

A Comprehensive Study on Megalithic Monuments of Andhra Pradesh: An Archaeological Perspective

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Abstract:

The megalithic monuments of Andhra Pradesh represent a significant phase in the prehistoric period of South India, offering profound insights into the burial practices and ritualistic traditions of early societies. This paper delves into the archaeological aspects of these monuments, examining their typology, distribution, cultural significance, and the socio-religious context of the communities that constructed them. Through an extensive review of archaeological findings, including the analysis of burial types, grave goods, skeletal remains, and construction techniques, the study reconstructs the complexities of megalithic traditions in Andhra Pradesh. The research highlights regional variations, correlates the megalithic culture with contemporaneous cultures in neighboring regions, and underscores the importance of these monuments in understanding the prehistoric heritage of India.

Keywords: Megalithic monuments, Andhra Pradesh, burial practices, archaeological perspective, rituals, South Indian prehistory.

Introduction

The megalithic culture of India, particularly prominent in the southern regions, stands as a testament to the complex social structures and rich ritualistic traditions of prehistoric communities. Andhra Pradesh, with its diverse landscape and strategic location, hosts a plethora of megalithic sites that have captivated archaeologists and historians alike. These monuments, predominantly associated with burials, offer a unique window into the past, revealing the beliefs, practices, and societal norms of the communities that erected them.

The term "megalith" originates from the Greek words *mega* meaning "large" and *lithos* meaning "stone," referring to the use of large stones in the construction of these monuments. In the context of South Indian archaeology, megaliths are often funerary structures, though some may have served as memorials or markers for significant events. The diversity in their forms—ranging from dolmens, cairns, cists, to menhirs and stone alignments—reflects a wide array of cultural practices and technological advancements.

This paper aims to present an archaeological perspective on the megalithic monuments of Andhra Pradesh, focusing on burial practices and rituals. By analyzing the typology and distribution of these monuments, as well as the material culture associated with them, we seek to understand the socio-cultural dynamics of the megalithic communities. The study also explores regional variations and examines how these practices relate to broader patterns observed in the Indian subcontinent during the Iron Age.

Overview of Megalithic Culture in Andhra Pradesh

Historical Context

The megalithic period in South India is generally dated between 1200 BCE and 300 CE, corresponding with the Iron Age—a time marked by significant technological, social, and cultural transformations (Moorti, 1994). The introduction of iron metallurgy revolutionized tool and weapon production, enhancing agricultural efficiency and warfare capabilities

(Srinivasan, 2007). Iron ploughshares and sickles facilitated the expansion of agriculture, leading to surplus production and the growth of settlements (Allchin & Allchin, 1982).

In Andhra Pradesh, the proliferation of megalithic monuments aligns with these advancements, signifying a period of dynamic cultural evolution (Murty, 2003). The construction of elaborate burial sites reflects the development of complex societal structures and specialized craftsmanship (Brubaker, 2001). These monuments exemplify the communities' ritualistic and ceremonial practices, indicating sophisticated belief systems centered around death, ancestry, and possibly cosmology (Mohanty & Selvakumar, 2002).

The megalithic culture exhibits a transition from nomadic to more settled lifestyles, with increased emphasis on community organization and social stratification (Possehl, 1992). The diversity of grave goods, including pottery, ornaments, and weapons, suggests distinctions in social status and roles within these societies (Rao, 1988). Trade networks expanded during this period, facilitating the exchange of materials such as iron, beads, and exotic goods, which is evident from the artifacts found at various sites (Thapar, 2002).

Furthermore, the megalithic period in Andhra Pradesh represents an important link between the prehistoric and early historic phases of Indian history (Singh, 2008). The cultural practices observed during this era laid the groundwork for subsequent historical developments, influencing later traditions and societal norms (Deo, 1985). The megalithic monuments thus serve as crucial archaeological records for understanding the evolution of early South Indian civilizations.

Geographical Distribution

Megalithic sites in Andhra Pradesh are dispersed across diverse geographical landscapes, with notable concentrations in several districts. The distribution of these monuments is influenced by factors such as topography, availability of suitable stone materials, and proximity to ancient trade routes (Leshnik, 1974).

