

BURIAL HILLOCKS IN WAYANAD

Vinoy Joseph¹

Abstract

Iron Age remains in Wayanad seem to have been the result of the co-mingling of cultures who were engaged in what may be referred as unilateral settlements. A number of megalithic remains have been found from Wayanad region by the archaeologists and the common people. Recent studies conducted on the topic reveals that there existed granite cemeteries and urn burial hillocks in Wayanad region. The attention given to the southern megalithic map of Kerala by the second half of the twentieth century resulted in neglecting of the abundant Iron Age remains lying west of Brahmagiri and North of Nilgiris, trapped in Wayanad region, facing ruthless destruction! The contents of the graves and urns are highly urbane in characteristics as noted by the pioneers of excavations in this region. A number of curios, taken back to London Museum by the colonial masters point out to the existence of a type of early exchange in which the profit must have been one sided. Though the idea has a tinge of the reflection of colonial orientalist views, study of the remains on a multi-disciplinary approach might yield a different result. This paper tries to gather and share some thoughts regarding the Iron Age remains of Wayanad and its contact with the coastal belt connecting them to the location of granite burials and urn burials.

Key words: Wayanad, megalithic remains, Iron age remains

Introduction

Studies on Megaliths in Indian subcontinent evoked the interest of scholars from India and abroad alike for about three centuries since the presentation of Babington at Bombay in 1823.² Initiated by colonial/British administrative-historians and archaeologists the study of Iron Age in India grew rapidly since 19th century. As rightly observed by Wheeler ‘South India is a land of temples but even the temples are there outnumbered by these ancient tombs’, one can find the Megalithic tombs and burials spread out in peninsular region abundantly. Considering the Iron Age remains in Kerala, one could find their presence in every district unevenly distributed. Typologically, all the eight types of sepulchral burials mentioned by Subbarayalu³, find space across the mainland of Kerala. However, the peculiar types of megaliths found in Kerala coast, like *Kodaikkal and Toppikaldid* not find their way to the slopes of Western Ghat region. They seem to be following typical patterns of distribution across the region about which the scholars have different hypotheses. The typological division put forward by US Moorthy, i.e, sepulchral and non-sepulchral, includes the types like dolmen, port-holed dolmen, menhir, stone alignment and avenue as memorial in nature.⁴ In Wayanad, we have come across cists with and without stone circles, in clusters as well as in singular locations, and urns with lithic and non-lithic appendage. However, it would be unwise to pass

¹Dr. Vinoy Joseph, Assistant Professor of History, Krishna Menon Memorial Government Women’s College, Pallikkunnu, Kannur.

² J. Babington, “Description of the Pandoo Coolies in Malabar,” Transactions of the Literary Society of Bombay, Vol.111, 1823, pp.324-330.

³ Noboru Karashima (ed), A Concise History of South India, Oxford University Press, pp 16-18

⁴U S Moorthy, Megalithic Culture in South India; Socio-Cultural Perspectives, Varanasi, 1994, p-1-3.

comments of them observing outward features alone. Yet, we may be able to reach some conclusions on them based on their location and alignment.

The region of Wayanad (hitherto used as a separate geographical unit extending from the lower hills of Brahmagiri in the north to the Nilgiri slopes in the west and the from the Chitradurga district in the east to the tropical slopes of Western Ghats bordering Calicut and Kannur), arrayed in sepulchral monuments supposed to be belonging to the Iron Age seem to be a continuation of the widespread burial culture found in Andhra region and Karnataka. This must be due to the table land properties of geography present in the region of Wayanad similar to that of the other two regions. Along with the features of Deccan plateau, the location of the region adjoining to the windward side of Western Ghats also must have provided a distinctive hill culture in the prehistoric times. However, the authors of the re historic remains found in this region remains in case of megalithic monuments of Wayanad, a detailed study would be possible only through the typological analysis supported by interdisciplinary tools.

Disciplines like Archaeology, Geography, Anthropology, Geology, and Meteorology could be of greater assistance in comprehending the vital features of these remains. However, such an attempt would be impossible without accessibility to account of remains in a given area. Human geography at its present trend would soon find a deformed geography and land form patterns before such a study could be initiated. This paper is a part of an ongoing study on the urnfields found across the landscape of Wayanad fast disappearing and an attempt to list them. This is done under the presupposition that these remains form a major link in the Iron Age trail of sites extending from the Vindhyas up to Adichanallur or Tirunellveli. Such a list with some insightful askance on a broader canvass would try to lit a beam into the dark areas in the study of Megaliths of Kerala. An all-inclusive review of the entire burial remains based on region-wise data collection is imperative in comprehending the prehistory of Kerala.

