Megaliths off the Coast of Tranquebar

Sila Tripati
Marine Archaeology Centre
National Institute of Oceanography
Dona Paula, Goa 403 004
Email: sila@nio.org

The Megalithic culture succeed the Neolithic in South India and includes a variety of commemorative monuments consisting either of large stone blocks or small cairns. The Tamil term pandukal (old stone) is the traditional designation given to these burials in several parts of South India (Leshnik 1974). Manimekhalai, a Sangam epic, mentions that the dead were either cremated or exposed to the elements, or the body was buried in pits in subterranean vaults. Sometimes the corpse was placed inside a burial urn which was covered with a lid (Ghosh 1989).

In Tamil Nadu, megaliths belong to a period dating from 1000 B.C. to the third century A.D. A cairn circle usually contains pottery and the personal belongings of the dead. The body remains in a pit covered with a capstone, and small boulders are arranged in a circular fashion over

---

Fig. 1: Cairn circle in the sea off Tranquebar
Fig. 2: Offshore study area of the Tamil Nadu coast

It is inferred that, in Tranquebar, human habitation initially extended up to the area that is presently under 8 m of water, which represents the encroachment of the sea (Rao 1991). Besides the megaliths, terracotta ring wells of the third and fourth centuries A.D. as well as Chola and Danish coins have been found in Tranquebar. The descriptions of Silappadikaram concern human settlements on the shore that have been swallowed by the sea. Hence much that is referred to in the Sangam text is not poetic imagination, but historical fact.

The boulders of the submerged cairn consist of metamorphosed-anthosite gneises of the Archaean series (R.R. Nair and V. Purnachandra Rao, personal communication) Generally this rock type is found near Pattalur on the Kaveri river, and from Sittampudi to Suryaputti in Salem, as also around Kadavur in Tiruchirapalli District of Tamil Nadu (Krishnan 1968).

The boulders are covered with shells which have been cemented in a beach environment. The sediment sample, containing sand, indicates that a high energy environment prevailed at the site (R.R. Nair and V. Purnachandra Rao, personal communication).

These megaliths can be compared with those of the adjacent area, especially Korkai and Punjeri in
Mamallapuram (Fig. 4). Urn burials were found at Manigramam, to the north-west of Mclaiyur, and to the south-west of Melapperumpallam. Red ware was found at both the places.

Korkai, an ancient Pandyan port, was famous for pearl fishing, as mentioned in the Sangam literature (Ghosh 1989), but the sea has now receded five miles (Leshnik 1974). The excavation at Korkai has revealed megalithic urn burials, terracotta ring-wells and Chola coins (Nagawami 1971). Stone circles and urn burials have also been found in the vicinity of Punjeri, the city of the Pallavas of Mamallapuram (Dayalan 1987).

The megaliths of Tranquebar may be of an earlier period as they are presently submerged in 7 m of water, which can be accounted for by sea-level changes.

Acknowledgements

The author is thankful to Dr. B.N. Desai, Director of the Marine Archaeology Centre, for his encouragement, and to Dr. S.R. Rao for his guidance and valuable suggestions in writing this note. The author is also grateful to Dr. K.H. Vora for his suggestions. Thanks are also due to Dr. R.R. Nair, Dr. V. Purnachandra Rao and Prof. K.V. Raman for analysing the samples and providing the data on Kaveripattinam.
Fig. 4: Boulders of the cairn circle

References


