

MEGALITHIC CULTURE IN TAMIL NADU

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Introduction

The custom of erecting huge tombs to pay homage to the departed souls prevailed among the different communities in different stages almost throughout the world starting from the neolithic period till the early part of the Christian era. It is still found in some areas as a living tradition among the tribes. In India innumerable megaliths are found throughout the length and breadth of the country with much concentration in the peninsular India. The peninsular Indian megaliths in particular include a variety of sepulchral and commemorative monuments which are built of large rude or dressed stones and associated with a somewhat homogeneous group of black and red ware and iron tools. They are individual or collective secondary burials having post - exposure bones. The field work undertaken by various scholars in the last century since the first discovery of the *pandoo coolies* in Malabar by J.Babington, opened a new era in the

study of South Indian megaliths. The limited excavations and explorations in selective zones clearly emphasize that understanding the origin, diffusion, authorship, chronology and material culture of the megalithic period is a complex problem. These megaliths have been found in different stratigraphical and chronological context and still continues as a living tradition on the northeastern part of India.

Unlike in the West, the Indian megalithic monuments are associated with iron objects. Therefore, the time bracket of the Indian megaliths is placed somewhere between 1000 BC and 100 AD as it is found in association with neolithic - chalcolithic wares at the lower end and with Roman antiquities at the upper end. The limited amount of c^{14} dates coming directly from the graves posed a great problem in dating different types of the burial. However the available archaeological data suggests that the period of their maximum

popularity lies somewhere between 700 BC and 300 BC.

Different theories have put forth regarding their origin and diffusion. Scholars by and large look forward of West Asian origin. The typical West Asian megaliths had bronze object as their internment and this culture came to an end in the last phase of their bronze age around 1500 BC. Whereas the Indian megaliths belong to Iron Age generally dated to 1000 BC onwards. It is as yet not certain when and how iron technology developed and became the integral part of megalithic culture. Likewise, it seems the associated black and red ware also had an independent origin and later it was totally integrated with the megalithic culture.

The present paper attempts to divulge the nature of megalithic monuments that found in the southern most part of the India namely Tamil Nadu. The systematic explorations carried out by the author in selective geographical zones brought to light more than thousand new megalithic sites which helps to understand the distributional pattern of different types of burials. These data are further strengthened by the subsequent well planned excavations conducted in six

seasons at Kodumanal, a megalithic habitation - cum - burial site, located on the bank of river Noyyal, a tributary of river Kaveri, in Perundurai taluk of Erode district.

The Region

Tamil Nadu (8° N to 14° N, 76° E to 80° E) occupies the southern most part of the peninsular India. Geographically, Tamil Nadu can be divided into two parts i) The Tamil Nadu uplands and south Sahyadri region and ii) Eastern coastal plains. The Tamil Nadu uplands and south Sahyadri region cover an area of 74,254 sq. km. It is bordered on the north - east and north by Karnataka plateau. In the west, the western ghats run north - south with a prominent gap near Palghat having a width of about 27 km. On the whole this region occupies a position of great importance in acting as a connecting link between the west coast and the Coramandel coast; yet its geographical isolation, mainly due to the girdle of mountains, has favoured the growth of distinct type of cultural landscape.

A comprehensive study of the geological formations since Archaean period reveals the fact that the entire Tamil Nadu upland and south Sahyadri

hills have undergone lesser changes as compared to the coastal region of the Indian peninsula. The major part of Tamil Nadu consists of an assemblage of crystalline rocks of gneissic series, which form the basement complex upon which later geological deposits were laid down. The gneissic rocks have veins of quartz and limestone, which are both nodular and crystalline. The Nilgris consist of a great mass of foliated (gneissose) or charnockite rocks. Laterite and quartz also occur in considerable quantities. This geological formation completely meets the needs of the megalithic folk.

Location of Megaliths

Their graveyards were mostly located in the area where the raw material was easily available, say, within the distance of one or two kilometers. They always preferred the elevated area for the cemeteries. The reason for this selection is either to avoid the graves being washed away by the rain water or to utilize unproductive area for better purpose. As per the observation goes, it seems the second reason stands valid. If the selected elevated field had been exhausted they choose the next elevated field, even if it was a little farther away, rather than selecting the nearby plain

land. Cairn circles are generally found on the slopes of the hills or on the elevated field overlooking the water resources mainly rivers. Whereas the dolmens and dolmenoid cists were located on the top of the high rocky grounds or hills overlooking a tank or perennial ponds. The sarcophagus burial generally found north of river Pennaiyar along the east coast. The urn burial is mostly concentrated south of Pennaiyar particularly in deltaic region. When a site contained more than one type of burial, each type occupied a separate portion within the burial complex. Fine example could be seen at Kallerikuppam and Peral in Kallakurichchi taluk where the cist burial and urn burial complex occupied a separate area. Likewise at Andali near Tirukkoyilur the sarcophagus and urn burial complex occupied different zones thereby showing two different groups living in a particular village having their own graveyard. The location of the graveyard is always preferred on the eastern side of the habitation. This practice is quite dominant in the Noyyal valley of Coimbatore region.

As the height of habitation mound is less and it can not be recognized easily unless one seriously look for it. The size of the mound ranges between 5 and 50

acres. The location of the various habitation - cum - burial sites indicates that they opted for riverine based settlement. Even though the raw material was available in plenty in the ranges of mountains, they preferred only small hillocks and outcrops. The reason may be to avoid dense forests which were not congenial to live or cultivate. The pattern of distribution that seemed to emerge from the survey was that for each locality of a 5km radius there was somewhat connected cluster sites.

Raw Materials

The present location of the burial ground except in a few cases clearly demonstrates that the raw materials were available within the distance of one or two kilometers. They used round boulders for the construction of the circles and slabs for the cists and capstones. Both dressed and undressed slabs were used to prepare a cist whereas undressed slabs were generally used for capstones. Some of the capstone weighs more than 2 - 5 tons.

The most interesting point here is that some menhirs like the one found at Nattukalpalayam, Mukkudivelanpalayam, Panchalingapuram, Kodumanal, Brough Nagar in Coimbatore region; Tondamanur in North Arcot region and

Tirumalavadi in Dharmapuri region would have been still more than the weight of the capstone. Further unlike capstone, the menhirs are slabs except the one found at Tirumalavadi. Utmost care would have taken to install these tall slabs otherwise it would break easily. This could be well observed in the sites like at Nichchampalayam and Kodumanal where the dismantled base of the menhirs could be identified. Quarrying, lifting, transporting and erecting these huge stone slabs and boulders certainly indicate that they had the knowledge of petrology and appropriate technology. The occurrence of chisel marks on the edge of the slabs, orthostats and capstones indicate besides natural way of breaking they used chisels to some extent to quarry the raw material for making orthostats.