The developments in the post-independent schools of historical research and the advent of interdisciplinary approaches accelerated this shift from the conventional way of looking at these structures assigned to Iron Age. Western scholars started looking at these structures from the viewpoint of a 'monument biography'⁵ by tracing out the original location of stone boulders used for the construction. For the megalithic studies in India, the period 1960-1990 could be called as an affluent period as far as the production of literature is concerned. These studies were generally based on models which Gordon Child referred as 'evolution, diffusion and migration'.⁶ Owing to the multitude of remains found in Peninsular India, the explorations and expeditions were generally concentrated to the south of Vindhyas, especially Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. Kerala, too witnessed such explorative studies, though not as many as conducted in the aforesaid states. In the mainland of Kerala, excavations were conducted at Cranganore (1969-70) Pazhayannur and Machad (1974), Cheramanparambu (1972-73), Mangad, Porkkalam, Umichippoyil (2002) brought out fresh insights regarding the typology, alignment and the nature of deposits. All these excavations were named after the site excavated and conclusions were on the basis of a site or a cluster which presented with explicit evidences about human behavior.

⁵Cornelius J. Holtorf, The Life-Histories of Megaliths in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (Germany), *World Archaeology*, Vol. 30, No. 1, The Past in the Past: The Reuse of Ancient Monuments (Jun., 1998), pp. 23-38, inflibnet.

⁶Andrew Sherratt, Gordon Childe: Paradigms and Patterns in Prehistory, *Australian Archaeology*, No. 30(Jun., 1990), pp. 3-13

Earliest mention of Wayanad in a historical perspective was done by Fred Fawcett, in his report on Edakal Caves.⁷ His work was a precursor of the later investigations conducted by L A Cammide, Plenderlieth, B K Guru Raja Rao, Dr RajanGurukkal and Dr Raghav varier. Among them, Guru Raja Rao, Cammide and Plenderleith specifically concentrated on the presence of Urns in Wayanad. All of them were studies emerging out of accidental discoveries rather than deliberate academic exercises. Among them Cammide described the features of urns recovered from four different sites in Wayanad like SulthanBathery, Varadoor, Near Panamaram river and at KandathumVayal/ Velliladi. Though they are identified roughly, none of these sites were preserved. However, there are discoveries of urns and jars of lesser dimensions from nearby places to supplement the list of Cammide.

The term 'Urns' is generally used as a generic term to denote the massive earthen jar which is often associated with the burial system argued to have existed during the Iron Age, throughout the world. Though urns differ in size, stature, composition, colour and the goods deposited in them, the term is now widely used to denote the pottery items recovered from any burial place with stone appendage. However, we are yet to know about the use of the urns recovered from different locations. Generally, they are found with bones, skeletal remains or ashes, where as in daily life they might have been used for a variety for purposes. Though we find certain amount of similarity in the measurements and orientation of the stone structures known as 'Megaliths' found in different parts of the world, we find a clear-cut difference in the preparation and deposition of the urns within burials presenting regional elements of local diffusion. There was the occurrence of three or four legged urns (Valal) along with un-sculptured and pyriform shaped ones (Kandathuvayal). There was also a combination of thick and thin Black and Red Ware and thin polished red ware (Bathery). Similarly, at Ellumandham we find coarse urn used to cover up the polished black ware containing ashes and bones. Therefore, it is clear that there is much to explore beyond the mere make of the pottery found from the burials.

Urnite Hillocks

'Urnite hillock' is used here to denote an area where the urn deposits can be located on a hill side. Based on the studies conducted hitherto, there is no consensus on the date of settlements/in Wayanad. However, from the nature of burials and the examination of contents, and a study of the location one can reach some conclusions regarding the nature of distribution followed by them. From such an inference we could derive a better view about the nature of interaction their authors had with the environment. According to Cammide, there are four sites yielding urns of different dimensions. Apart from the sites many other individual urns of smaller and equal measurements were found from the same belt subsequently. Setting aside the innumerable individual appearances, the discovery of 'urnite hillocks' from Valal and Ellumadham and Urnite filed from Kottathra are considered worth mentioning here. As early as 1930 itself Plenderlieth had concluded that the vessels excavated were more or less similar to those Greek Vessels recovered by Alexander Brongniart.⁸ The Iron Age remains in Wayanad seem to be not belonging to a particular phase of human migration. Instead, they seem to represent the different stages of human migration, to go by the general notion that they had no settlements.