Deep southern Andhra Pradesh particularly areas adjacent to Bellary region had numerous dolmens and cairns. Kurnool region known for sites like Chanugondla, this region features en number of dolmens and cairns situated on hilltops and rocky terrains (Ramesh Susarla, The Hindu, October 01, 2021) The granite-rich landscape provided the raw materials necessary for constructing megalithic structures. Megalithic site Kalmednur in Anantapur district is prominent for cist and urn burials, reflecting diverse burial customs within the megalithic tradition (Reddy, 2018). The region's fertile plains suggest a community engaged in advanced agricultural practices.

Megalithic monuments and burials constructed in elaborative manner were identified in Chittor region. In this region Megalithic monuments represented with advanced and elaborative constructive methods. Dolmens with concentric stone slab circles, porthole, passage way, sarcophagus, gigantic cap stones and anthromorphic figures were identified in this region (V Ramabrahmam, 2019). A site named Mallayagaripalle showcases menhirs and stone alignments, indicating ceremonial or astronomical significance (Sharma, 2016). The area's strategic location may have facilitated trade and cultural exchanges.

Megalithic monuments at Nagarjunakonda stone circles and dolmens, highlighting a blend of megalithic and early Buddhist influences due to its proximity to major trade routes along the Krishna River (Kumar, 2015). Dharanikota, Amaravati, Vinukonda, Narasaraopeta and Chilakaluripeta also represented with megalithic sites. Megalithic monuments in Northern Andhra Pradesh followed simple burial constructive practices when compare with Megalithic monuments in deep Southern Andhra Pradesh.

Influencing Factors:

Topography and Resources: The megalithic builders often selected elevated sites with abundant stone resources, both for practical construction needs and possible symbolic reasons related to visibility and proximity to the sky (Wheeler, 1948).

Trade Routes: Proximity to ancient trade paths facilitated the exchange of goods and ideas, contributing to the cultural richness observed at various sites (Gogte, 1997). Coastal and riverine routes in districts like Guntur linked inland communities with broader maritime networks.

Cultural Landscapes: The spatial organization of megalithic sites suggests deliberate placement within the cultural landscape, possibly denoting territorial boundaries, sacred spaces, or communal gathering areas (Rajesh & Abhayan, 2014).

Table 1: Major Megalithic Sites in Andhra Pradesh

Site	District	Monument Types	References
Chanugondla	Kurnool	Dolmens, Cairns	Rajan (2014)
Mallayagaripalle	Chittoor	Menhirs, Stone Alignments	Sharma (2016)
Kalmednuri	Anantapur	Cist Burials, Urn Burials	Reddy (2018)
Nagarjunakonda	Guntur	Stone Circles, Dolmens	Kumar (2015)

Sources: Compiled from various archaeological reports.

Regional Variations:

The variation in monument types across different regions of Andhra Pradesh indicates localized expressions of the broader megalithic culture (Sundara, 1975). Factors contributing to these regional differences include:

Environmental Diversity: Different ecological zones led to adaptations in construction techniques and burial practices which is visible in the use of stone slabs for cists in rocky regions versus earthen urns in alluvial plains. Megalithic burials were constructed according to the environmental and ecological factors which were identified with sites like Nagarjunakonda (R Subramanyam, 2006), Irilabanda (Ranjith Kumar V, Unpublished Ph D thesis) etc.

Cultural Interactions: Interactions with neighbouring cultures influenced local traditions, as seen in the amalgamation of megalithic and Neolithic practices at sites like Sanganakallu (Fuller et al., 2007). It is also evident that some of the sites in Andhra Pradesh Megalithic phase followed the Chalcolithic phase. It is identified at a megalithic site Ramapuram in Kurnool district (IAR, 1980-84). Cultural continuity is witnessed with megalithic sites of Andhra Pradesh.

Resource Availability: Access to materials like specific types of stone or metals affected the types of monuments constructed and the inclusion of particular grave goods (Murty, 2003). It is also known that there are a lot of differences between the Megalithic monuments of Andhra and Telangana which are influenced by availability of materials. It is identified that Telangana is represented with simple burial types like stone circles, urn burials whereas southern Andhra Pradesh elaborate burials like Swastika pattern cists with stone slab circles, Dolmens (Rao K P, 1988). It is clearly indicating the role of physical resources materials in the burial construction.

Burial Practices and Rituals:

The burial practices observed in megalithic sites of Andhra Pradesh reveal complex mortuary rituals. Both primary and secondary burials are present, with variations in body treatment, orientation, and accompanying grave goods. It is also evident that a single burial contains many skeletons and other burial contains a single skeleton. A monument with different variations in a single site was identified at many places which indicate the social or economic or political disparities in the same community.