Types of Megalithic Monuments in Tamil Nadu

The burials were heterogeneous in nature and each type had some regional variation both in time and space. The major types that found in Tamil Nadu are as follows:

1. Cairn circle
2. Stone circle
3. Cist
4. Dolmen
5. Dolmenoid Cist

6. Menhir
7. Sarcophagus
8. Urn burial
9. Anthropomorphic

However each type had several varieties. For instance the cist burial embedded in a cairn circle or stone circle had sub - types like transepted cist with round or trapeze or arrow shaped porthole. Therefore an attempt is made, though in a modest way, to delineate the nature of each type.

Cairn Circle

The cairn circles were constructed with heap of cairns at the centre and encircled with round boulders. Their height above the ground depended upon the nature of the burial and the land. If the land is more flexible, the cist or urn or sarcophagus was placed 30 to 60 cm below the ground level and then the pit was covered with cairns. In this case the cairns were not raised more than 50 cm. On the other hand if working surface is hard such as that in the rocky area, they did not attempt to dig deep. They made only a small dig to get an adequate depth in which the cist could stand and thereafter it was covered with cairns and encircled by stone boulders. As the cist was projected out to a certain height, the cairns were also raised to one or two

metres above the ground level. The diameter or the size of the cairn circle entombing urn or sarcoÇagus are generally small in size whereas cairn circles also depended upon the nature of the of the burial embedded in it. Cairn circles entombing transepted cists or cists with two subsidiary cists had an unusual diameter. The diameter of the circle varied from 10 to 25 metres.

The cairns sometimes were encircled by a wall or slab or both. The wall is built of triangular stones placed side by side in three to seven courses. The base of the triangular stone or slab is slightly curved and this placed facing outer. The pointed portion of the slab placed facing inner side. Sometimes the wall's inner face is found lined with rectangular stones or big gravel. This type of construction is noticed at Kodumanal.

In few cases, both the inner and outer face of the wall is built of rectangular stones. The gap between the inner and outer face of the wall is filled with small stones. One of the megaliths (Meg. 8) at Kodumanal yielded prismatic shaped quartz blocks kept in the gap between the inner and outer faces of the wall. The wall generally keeps the cairn packing intact.

Besides, there are double circles in which the inner circle is made of boulders or rectangular slabs whereas the outer circle is made of slab circle planted vertically around inner circle at regular intervals with 10 - 20 cm projection above the ground level. These varieties are noticed at Kodumanal, Nichchamplayam, Mungilpudur, Ittikal Agaram, Kuruvinyanapalli, Nayanur, Thondamanur and at Sittannavasal.

Stone Circle

Stone circles are made of round boulders and are devoid of any cairn packing. In cairn circles, generally stone boulders were placed one after another without any gap to form a circle but in stone circles they were generally placed by giving much gap between two boulders.

Cist Burial

A major type of the burial encountered in Tamil Nadu is the cist burial. This is invariably found in cairn circle. It had four sub - types:

1. Simple cist burial constructed out of four orthostats resulting a chamber
2. Cist with passage
3. Transepted cist with single, double and multiple chambers.

4. Transepted cist with two subsidiary cists.

Simple Cist

The cist is a box - like structure constructed of four orthostats or upright stone slabs kept in clockwise or anti - clockwise direction on a floor slab and was enclosed by a capstone. This box - like structure had either round or trapeze shaped porthole on its front slab.

Cist with Passage

In addition to the cist one passage was constructed in front of the porthole by placing three vertical slabs. Two slabs placed on either side of the porthole at right angle to the eastern orthostat and the third one against these two slabs. In most of the cases they were not raised from the bottom of the pit. The pit was filled up with small uneven boulders or sands up to the bottom portion of the porthole and a base slab placed against the porthole in the passage. Then the vertical passage slabs were placed as stated above.

In case of transepted cist, the passage is generally found against the chamber which had a porthole. If both the chambers had porthole then the passage covers both the portholes. The

closing slab of the passage is always joint with the enclosing circle.

In the case of elaborate cist such as the one having main cist and two subsidiary cists, the passage is made like a porch covering all the cist. For instance at Kodumanal the meg. 2 and Meg. 10 had a main cist with two subsidiary cists placed on either side in front of the main cist. The closing slabs of the passage placed vertically against the eastern edges of the front slab of the subsidiary cists.

Transepted Cist

The simple cist bifurcated laterally or longitudinally resulting in two or more chambers are called transepted cist. The cist generally has six orthostats besides the capstone, floor slab and central bifurcation slab. In this variety, the cist is divided into two halves by inserting a transepted slab at the centre. In few cases, one of the chambers of the transepted cist is further divided into two halves making the total number of chambers into three. Sometimes, as one noticed at Nattukkhalpalayam in Pollachi taluk, one of these chambers further divided breadth wise to raise the total number of chambers to four. All the chambers were usually connected by a

porthole either directly from the passage or through transepting slabs. Generally a single capstone is surmounted on the cist leaving the passage open. In the case of transepted cists placement of orthostats hardly followed any clockwise or anti-clockwise direction. This method of construction is not required in transepted cist varieties as the central transepting slabs withheld any inward collapse of the cist. But whereas in the case of simple cist the inward collapse of the cist can only be averted by placing them in *swastika* pattern. This clearly suggests that the method of construction had only functional value rather than any spiritual value.

Transepted Cist with Two subsidiary Cists

The excavation at Kodumanal yielded a new type of cist burial unnoticed so far in this region. Out of 15 burials opened, six burials (Meg. 1, 2, 5, 10, 14 and 15) had this class. In this type, there is a main transepted cist erected to wards eastern half of the circle. The other two simple subsidiary cists were placed on either side of the main cist at the front. The front slab of the subsidiary cist met the edge of the front slab of the main cist at right angle. There will be a common passage in front of all the cists. Then this

passage was closed with the vertical slab placing against the eastern edges of the front slab of the subsidiary cist. It resembles a triple celled temple meeting with common *mandapa*.