⁷Fred Fawcett, 'The Rock cut Carvings in the Edakkal Cave' (1901), *Wayanad Series*, Shreyas Publications, 2006.

⁸ H J Plenderleith, Black Polished pottery from Urn burials in Wayanad, *Man*, vol.3, 1930

The so-called colonialist view on Indian history always precipitated the idea that human settlements in Western Ghat region is out of question. We learn from Mr. Foote's treatise that there could have been Paleolithic, Neolithic, and Iron age, but apparently no age of bronze.⁹ However the unveiling of the cists in Chembra hills, (at a height of 4500 msl) ruled it out clearly. The remains found from a cist in 1970's at Chembra hills yielded a number of artifacts including the figurines of buffaloes made in bronze. It essentially points out the possibility of human presence at such a height during the transitional phase or later Bronze Age. (It is interesting to note that the Todas of Nilgiri still pursue the system of depositing the animal figures inside the burials!) Though the discovery of a single piece of bronze may not throw a flood of light of about the existence of Bronze Age, it does send a beam of light to the existence of the contemporaries of Bronze Age. The meticulous work undertaken by Brecks brought out more evidences of bronze from Nilgiri hills. The inhabitants (*if they were!*) must have avoided the low valley due to geographical perils like mosquitoes or marshy lands generating diseases. We have a similar cist found in *Kurichyar Mala* near *Achooranam* which provided terracotta human figurines of man and woman which had protruding teeth mentioning the presence of flesh-eating humans. However, there are less or no examples of urns straightaway buried at such heights. Instead, we have examples of urn deposits on the slanting sides of the lower hillocks as mentioned above.

Near Kurumbalakotta, while constructing a road in 1980's workers found around forty urns arranged in double rows. Digging deeper three feet more they came across another row of smaller pots arranged in a line. The area was covered by thorny bushes. Continuity of habitation is clearly mentioned in the area even today with a very old temple and sacred grove.

The urn burial sites found in Wayanad region display the features of *Urnite* hillocks, forming clusters. Following clusters can be added to the list of Cammidie;

1. Valal:

a) Geo-coordinates	11° 39' 58.716" N76° 0' 40.2264" E
b) Location	Valal, Kottathara Panchayath
c) Altitude/sea level	749/2457 ft
d) Landscape features	Hillock of rubber plantation and other cash crops.
e) Type of remains	Urns of varied sizes and different types.
f) Date of discovery	2012

2. Ellumantham

a) Geo-coordinates	11° 47' 12.3" N75° 57' 44.244" E	b) Location
Ellumandham, Edavaka Panchayath		c) Altitude/sea level
754/2473 ft		d)
Landscape feature	Slanting Hillock perhaps used as Urn burial ground	
e) Type of remains	Massive urns of different size and types.	
f) Year of discovery	2013	

Connected to the *Urnite* hillocks in Wayanad, a number of questions seem to come up worth pondering. The authors of the burials seem to be people who possessed the technology

⁹R.Sewel, Prehistoric Burial Sites in Southern India, The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland (Jan., 1902), pp. 165-170, <http://www.jstor.org.iproxy.inflibnet.ac.in:2048/stable/pdf/25208378.pdf>