Primary Burials:

Primary burials involve the direct interment of the deceased. The bodies are placed in extended or flexed positions within cists or pits, sometimes accompanied by grave goods.

Secondary Burials:

Secondary burials consist of reburial of skeletal remains after initial decomposition elsewhere. These remains are often placed in urns or ossuaries, indicating ritualistic treatment of the deceased.

Grave Goods and Material Culture:

Grave goods found in megalithic burials include pottery, iron weapons, tools, beads, and ornaments made of gold, copper, or semi-precious stones. The presence of such items suggests beliefs in an afterlife and the significance of

social status. Construction of burials in an elaborative manner indicates the importance of burial practice in megalithic communities all over the world. Keeping different objects as Grave goods could be an indication to life after death.

Table 2: Common Grave Goods in Megalithic Burials

Item	Description	Cultural Significance
Iron Weapons	Swords, Spears, Arrowheads	Warrior Status, Protection in Afterlife
Pottery	Black and Red Ware, Burnished Vessels	Food Offerings, Ritual Use
Beads and Ornaments	Carnelian, Agate, Shell, Gold Pendants	Personal Adornment, Social Status
Tools	Iron Axes, Sickles, Agricultural Implements	Occupation, Daily Life Significance

Sources: *Excavation reports and analyses* (Singh, 2017; Narayan, 2019).

Belief system and Cultural Practices: The construction of megaliths and associated rituals reflects complex belief systems. Evidence suggests ceremonial feasting, ancestor worship, and possibly ritual sacrifices. Some megalithic structures exhibit Astronomical alignments with celestial bodies, indicating astronomical knowledge and its integration into ritual practices (Rao K P, 2006). The architectural features of megaliths often carry symbolic meanings. For instance, the orientation of burials towards the east signifies beliefs associated with rebirth and immortality. Identification of Anthropomorphic monuments at Mallayagaripalle in Chittoor district indicates the worshipping nature of these megalithic monuments (V Ramabrahmam, 2019).

Social Structure and Cultural Dynamics

Hierarchical Society: The variability in monument size, complexity, and grave goods suggests a stratified society. Larger monuments with richer grave goods are likely associated with high-status individuals or elites.

Craft Specialization: The production of sophisticated iron implements and ornaments indicates specialized craftsmanship. This specialization points towards economic complexity and trade networks.

Interregional Connections: Comparative studies reveal similarities between megalithic cultures across South India, suggesting cultural exchanges and interactions. Trade in iron, beads, and other commodities would have facilitated these connections.

Regional Variations within Andhra Pradesh

Northern Andhra Pradesh:

In the northern regions of Andhra Pradesh, megalithic sites exhibit unique features that distinguish them from those in the southern and coastal areas. Sites like Devandlapalli and Mallampet are notable for extensive urn burials, where the cremated remains of the deceased were placed in large ceramic urns and interred in burial pits. This practice indicates a cultural preference for cremation and secondary burial rites in this region.

The pottery styles associated with these urn burials are distinctive, featuring intricate designs and motifs. Common types include Black and Red Ware (BRW) and all-black ware, which often display geometric patterns, stylized animals, and occasionally human figures. The craftsmanship suggests a high level of skill in ceramics and may reflect socio-cultural aspects such as status or clan identity.

The prevalence of urn burials and the specific pottery styles suggest that northern Andhra Pradesh developed regional cultural practices within the broader megalithic tradition. These practices may have been influenced by interactions with neighboring regions to the north and east, indicating a network of cultural exchanges.

Southern Andhra Pradesh

Southern Andhra Pradesh, encompassing districts like Chittoor, Anantapur, and Kadapa, exhibits a different set of megalithic traditions. Here, there is a predominance of dolmens and cairns, monumental structures built with large stone slabs. The dolmens often consist of a rectangular chamber formed by upright stones and capped with a massive horizontal slab.

Excavations in this region have uncovered rich assemblages of iron weapons, including swords, spears, and arrowheads. The abundance of weaponry in burials suggests a society that valued martial prowess and may have been organized around warrior elites. The presence of horse bones and associated harness fittings in some burials indicates the importance of horses, possibly for chariotry or cavalry, highlighting technological advancements in transportation and warfare.

The architectural complexity of the megaliths in southern Andhra Pradesh reflects advanced engineering skills. The careful alignment of certain monuments with astronomical bodies suggests an understanding of celestial events, potentially tied to agricultural cycles or religious ceremonies.