Cist with Benches

The cist containing benches were noticed at Nattukkalpalayam and at Sular. At Nattukkalpalayam, the transepted cist was met with a flat slab laid up to half the height of the orthostatic slab to the whole length of the cist to serve as a bench. The stone bench occupied half the space of the chamber, the other half being vacant. The simple cist at Sular yielded two stone benches attached to the northern and southern orthostats suggested on some upright stones. These benches were about 30 cm wide and rose 25 cm from the floor level and had a 1.80 m length. On each bench were the remains of a skeleton placed in an extended position.

Dolmen

Another major type of burial concentrated mainly in the eastern part of Dharmapuri region and western part of North Arcot region had the following sub - types.

a. Simple dolmen

b. Dolmen with passage.

c. Dolmen encircled by single or multiple slab circles

Simple Dolmen

This is made of four orthostats placed in clockwise or anti - clockwise direction to form a box - like structure with a round porthole on the east and invariably rested on the ground. This was covered by a capstone.

Dolmen with passage

In addition to the above architectural feature a passage is noticed in front of the porthole, i.e. on the eastern side. These passages were either made up of two vertical slabs placed on either side of the porthole or small triangular slabs placed in four to five courses to form a wall - like structure on either side of the porthole. This was closed by another vertical slab on its eastern end. Generally the passage lies between the dolmen and the circle.

Dolmen with slab circle

The whole structure is encircled by a rectangular slab circle, like a wall or stone railing, either continuously or at regular intervals or in four cardinal points. Sometimes there are more than

one circle. In this case, the outer circle is smaller in height than the next inner circle. The whole structure looks like a fortification wall. Rectangular brick-shaped stone blocks were placed in courses in the gap between the slab circles and dolmen covering half the size of the dolmen. This architectural arrangement prevents any inward or outward collapse of the vertical slabs.

Another variant of the above had single or double slab circles. The slabs of the inner circle rose 150 cm above the height of the dolmen. Slabs with rectangular or flat top and slabs with semi - circular top were placed alternatively in the circle. The slab with semicircular top always occupies the cardinal points. The slab standing against the eastern orthostat of the dolmen also had round porthole identical to the one found in the main chamber. Generally this elaborate dolmen was surrounded by a number of small dolmens placed at regular intervals. This particular kind of dolmen may belong to some important person of the society. This type of burial is found at Mallachandram and Maharajahadai in Dharmapuri region.

Dolmenoid cist

The term dolmenoid cist (dolmens like cist or cist like dolmen) is confusing

and sometimes misleading. The explorers are reported the half buried cist or partially covered dolmen as dolmenoid cist. In both the cases, cist or dolmen is partially exposed. Sometimes this misrepresents a particular society who performed it.

The observations made on some new sites in the recent explorations and on earlier reported sites indicate that the existing cist or dolmen was exposed partially due to erosion or vandalism. So the author felt that dolmenoid cist is nothing but another variant of cist or dolmen only. Though the author is not fully satisfied with this terminology, but using it provisionally till get a suitable and acceptable terminology.

The dolmenoid cist reported here had the following features:

1. Shorter in height (approx. 1m or even less than that) and made of multiorthostats or rubble stones or boulders.
2. Capstone placed either on a rubble or boulders instead of orthostats. Even if slabs are used, it consists of more than one small irregular slab on each side.
3. Three sides are closed and the remaining facing side is kept wide open.
4. Devoid of any porthole.

5. Erected above the ground level.

The fine example of these types is noticed at Bhashtarapalli and Othikuppam in Dharmapuri district and Kilseppuli and Krkur in North Arcot district. At Karikal the chamber measuring 3.40 m north - south and 2.70 m east - west is made of fourteen slabs with gap on the eastern side. It is encircled by two stone circles. At Kilseppuli and Andiappanur the chamber is made of multiorthostats with a passage on the east which terminates at the circle. Here the circle is built of small rectangular slabs, almost in brick size and shape, placed in courses around the chamber upto the capstone. The whole part looks like a fortification wall. This surrounding wall detached against the passage. Quite interestingly unlike other places here the passage is found in all directions.

The second type of dolmenoid cists were comparatively more in number and were reported in the sites like at Kilseppuli, Andiappanur, Karkur, Sempalli, etc. In this type, the chamber is built of four courses to the height of 30 - 50 cm. Sometimes they were placed like a wall without any gap between the rubble but some occasions they were placed at four corners too. The chamber

is surmounted by a huge capstone which generally projected well beyond the chamber wall.

This chamber is encircled by a stone circle or wall like structure as one noticed at Karkur and Kilseppuli respectively. One of the dolmenoid cists at Karkur had two circles. The inner slab circle placed around the chamber raised to the height of capstone and the outer stone circle placed at the base of the slab circle. The eastern side of the chamber had a wide opening.

The third type of dolmenoid cist had a chamber made of granitic boulders placed together or leaving a gap between the boulders. This oblong or a paraboloid chamber with passage or gap on the east is surmounted by a huge capstone. One of the dolmenoid cists at Mamandur is made of eleven rough and unhewn boulders with passage or gap on the east and it was encircled by boulders.

All the above said types had the sarcophagus interment. It seems these types of burial might have emerged in the district of Chingleput where we found in large numbers. The occurrences of such type of burials are found in few numbers while moving in southward or westward direction. These types were

found in the eastern part of Kirshnagiri taluk in Dharmapuri district and Palamaner taluk in Chittoor district of Andhra Pradesh. Beyond this region, the availability of these types is negligible. This type of burial would have emerged out of cist and dolmen type of burials which percolated into the Chingleput region from North Arcot district and merged with the existing sarcophagus burial.

menhirs

The sites at Nichchampalayam, Mukkudivelanpalayam, Kodidhasanur, Kudiyampalayam, Kodumanal, Panchalingapuram and Nattukkalpalayam in Coimbatore region; at Tirumulavadi in Dharmapuri region; at Arapakkam and Thondamanur in North Arcot region; and at Devanur in South Arcot region yielded a circle with a standing monolithic slab at the periphery of the circle. The slabs are found either in single or double planted on any part of the circle. The exception to the above type is of the Tirumulavadi menhir. Here, the menhir is made of a huge monolithic block with round base and tapering body to a height of 3.25 m.

At present, only one or two monolithic slabs are found but the close observation made at Nattukalpalayam,

Kodumanal and Nichchampalayam led to believe that earlier there were more than two menhirs. According to the local people few menhirs were broken for want of slabs. Some of the rectangular slabs projected 20 to 30 cm above the ground level seem to be the part of earlier menhirs.