of iron tools, with considerable amount of social bonds. However, from the roughly dressed boulders used for constructing the burial chambers around *Ambalavayal* shows that they belong to an early Iron using phase. Pots of mediocre dimensions excavated from beneath some thorny groove near a snake worshipping temple at Kottatha provided with rusted iron pieces, blackened bone remains mention the existence of a race/tribe or a community. The occurrence of urn clusters seems to be in the westward direction heading towards the ocean, avoiding the dense forest. Moving along the Urnite hillocks we would come across a number of Jaina/Hindu temples and sacred groves too. The contents of the urns also point towards a remote exchange system based on unilateral settlement kept alive by trans-oceanic goods like carnelian beads and etched carnelian beads. This must have been highly one sided with a tribal community on one side and a group of trading community like Jews or any of the Celtic tribes on the other side. Going by the description of Cammide, there was the presence of bones found in small pots inserted into the large urns which is a proof of secondary burials. Antiquity, authorship, structural features, orientation, alignment and similar issues can be roughly designed by examining the urns and pottery deposits. According to scholars like N J Francis important Buddhist centers of central India like that of Amaravati were built on the megalithic burial ground. The zippers excavated from below the columns of temple complex there resembled the small urn remains found in different parts of South India. This points towards the possibility of a continuity of Megalithic tradition diffused during the later Iron Age in peninsular region¹⁰.

Geographically speaking, one can find a relation in the distribution of the burials all over the area right from the foothills of Brahmagiri to Nilgiris. Dwindled to the seaward side of the Western Ghats we find Urnite hillocks with no cases of granite cists reported so far. This may be due to the geographical peculiarity or the availability of materials as mentioned by Krishnaswami observed. (1949). According to him cists and dolmens may have regional subtypes depending on the locational features. Granite graves seem to keep a route closer to the Edakkal complex while the Urn cemeteries find their way right from East Wayanad to the beginning of laterite bedrock near the coastal belt. L A Cammide mentioned another set of urns near Puthuppady which is accessible to the 9th century port 'Panththalayani Kollam' It is to be noted that the hillside urn clusters are found along the hypothesized trade route that runs through Mananthavady-Panamaram-Punchavayal- Bathery-Moolankav-Gundlepetta-Mysore. However, this can't be surely asserted to an extent, unless we cross examine the remains and subject them to some sophisticated scientific methods. Such an analysis would solve the mysteries lingering around Megalithic problems in India as well.

References

Andrew Sherratt, (1990) Gordon Childe: Paradigms and Patterns in Prehistory, Australian Archaeology, No. 30 (Jun., 1990), pp. 3-13 retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40286976>

Babington J, (1823) Description of the Pandoo Coolies in Malabar, Transactions of the Literary Society of Bombay, Vol.111.

Chakrabarti, Dilip K. 2001, The Archaeology of Ancient Indian Cities. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

¹⁰N J Francis, Historicizing Amaravati Sculptures, Semiarr presented at Nehru Arts and Science College Kanhanagad, on 02/03/2018.

Cornelius J. Holtorf, (1998) The Life-Histories of Megaliths in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (Germany), *World Archaeology*, Vol. 30, No. 1, The Past in the Past: The Reuse of Ancient Monuments.

Foote, Robert Bruce, 1901. *Catalogue of the Pre historic Antiquities*. Madras: Government Museum.

Fred Fawcett, (1901) 'The Rock cut Carvings in the Edakkal Cave' (1901), Wayanad Series, Shreyas Publications, 2006.

Gopi, Mundakkayam, (2014) *Kurumporai*, Sahya Publications Kalpetta.

Gurukkal, R and M. R. RaghavaVarier, (1999). *Cultural History of Kerala'* Thiruvananthapuram: Department of Cultural Publications, Government of Kerala.

H J Plenderleith, (1930) *Black Polished pottery from Urn burials in Wayanad, Man*, vol.3.

Krishnaswami, V.D. 1949. *Megalithic Types of South India*, *Ancient India*,5: 35-45.

Moothy, U S, (1994) *Megalithic Culture of South India; Socio-Economic Perspectives*, Varanasi, Ganga Kaveri Publications.

Noboru Karashima (ed), *A Concise History of South India*, Oxford University Press.

R.Sewel, (1902) *Prehistoric Burial Sites in Southern India*, *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.inflibnet.ac.in:2048/stable/pdf/25208378.pdf>

Rajendran P, (1998-99), *Holocene Cultures and Their Technological Innovations in Kerala, South India*, Purathattva.

Rao K P, (1996) *Megalithic port Hole: A Techno-Cultural Study*, (Proceedings of IHC: 57th Session).

Thapar B K, (1991-92) *Archaeology of South Asia: A perspective in Interrelationship*, Purathattva, Bulletin of IAS, No.22, New Delhi.

PanikkasseriVelayudhan, (2006) 'Keralacharitram' DCB, Kottayam.