were not the permanent repositories of human remains. He argues that this made it possible for them to be used repeatedly, whenever required. He contends that after the offerings were interred and silt allowed to accumulate up to the top level of the bier, Brahmagiri pits were used for only the first disposal of the corpse and these

the body/bodies were laid on to be excarnated. After excarnation, selected bones were transferred permanently to the cists. So if we go by Wheeler's theory the pits represented only "symbolic burial". At Mahurjhari this does not seem so as no pits, leave alone stone slabs at the base of the pit have been found.

However we can not overlook the examples of secondary burials at Mahurjhari<sup>1</sup> and other Vidarbhan sites<sup>2</sup>. The skeletal date from Khairwada provides clear evidence for fractional or secondary mode of burials. None of the skeletal remains of individuals recovered are fully represented. Two individuals even exhibit evidence of charring (Walimbe 1988 : 67) indicating exposure to fire in "flesh-on condition" (ibid.).

Another universal feature of the Brahmagiri pits was a filling of alluvial clay, presumably from a neighbouring pond. At Mahurjhari, pebbles and black clay, or brownish or reddish brown soil was used to fill up the stone circles. Nowhere has it been suggested by the excavator that the black clay/brownish soil was not local material. However black clay was almost always laid at all the Vidarbhan burial sites to "envelope securely the primary burial material, even if it be purely symbolic... A cautious generalisation would be to presume that whatever lay hidden under the black clay filling were the immediately vital mortuary relics which went with the dead on the day of internment" (Deglurkar and Lad 1992 : 142). Therefore use of black clay implied ritualistic significance at both Brahmagiri and Mahurjhari.

<sup>1</sup> "It appears that the megalithians of Mahurjhari buried the dead in some cases immediately after death while in some, the body might have been exposed for some time and afterwards whatever remains could be collected were interred" (Deo 1973 : 15).

<sup>2</sup> At Khapa we have the evidence of a couple of copper dishes with elaborately decorated lids which were found in association with crushed bones possibly suggesting that the dishes were used to deposit bones in the stone circles (Deo 1917: 51-52). Thus indicating secondary burial.

Going by the structural specificity's of the stone circles at Brahmagiri and Mahurjhari one concludes that they were not very similar. It is possible that this may have had something to do with the observance of different rituals of the dead.

Grave Goods :

Before we begin a systematic analysis of the burial goods at the two sites under study it should be kept in mind that the stone circle sample at Brahmagiri is extremely small as compared to Mahurjhari. Therefore absence of a material or an artefact-type here will not be given great weightage.

(i) *Iron Goods* : The sites of Mahurjhari and Brahmgiiri have yielded a variety of iron objects in their stone circles (though Mahurjhari has a richer repertoire). The range at Mahurjhari comprised of weapons like daggers, spearheads; tools for carpentry like chisels of various shapes; axes with cross ring fasteners and adzes; objects of agricultural use like hoes; objects of domestic use like lamps or ladles; objects of toilet comprising nail-pares; and lastly horse equipment like bridle bits. Apart from the iron axe with cross ring fasteners none of the objects of iron represented at Mahurjhari have been found at Brahmagiri.

Brahmagiri pit circles are represented by 43 iron objects. Of them 12 are weapons [i.e., hunting and cutting implements (i.e. 28 per cent)]. One of them was a miniature iron knife or dagger (this was probably of ritual significance). Bars and small fragments of indeterminate use appear here too. Two sickles, not found in either cists or habitational debris are represented here. Three, chisels and four wedges were also found. Other classes of iron objects, present here and not in the cists are a fragment of an iron nail and a decayed iron ring.

(ii) *Stone objects* : A granite pestle (Wheeler 1948 : Pl. CXVIS) in Pit II at Brahmagiri is similar to the one found at Mahurjhari<sup>1</sup> Both these have a

<sup>1</sup> A stone pestle recovered from Maski is entirely different from the specimen recovered from Mahurjhari or Brahmagiri (Thapar 1957 : Pl.XXVI).

cylindrical bulbous lower end, flat and circular working end and truncated slightly convex butt end (Deo 1973: 57). In all, Mahurjhari has five pounders made of stone. According to the excavator (*ibid.*), from the "freshness" of these artifacts, it appears that such pounders were kept ready for burial ritual.

(iii) *Ornaments* : Mahurjhari stone circles are rather rich in terms of ornaments of copper and gold. In fact Mahurjhari is the richest amongst the Vidarbhan sites in terms of gold objects. Here have been recovered necklaces, a spiral gold ring and ear ornaments. Besides, ornaments of copper like bangles have been recovered. The stone circles of all the four localities of Mahurjhari have yielded solid copper bangles. Besides ornaments for the horse have also been recovered extensively (Deo 1972 : 40-42).

At Brahmagiri, negligible numbers of ornaments have been found in the cemetery areas. There is a complete absence of ornaments in the cist graves. Amongst the pit graves, in pit circle IX have been found four copper bangles. They were found in association with steatite, serpentine and gold beads and a conch shell. Pit VII at Brahmagiri which has the bones of at least two persons has no ornaments. At Brahmagiri there is an absence of ornaments of gold.

(iv) *Beads* : Beads have been found present at both the stone circle sites of Brahmagiri and Mahurjhari. It is of interest that at Brahmagiri beads have been found only in the pit burials and not the cist graves. Brahmagiri has yielded a diversity of beads. In Pit II were recovered two ring-like terracotta beads (that may have been spindle whorls). Pit IX has one steatite, one serpentine and 33 gold beads. Nowhere else in iron age Brahmagiri are there any gold beads; their ritual significance here, therefore being all the more probable.

Mahurjhari, on the other hand has also yielded a rich variety of beads. It is, infact, the richest site in Vidarbha in terms of finds of beads. According to the excavator, the beads were in all probability locally made (Deo 1973 : 61).

The beads include those of agate, carnelian, chalcedony, crystal, glass and jasper. Some even bore decoration by etched patterns.

Our comparison of Mahurjhari with Brahmagiri has highlighted the fact that Vidarbhan "cairn circles" are different from the Brahmagiri "pit circles". This is not to say that there are no points of convergence but in terms of burial structures, skeletal remains and grave goods there are variations. For the time being then, all we can say is that the Vidarbhan "stone circle" and Brahmagiri "pit circles" represent different archaeological phenomena -- even if they may be technologically and chronologically comparable. Thus a 'type' like the "cairn circle" is really not a homogenous "type".