Sarcophagus

A Sarcophagus primarily denotes a stone coffin usually adorned with sculpture or inscription but later it includes terracotta as well. In Tamil Nadu, these sarcophagi are found individually as well as associated with megalithic burials. They were used for secondary burial placed generally in the east west orientation inside the tomb chambers like cist, dolmen and dolmenoid cists. The grave goods like black and red ware pots, iron swords, spear heads, arrow heads, hoes, sickles, horse bits and stirrups were placed within and outside the sarcophagus.

A vast majority of them were of terracotta while a very few are of stone. The stone ones are monolithic troughs. Such types are reported in Dongatogu, Pandurangapuram, Polichetticheugudda and Tottigutta, all concentrated in the district of Khammam, Andhra Pradesh.

In Tamil Nadu, the sarcophagi were mainly concentrated in the eastern

coastal plain particularly north of the river Pennaiyar and south of Godavari in Andhra Pradesh. A few were also reported inland regions in the sites like at Maski, Sankavaram, Jadigenahalli, etc. Another set of sarcophagus found against the Palaghat Pass in the districts of Trichur and Kozhikode in Kerala. Those sites are Chevayur, Feroke and Kattankampal.

In Tamil Nadu, the sarcophagus is found in abundance in the district of Chingleput and in northern part of South Arcot districts. The occurrence of sarcophagus sites drastically comes down south of the river Pennaiyar. On the other hand the occurrence of urn burial increases south of the Pennaiyar and decreases as one moves north of it. It seems that the sarcophagus and urn had similar mode of burial practices with slight variation in its shape.

The available evidence suggests that the sarcophagus had its origin in the eastern coastal plain between Godavari and Pennaiyar and moved slowly westward and merged with the local tradition of the respective area. In district Chingleput and northern part of south Arcot district, particularly in the coastal area, it was found in pits or in stone

circles. While moving westward it is found as an interment in the cists, dolmenoid cists and dolmens.

The sarcophagus burials can be divided into the following types:

1. Sarcophagus found in pits.
2. Sarcophagus found in stone circles.
3. Sarcophagus found in cist.
4. Sarcophagus found in dolmen and dolmenoid cists.

The sarcophagus directly placed inside the pits seems indigenous and probably earlier than all other types. These types of burials were reported at Perambair in Chingleput district. Quite interestingly one of the sarcophagi found without legs recalls another form of coffin or urn burial. In addition to this two upturned clay hooks at both the exterior ends of the sarcophagus were noticed. These types of hooks are also found on the interior surface near the rim portion of the urn in some sites like at Kalapatti and Nallurvayal in Coimbatore district. In South Arcot district, these were noticed at Alagrammam, Kutteripattu and Vanur in Tindivanam taluk and Kuchchipayam in Panruti taluk.

The sarcophagi placed in a stone circle were reported earlier at Perambair,

Kunnattur, Sanur and Pallavaram all located in the Chingleput district. In the present exploration it was noticed at Ariyur, Nemili and Kappalambadi in Gingee taluk and at Sitamur (kil), Auroville, Kanthadu in Timdivanam taluk.

The above said two types were not noticed in North Arcot district. Obviously the reason is that of its western movement where it mingles with existing dolmenoid cists and dolmens as one noticed at Karikal, Mamandur, Wandivasal, Karkur, Settavarai, Pogalur and Kilseppuli.

The sarcophagus placed inside the cist in east - west orientation is reported in the excavation at Mottur, Odugattur and at Sembadavankottai in North Arcot district. In this district, the sarcophagus placed inside the cist as an interment is noticed at Andali, Devanur, Melkalpundi, Nayanur, Mullur and Paranur in Tirukkoyilur taluk and Karuvakshi in Villupuram taluk.

Its association with dolmen is noticed at Kilseppuli, Ariyur, Karikanthangal in North Arcot district and at Mallachandram in Dharmapuri district. The above said sepulchral representations clearly indicate the

adaptability of sarcophagus by various groups depending upon their local tradition thereby showing close relationship between different social groups.

Types of Sarcophagus

The sarcophagi are generally a coffin with oblong or bathtub shape having cylindrical leg fluted at the bottom either in one or more rows. The sarcophagus at Paiyampalli had 24 legs.

The sites yielding sarcophagus found in the coastal area had domical lid whereas the sarcophagus unearthed at Mottur and Paiyampalli did not yield any lids. It can be conceived in other way too. The sarcophagus placed in a pit burial (not having any capstone) had lids whereas the cist, dolmenoid cist and dolmens having sarcophagi are placed without lids. This clearly indicates that the capstone of the tombs itself served as a lid thereby suggesting that the lid is not having any ritual value but only a functional value. Sarcophagus without legs was also reported at Perambair. This looks like another form of urn burial.

In south Arcot region, Garstin found 4 - 4 1/2 feet long sarcophagus at Kollur and Devanur. This fifteen legged sarcophagus met with human bones and iron piece.

The smaller sarcophagus had only two rows of three legs each. The larger sarcophagus had a decorative border below the rim. On the outer surface had two upturned clay hooks probably used to tie the lid or to suspend some articles.

Urn burial

Urn burials were noticed throughout Tamil Nadu with much concentration on the eastern and southeastern parts. The predominate of this burial practice observed in deltaic region of Tamil Nadu. They were placed in pits in the coastal area and in few occasions in cists in the upper region. The shape of the urns was almost uniform having a wide mouth, bulbous or globular body and sagger or conical base. It seems that the stem was fluted with the body of the urn at its bottom. A striking feature of these urns was the occurrence of two small hooks bent upward fixed on the interior surface at the shoulder of the urn. Either the hooks could have been used to hang something inside the urn or they helped to tie up the bowl enclosing the urn. The sites like Nallurvayal, Kalapatti, Idayapalayam, Vannathuraipudur, Erode, Sivagiri, Thattur and Moolakarai yielded such types of hooks.

The size of the urn varied from small pots to tall jars. However the last variety predominates. The rims of these ill - fired coarse red ware jars are heavy and rolled. The urns were placed either vertically or in a slanting position inside a shallow or trough shaped pit and closed either with thin slab serving as capstone or with a shallow bowl or lid. The skeletal remains were found inside the urn and a number of small pots were kept around this urn at the bottom.