Coastal Regions

The coastal regions, particularly along the Krishna and Godavari river deltas, reveal megalithic sites that demonstrate significant maritime influence. Sites such as Nagarjunakonda and Amaravati have yielded grave goods including exotic items like carnelian beads, shell ornaments, and imported ceramics. These artifacts indicate active maritime trade with regions as far as the Indus Valley, Southeast Asia, and possibly the Mediterranean.

The coastal megaliths often take the form of stone circles and dolmens, but with unique features such as carvings or inscriptions that are not commonly found inland. The incorporation of foreign materials and styles suggests these communities were cosmopolitan and engaged in extensive cultural exchanges.

Burial practices in these regions may also reflect a fusion of local traditions with external influences. The variety of grave goods and monument types points to a society that was adaptive and open to incorporating new elements from their trade partners.

Comparative Analysis with Neighbouring Regions

Karnataka and Tamil Nadu

Megalithic cultures in the neighboring states of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu share several similarities with those in Andhra Pradesh, including the use of dolmens, cairns, and menhirs. For instance, the dolmens of the Brahmagiri site in Karnataka and Adichanallur in Tamil Nadu exhibit architectural features comparable to those found in Andhra Pradesh.

However, there are notable regional distinctions. In Tamil Nadu, for example, urn burials are often accompanied by bronze implements and intricate gold jewelry, indicating advanced metallurgical practices. The pottery styles and decorative motifs also differ, reflecting regional artistic traditions.

In Karnataka, the presence of ash mounds—accumulations of burnt cattle dung—suggests ritual activities distinct from those in Andhra Pradesh. The differences in material culture and burial customs highlight the diversity within the megalithic traditions of South India, influenced by local resources, environmental factors, and cultural interactions.

Influence of Deccan Traditions

The Deccan Plateau played a significant role in shaping the megalithic practices of Andhra Pradesh. The plateau's extensive mineral resources, particularly iron ore, facilitated the development and spread of iron metallurgy. The techniques and styles associated with ironworking likely diffused from the Deccan into Andhra Pradesh, enhancing local technological capabilities.

Moreover, the use of dolmens and menhirs across the Deccan region suggests a shared cultural heritage. Trade routes traversing the plateau enabled the exchange of goods and ideas, leading to similarities in monument construction and burial practices. The influence of Deccan traditions is evident in the architectural techniques and types of grave goods found in Andhra Pradesh.

Technological Advances

Iron Metallurgy:

The introduction of iron metallurgy was a transformative development during the megalithic period. Iron implements found at various sites in Andhra Pradesh include agricultural tools like ploughshares and sickles, as well as weapons such as swords and daggers. The widespread use of iron tools improved agricultural productivity, leading to surplus production and societal growth.

Archaeometallurgical studies indicate that megalithic communities had advanced knowledge of smelting and forging techniques. They utilized bloomery furnaces to extract iron from ore, and evidence suggests they could control temperatures to produce higher-quality metal. The ability to manufacture durable tools and weapons had significant implications for economic and military aspects of these societies.

Architectural Techniques:

Constructing megalithic monuments required sophisticated engineering and stone-working skills. The transportation and erection of massive stone slabs involved knowledge of mechanics, including the use of levers, rollers, and possibly animals for hauling. Quarrying techniques show that stones were carefully extracted and shaped to fit precise architectural designs. Some megaliths exhibit alignment with astronomical phenomena, such as solstices and equinoxes, indicating an understanding of astronomical principles. This knowledge may have been applied in calendrical systems, agricultural planning, or religious rituals. The integration of architecture and astronomy reflects the intellectual advancements of megalithic societies.

Challenges in Megalithic Studies

Preservation Issues:

Many megalithic sites in Andhra Pradesh are under threat due to urbanization, agricultural expansion, and industrial activities like mining and quarrying. The destruction of these sites leads to an irreversible loss of cultural heritage and archaeological data. Additionally, vandalism and the illicit trade of antiquities pose significant challenges to preservation efforts.

Environmental factors such as erosion, flooding, and vegetation overgrowth also contribute to the deterioration of megalithic monuments. The lack of adequate legal protection and resources hampers conservation initiatives. Raising public awareness about the importance of these sites is essential for their preservation.

Dating and Chronology:

Accurately dating megalithic monuments is difficult due to the scarcity of organic materials suitable for radiocarbon dating. Many structures are composed entirely of stone, lacking datable remains. As a result, archaeologists often rely on relative dating methods, such as typology and stratigraphy, to establish chronological frameworks.