Anthropomorphic figurine

A unique discovery of B.Narasimhaiah is a huge monolithic anthropomorphic figure found at Mottur in Chengam taluk iying 5 km north of Tanipadi and 25 km west of Tiruvannamalai. The anthropomorphic figure forms integral part of the three concentric circles in which the outer two circles are built of stone slabs. This stands in the middle circle facing south. The figure is made of well dressed slab and measures 3.25 m in width and 3.25 m in height and is planted by scooping out the bed rock to a depth of 75 cm to secure it in position besides adequate packing of murrum on either side. It has curved arms measuring 0.92 m. Neck and head were represented by a semi - circular

projection above the shoulder. A pedestal is provided instead of legs. It looks like in a seated form. Identical anthropomorphic is discovered earlier by the State Archaeology Department at Udayarnattam in Villupuram taluk. This anthropomorphic, locally called *visiriparai* is placed as a part of the slab circle of cairn circle entombing cist burial with round porthole on the east. This 3 m tall figurine had im waist portion. The distance between the 110 cm broad arm and the hip is of 50 cm. There is a triangular projection at the centre to look like a neck.

According to the local tradition, once the *Valiyars*, pygmies, came to know that there would be a rain fire at their original place. They wanted to move southward to save themselves. They requested their God to come with them but He refused. While leaving the place they cut the head of the God and took it to the forest along with them. Hence it stands there without head.

Similar figures were reported elsewhere also. Earlier King William reported cruciform monoliths on the right bank of the river Godavari at Kaperlaguru, located about 13 km southwest of Mungapet in Paluncha

taluk of Andhra Pradesh. Mulhern had also noticed some crosses on the bank of Kaveri at Malur and Katapur. Sundara and John observed at Ambala Vayal in Kerala certain projections looking like a head on the circular stone. Recently K.P.Rao reported two identical anthropomorphic figurines at Midimalla near Chittoor. The first of these forms an integral part of the slab circle around the dolmen. The dolmen was surrounded by two slab circles. The slabs having semicircular top were placed on the cardinal points around the dolmen, as at Iralabanda and Mallachandram. The anthropomorphic figure stands on the east in the outer slab circle. The second one is also placed on the eastern side. This dolmen is encircled with three slab circles. The circle slabs having semicircular top and rectangular top (flat top) were planted alternately around the dolmen. The slab having the semicircular top occupies the cardinal point. The anthropomorphic figure placed in the mid - circle seems to have evolved from the earlier one. The curvature of the arms and shoulders are well turned down. The neck portion had some "V" shape depression. But the first one noted above did not have any depression, instead it had a small round projection.

The availability of slab circles in the western part of Chittoor district led to believe that the Mottur and Udayarnattam anthropomorphs might have also derived from there.

Anthropomorphic figures with head but armless were also reported in northern Andhra Pradesh particularly on the south bank of river Godavari in the sites like at Tottigutta, Dongatogu in Khammam district of Andhra Pradesh.

Porthole

Usually the porthole was noticed on the eastern slab. In the case of transepted cist it was found on the eastern slab and on the bifurcating or the transepting slabs. There was also some variant in it. If the cist was divided breadth wise the porthole was noticed on the eastern orthostat as well as on the other transepting slabs. If the cist was divided lengthwise then the porthole was found on the eastern orthostat against each chamber or against right side chamber and on the transepting slab. The porthole serves the purpose of connection all the chambers.

Occasionally, the porthole in the simple cist or the first porthole in the case of multiple portholed cist was

covered with a slab on the outer side by rectangular slab. This phenomenon is noticed in the sites like at Nattukkalpalayam, Kannarapalayam, Kadaiyur and at Kodumanal. The shape of the porthole is confined to round, trapeze and arrowhead - shaped. The trapeze shaped porthole is confined to Coimbatore region only. In this region also, the transepted cist divided into breadth wise in the taluk of Mettupalayam, Satyamangalam, Gobichettipalayam, Avinashi and western part of Coimbatore had round portholes. These round portholed cists found in the northwestern part of the region were earlier than the cist having trapeze shaped portholed cist. The trapeze shaped portholed cist might have developed from the round porthole. The trapeze shaped porthole generally found in the central, southern and eastern part of the Coimbatore region. The unparalleled evidence is of the arrowhead - shaped (porthole having a round centre with conical top and Rectangular base) porthole. The usage of this type of porthole exclusively restricted to one type of cist burial i.e., transepted cist with two subsidiary cists. In this type too, they found only on the front slab of the northern subsidiary cist facing south.

Usually porthole is noticed on the eastern slab of the chamber. In case of transepted cist it is found on the eastern slabs as well as on the bifurcation slabs. In case of a circle having more than one cist such as subsidiary cists, the main cist has the porthole on the east and subsidiary cists have the porthole on the front slab facing the passage.

Capstone with cup marks

Capstone with cup marks on its upper surface is reported at Vedarthattakkal, Anachandram and Karubayanahalli in Dharmapuri region. The cup marks are found at regular interval all over the upper surface of the capstone. The cup marks are shallow in nature having coconut shell deep.

Method of Offering

It seems in earlier stage the grave goods are confined to chambers and in later stage they were placed around the cist. In a simple cist the grave goods and skeletal remains are placed on the floor slab. Grave goods generally found at the head portion. Grave goods like gold and carnelian beads found below the skull portion as one noticed at Kodumanal. In case of transepted cist, skeletal remains were found in the northern chamber and grave goods in the southern chamber. A

big pot or storage jar like thing noticed in one of the chambers at Kodumanal and Sirumugal. The offerings were made against the porthole in the passage. One sword generally found in the passage in the case of transepted cist with two subsidiary cists. Long swords and javelin were placed on the western side of the cist. The grave goods placed inside the cists are limited in nature and confined to important articles. Sometimes plenty of grave goods were placed outside the cist. Thousand of pots were lined up on the western side in a semicircular form within the circle around the main cist. One storage jar is invariably noticed on the southern side of the main cist. In case cist having benches, the grave goods are placed below the benches and skeletal remains on the bench. As per the Kodumanal evidence goes, the four legged jars were placed near the inner edge of the circle and followed by ring stands, bowls, conical vessels small bowls and plates. The skeletal remains were placed in east - west orientation with head on the east. The megalith 9 and 10 at Kodumanal yielded more than one skeletal remains. All are secondary burials placed in an articulated or in disarticulated form. Some of the cists yielded only few bones and devoid of any skeletal remains.

Due to the hidden nature of the cist burial, the grave goods are found in undisturbed condition whereas in the case of dolmens, the nature and vandalism played a major role in its destruction.

Local Name

The megaliths are called differently in different parts of the region. They are called as pandiyan mukkai, pandiyan kuli, sola kuli, sola kuli, pandiyar vidu, panduvarar vidu, panduvarar kuddai, panduvarar makkai and panduvarar kradu. The menhirs are known as vedankal and suryakal.

Graffiti marks

The megalithic pottery collected both from the habitation and burial yielded graffiti marks. The fine example could be observed at Kodumanal. At Kodumanal, there are about 250 complete or almost complete signs on the pottery. One of the interesting features of this region is that the megalithic burials here have each a distinct symbol. These post - firing graffiti are found on the neck portion of the vessels, but in the case of ring stands and dishes they are found on the exterior surface of the base and sometimes on the inner side also. Most of them were engraved on the shoulder portions of the back and red ware bowls.

Excluding the fragmentary graffiti, there are about fifty complete or almost complete signs on the habitation pottery. They are engraved on the black - and - red ware, red polished ware, both painted and plain, and occasionally on red ware also. Some signs are found to be compound signs consisting of more than one symbol. A few of these occur repeatedly from different localities and levels. The star symbol usually occurs at the end position of a compound sign. Some symbols are found to develop or evolve from some basic symbol. Taurine symbols which are found on a painted potsherd were popular on punch - marked coins. So, this taurine symbol may be just an imitation from those coins. Some of the symbols are found engraved at the end portion of two Brahmi inscriptions. Through the exact connotation of these symbols, individually or in compound form, cannot be easily guessed at, it can be suggested that they belong to the same cultural milieu.

One of the interesting features is that each burial has a distinct symbol. Of the thirteen burials excavated, only three (Meg.IV, and XI) did not yield any graffiti on their pottery. But this may be due to the fragmentary nature of their

pottery. The fact is that each megalith with a special symbol engraved on all its pottery may suggest that the particular symbol is somewhat important for and closely related to the person in whose memory that megalith is erected.

Rock Paintings

The rock paintings belong to megalithic period in Tamil Nadu fall into two categories, one found on the ceilings of the rock - shelters and another on the dolmen. The first category is found at Thalappalli, Oppathavadi, Oramanakunata, Myiladumparai, Mallapadi, etc., in Krishnagiri taluk and at Mudippinayanapalli in Hosur taluk. The second one is found at Mallachandram, Maharajakadi, Muththampatti, Kuruvinayanapalli, Oramanakunta ect.

The paintings were applied invariable by using both white and red pigments. At Myiladumparai and Oramnagunta the red pigment is superimposed by white pigment thereby indicating an earlier date to the red pigment. It seems that the red pigment is of the neolithic period. The nonavailability of red pigment in the megalithic burial and its superimposition by white pigment suggests its earlier date. These were

executed periodically indifferent locations of the same shelter. The non-occurrence of any habitation material in the rock shelter suggested that these were executed on some special occasions. There is some narrow or close difference between the motifs applied on the dolmens and the rock shelters. The paintings on the dolmens had numerous human figurines but less animal figurine and fighting scenes. There are two types of line drawings. One is just a figure or symbol made of single line drawing and in some other cases they were made of triangular figures with fill - up type.

While applying painting on the interior surface of the dolmen they always gave the first preference to the western orthostat against the porthole. If that orthostat had been exhausted then they preferred northern, southern and finally eastern orthostats. Generally, the paintings were seen only on the western orthostats.

Fighting scene, tilling a land, dancing in a row, riding a horse (?), man with cattle, etc... are some of the scenes portrayed by them. In few cases the bow and arrow were raised above the head of the man in a position of charging an arrow pointing upward. Otherwise men

are shown in a fighting posture, holding the bow and arrow against each other. This recalls the sculptural panel of the later - day heros tones found in the area. In one instance, the fighting on horses (?) is depicted the contenders fight with a shield in one hand and by holding a strap of the horse in the other hand. Sometimes they used long unidentified lane - like object. The objectives of the fighting scenes are yet to be assessed.

In a painting a plant is depicted emerging out of a square base recalling the rail and tree symbol of punch marked coins. While depicting the dance scene they always preferred to draw the human figures in a row. In one case a house is drawn in front of a raw of four human figurines depicted in a dancing posture.

Interestingly, the painting at Kuruvinyanapalli had a symbol having 12 square boxes formed out of 5 vertical and four horizontal strokes. Out of five vertical strokes the inner three strokes end with arrow marks. Four human figurines were also depicted two each on either side of the above said symbol. In addition to two human figures one animal is also depicted. the central box symbol with arrow marks is similar to

the symbols depicted on the fertility stone locally called sanniyasikal of later times. The animal depicted on one side of the symbol may be a symbolic representation of the animal allowed to cross this symbol to increase the fertility. Some other symbols like star, human genital, flower motif, circle with a dot, ect.... were also found.

At Maharajakadai almost all the paintings found in the dolmens fell a prey to vandalism. Most of them were overwritten or drawn by the local people by using the same white painting prepared with the locally available raw material. However, the rock - shelter paintings were left untouched.

The rock - shelters with the paintings are found in the vicinity of the megalithic graves. And those on the interior surface of the dolmens clearly suggest that these belonged to the megalithic period. Usage of weapons like arrow, lance, sword, etc. would corroborate this suggestion. Interestingly, the rock paintings so far discovered are only confined to the region where the dolmens are available. The close resemblance in tone and tenor between the paintings of dolmen and those of the rock shelter would support their identical nature.

Generally it is believed that the rock paintings belong to the prehistoric period. But the present explorations have not yielded any rock paintings in the vicinity of a paleolithic site. Unlike other regions, the earliest rock paintings in red pigment were perhaps of neolithic period only. As noted above out of ten sited only two sites yielded earlier paintings and all the others belong to the megalithic period.

Conclusion

The recent explorations and excavations carried out in northern part of Tamil Nadu exposed the varied nature of megalithic monuments. These findings are only a part of the megalithic culture and still more to come. It is very difficult to place any type of burial in a

definite chronological or stratigraphical frame without creating a vast data base.

The varied geographical settings, availability of the resource material and level of technology determined the nature of the megalithic monuments and its age. In Tamil Nadu, most of the available data on megalithic monuments is generally based on surface observations. The findings of the recent excavations at Kodumanal clearly suggest that the hidden treasure is more important than the surface findings. The close study of the goods, pottery, graffiti marks, rock paintings and associated burials can only give a better understanding for which issue based region wise exploration and excavation is necessary.