The reliance on relative dating can lead to broad or uncertain time ranges. Thermoluminescence dating of pottery and optically stimulated luminescence of sediments offer alternatives but require careful calibration. Refining dating techniques is crucial for understanding the temporal development of megalithic cultures and their interactions with contemporaneous societies.

Interpretative Limitations:

Interpreting the symbolic meanings and rituals associated with megalithic monuments is inherently challenging due to the lack of written records from the period. Archaeologists must infer cultural practices from material remains, which may not capture the full spectrum of intangible heritage, such as beliefs, languages, and oral traditions.

Ethnographic analogies, drawing parallels with contemporary or historically documented societies, can provide insights but carry the risk of anachronism. Interpretations may also be influenced by the researchers' cultural biases. Multidisciplinary approaches, incorporating anthropology, ethnoarchaeology, and experimental archaeology, can help mitigate these limitations.

Recent Discoveries and Ongoing Research

New Excavations:

Recent archaeological excavations have brought to light new information about megalithic cultures in Andhra Pradesh. Sites like Kandanathi in Kurnool district (MV Subramanyam: *The Hindu*, June 18, 2018) and Gangalakunta in Guntur district (Samuel Jonathan: *The Hindu*, September 30, 2022) have revealed previously undocumented monument types and artifacts.

At Kandanathi, archaeologists discovered a complex of rock-cut chambers and elaborate burials containing numerous grave goods, including pottery, iron implements, and personal ornaments. These findings suggest variations in burial practices and social stratification within the community.

Similarly, the excavation at Gangalakunta unveiled a series of menhirs and alignments that may have served astronomical or ceremonial purposes. The artifacts recovered provide valuable data on trade connections, as some items originated from distant regions.

Technological Applications:

Advancements in scientific techniques are enhancing the study of megalithic sites. The use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and remote sensing allows for sophisticated spatial analysis and site mapping. These tools help identify patterns in site distribution, relationships with the landscape, and potential undiscovered sites. Bioarchaeological analysis, including isotope studies and DNA analysis of human remains, offer insights into the diet, health, and genetic affiliations of megalithic populations. Such studies can reveal migration patterns, population diversity, and social organization.

Technologies like ground-penetrating radar (GPR) facilitate non-invasive exploration of subsurface features, reducing the need for extensive excavation and preserving the integrity of sites. 3D modeling and digital reconstruction enable virtual preservation and public dissemination of information about megalithic monuments.

Conservation and Cultural Heritage

Preservation Efforts:

Recognizing the historical importance of megalithic sites, both governmental and non-governmental organizations are working towards their conservation. The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) has declared several megalithic sites as protected monuments, implementing legal measures to prevent unauthorized alterations and promoting conservation projects.

Initiatives like the National Mission on Monuments and Antiquities aim to document and preserve cultural heritage across India. Conservation efforts include physical restoration, installation of protective structures, and the development of site museums to display artifacts and educate visitors.

Community Involvement:

Engaging local communities in preservation is crucial for the sustainable management of megalithic heritage. Programs that involve residents in heritage education, site monitoring, and cultural tourism create a sense of ownership and responsibility. When communities recognize the value of their heritage, they are more likely to participate actively in its protection.

Collaborations between archaeologists, local authorities, and community organizations can lead to the development of sustainable tourism that benefits the community economically while ensuring the preservation of sites. Training programs and workshops can equip locals with skills in conservation and heritage management.

Conclusion

The megalithic monuments of Andhra Pradesh serve as enduring symbols of the region's rich prehistoric heritage. Through an archaeological lens, the study of these monuments illuminates the burial practices, rituals, and social structures of ancient communities. The diversity in monument types and burial customs reflects the complex cultural dynamics and technological advancements of the time.

The Megalithic culture of Andhra Pradesh represents the complex nature of the culture. A single Megalithic site represents variation in monumental construction, contrasting in the grave goods in the same site, differences in arrangement of porthole, interment of sarcophagus at specific monument in the same site etc. are indications of complexity in the Megalithic cultural practices and customs.

Understanding the megalithic culture of Andhra Pradesh not only contributes to the broader knowledge of South Indian prehistory but also emphasizes the need for preservation and continued research. As we uncover more about these ancient societies, we gain invaluable insights into human history and the evolution of cultural practices.

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