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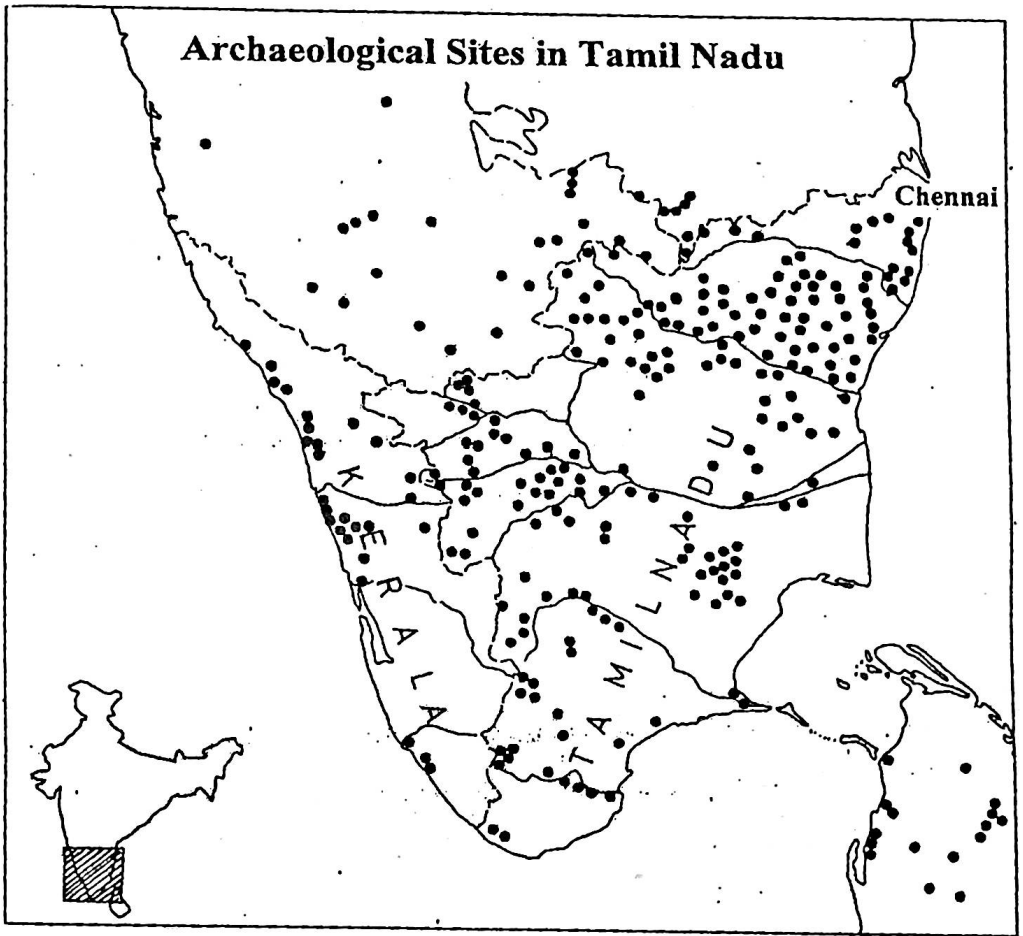
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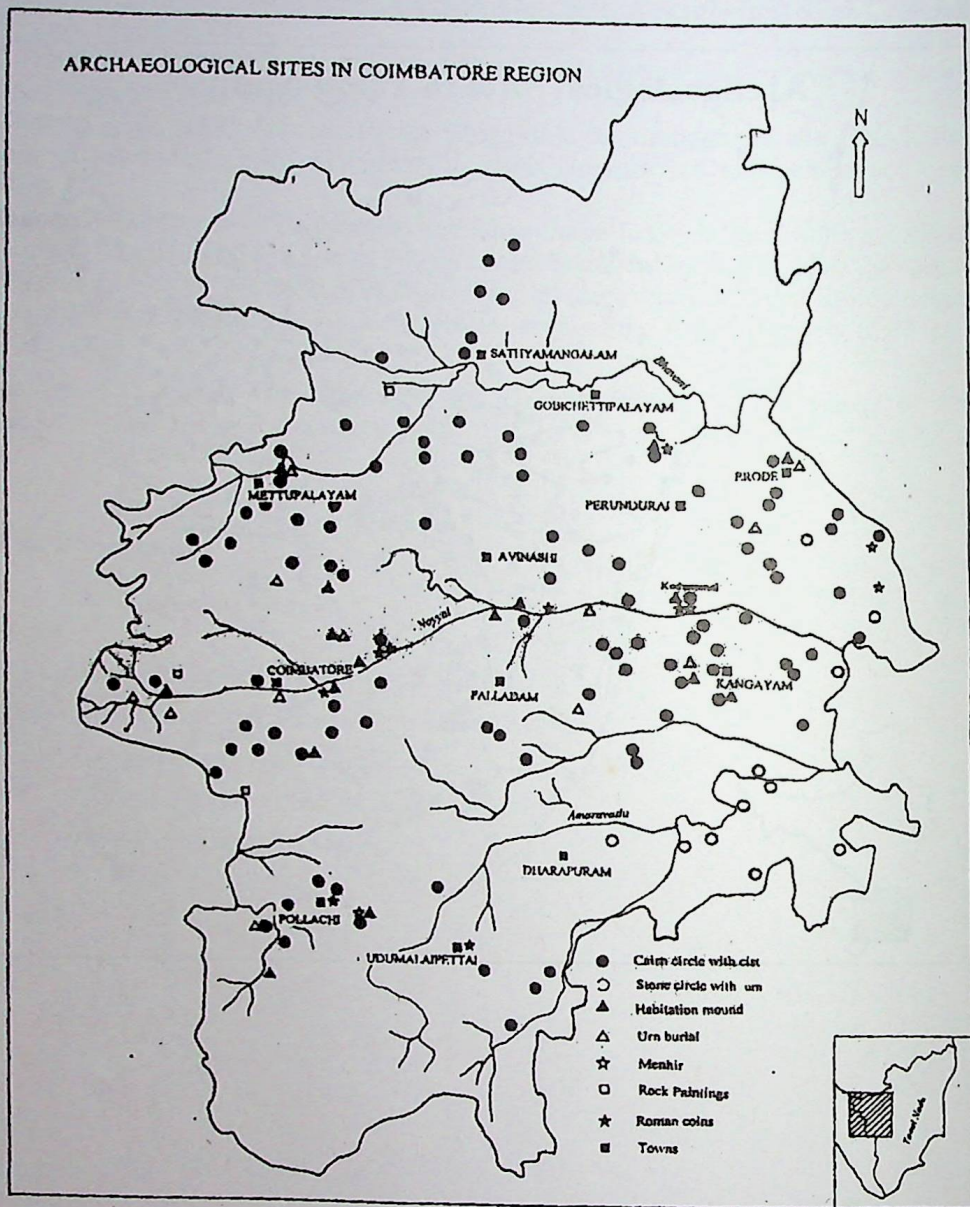
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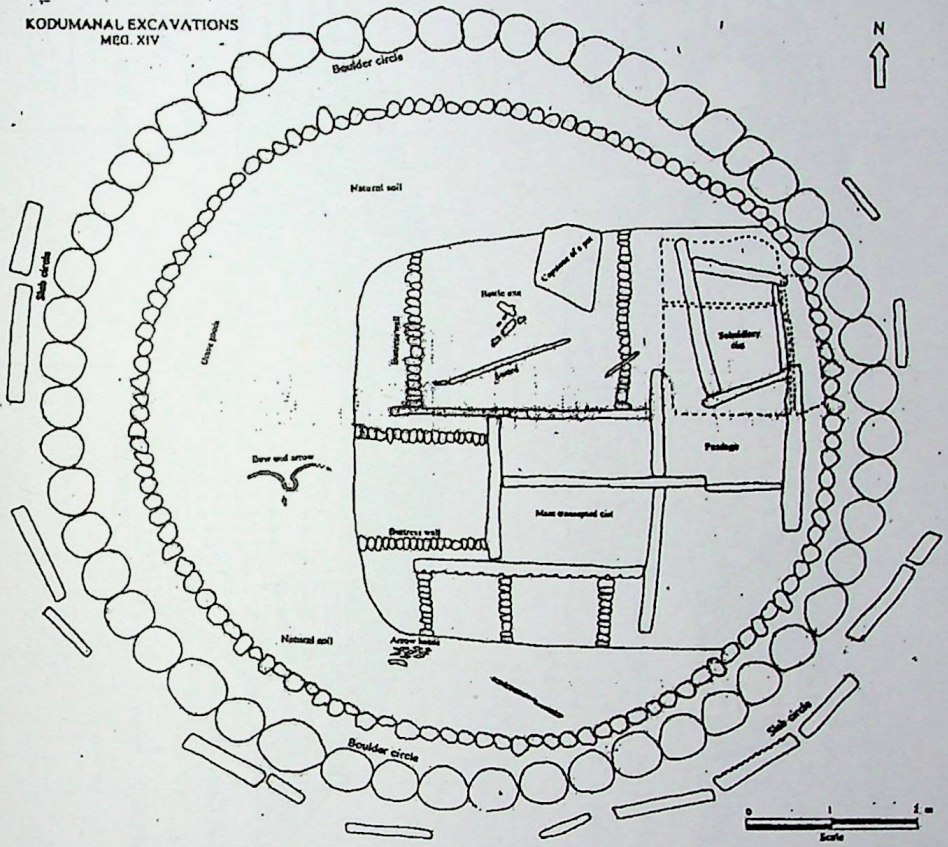
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- Fig.2 Archaeological Sites in Coimbatore Region
- Fig.3 Ground Plan of the Cist Burial
- Fig.4 Cross Section of the Cist Burial
- Fig.5 Megalithic Graffiti Marks.



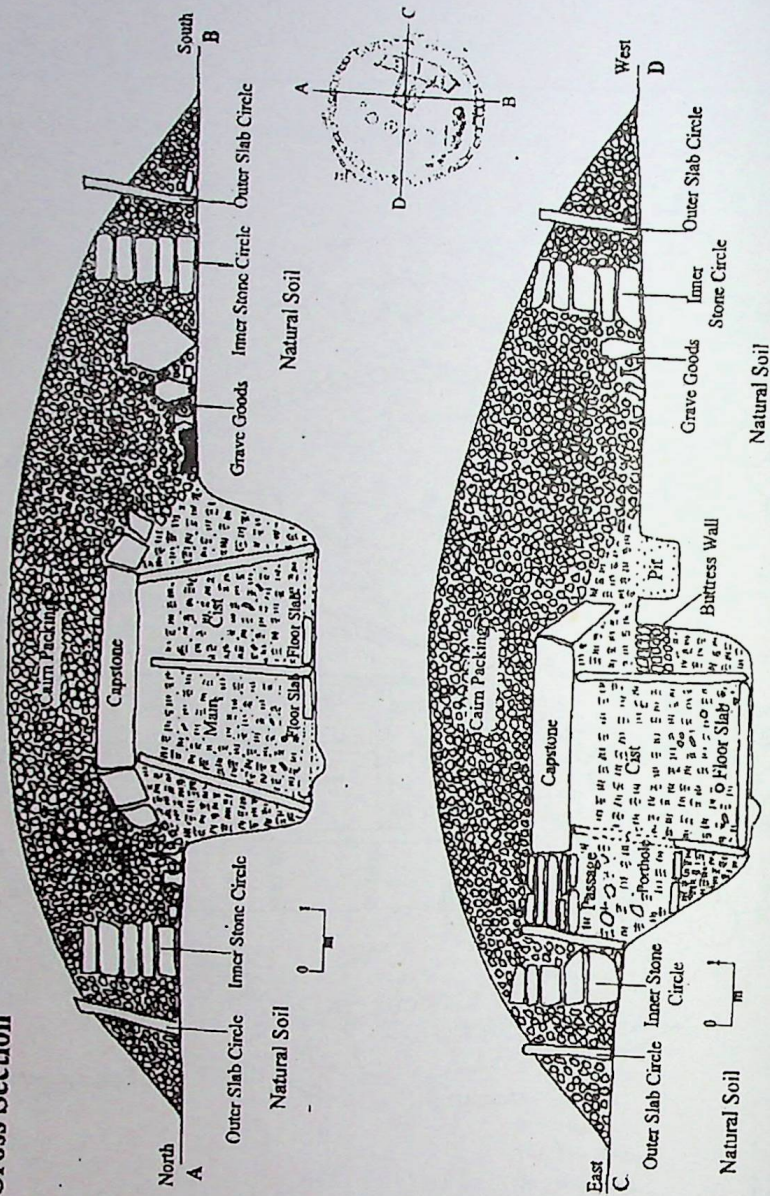
ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES IN COIMBATORE REGION



KODUMANAL EXCAVATIONS
MEG. XIV



Meg. 5
Cross Section



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Kodumanal : Graffiti Marks

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