

Megalithic Burial Tradition in South India: Special Emphasis on Sarcophagi

Sangu venkatreddy

Research Scholar, Department of History & Tourism Management, Kakatiya University, Hanmakonda, Telangana.

Abstract: The burial customs of the South Indian Megalithic era (1000BCE–300 BCE) are examined in this research, with particular attention to structural typologies and related grave items. The study's main goal is to comprehend how megalithic funerary customs reflect sociocultural views. Reports from archaeological excavations, field surveys, and a comparison of burial types including cists, dolmens, dolmenoid cists, urn burials, and terracotta sarcophagi serve as the foundation for this study. Significant geographical variety in burial architecture and material assemblages, including as terracotta artefacts, pottery, iron tools, and decorations, is shown by the study. These results show belief in an afterlife, and social stratification. Rather than consistent funerary procedures, the existence of multiple burial styles within the same site reflects intricate ceremonial acts. This research advances our knowledge of South India's prehistoric cultural dynamics.

Keywords: Megalithic, Sarcophagi, Terracotta, Coffin, Cist, Pit burial, Dolmen, Rock cut caves, Kudakkal, Topikkal, Hood stones.

Date of Submission: 01-02-2026

Date of acceptance: 10-02-2026

I. Introduction:

In South India, the Megalithic era occurred between 1000 and 300 BCE(Sundara 1975:198-216). This era was referred to as the Megalithic Age because it was marked by the building of large constructions out of enormous stone slabs. The Greek words mega, which means "large", and lithic, which means "stone". These massive stone constructions are mostly burial monuments and related funerary structures built for the deceased. In order to keep animals from consuming human remains and to shield the living from any harm believed to be caused by the deceased's soul, enormous stone structures known as graves were constructed by the Megalithic era. Because they believed in reincarnation after death, people buried the dead with weapons, household goods, and food grains during this time. Rituals were also performed to appease the spirits of the dead. There is some evidence that the domesticated animals belonging to the deceased were buried alongside them in several graves. Some of these burials were constructed at the time of death, while others were built in advance. Among them, a few are collective burials, meaning that the remains of more than one individual are found within a single grave. These were probably associated with members of the same family.

Regional variations in shape and typology can be observed in the burials, which were built with locally available raw materials. In the plains and plateau regions of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, cist burials, pit burials, cairn burials, and commemorative structures such as menhirs, stone alignments, and anthropomorphic statues are commonly found. In the hilly regions, dolmens, dolmenoid cist burials, and anthropomorphic statues are more prevalent. Similarly, in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, cist burials, cairn burials, dolmens, and dolmenoid cist burials, along with menhirs, avenues, and anthropomorphic statues, are widely distributed. In contrast, Kerala is distinguished by the predominance of rock-cut burials, topikkal, kudakkal, and urn burials.

Objectives:

To know about the burial practices, types of burials, and the use of sarcophagi of the Megalithic period. To examine, through the study of these burials, the belief of the people of that time in rebirth and faith in the soul. To understand the lifestyle and food habits of the people of that period based on the objects found in the burials.

Methodology:

The present study is based on primary and secondary sources, supplemented by systematic field investigations. The Andhra Pradesh Department of Archaeology & Museums' Annual Reports are one of the study's primary sources. Books, scholarly publications, and newspaper stories about megalithic culture are examples of secondary sources. The field investigation included museum visits and on-site inspections of certain megalithic monuments.

Major Types of Megalithic Burials:

Based on the method of disposal of the dead, megalithic burials can be broadly classified into two types: primary and secondary burials. In primary burials, the deceased is interred in an intact condition soon after death. This type of burial is commonly observed in pit and cist burials. In secondary burials, the body of the deceased was first subjected to cremation or excarnation, after which the remaining skeletal elements were collected and deposited in the grave. The majority of megalithic burials belong to this category.

Pit burial: In this burial practice, a rectangular pit, typically 6–8 feet deep and 4–8 feet wide, is dug. Pebbles are laid at the bottom, and the base of the burial is levelled with soil mixed with ash and lime. The body is then interred on this prepared surface. If a large stone slab covers the pit, it is classified as a pit burial with capstone. Similarly, if there is a passage leading to the burial chamber, it is termed a pit burial with passage chamber. After the burial is completely covered with soil, certain structures are often built to mark its location. Large stones arranged in a circular pattern around the burial are called **cairn burials**. If a tall upright stone is placed at the northern side or at the head of the grave, it is known as a **menhir**. In some places, **anthropomorphic statues** were also erected.

Cist burial: In this burial practice, a pit is dug below the ground surface and stone slabs are arranged on all four sides. The body is placed within this stone-lined chamber. In some cases, terracotta sarcophagi are also found in association with these burials. These cist burials are constructed in such a way that a part of the structure lies below the ground, while another part is visible above the ground surface. If these stone slabs have a hole, they are termed cists with porthole; if not, they are called cists without porthole. Similarly, if the burial has an access way, it is classified as a cist with an entrance passage, and if there is no access way, it is termed a cist without an entrance passage. The porthole is believed to have been provided either to allow the movement of the soul of the deceased or to facilitate the placement of objects used in post-funeral rituals, as well as food grains and offerings.

Dolmen & Dolmenoid cist: The grave is entirely visible above the ground surface. Large stone slabs(orthostats) are arranged in a square or rectangular structure for this type of burial, and a massive capstone is placed on the top. When dolmen burials are surrounded by stone circles, they are referred to as dolmenoid cist burials. In both these types of burials, a porthole-like feature can be observed. This porthole may be U-shaped, circular, or square in form. Both types of burials are predominantly found in hilly regions.

Rock cut burial: In this burial practice, a chamber-like structure is created by cutting a cavity into a rocky outcrop. Human skeletal remains are placed inside this chamber. In some cases, the human remains are kept in terracotta sarcophagi within the chamber, and the entrance is then sealed with a stone slab.

Urn burial: In this burial practice, the skeletal remains of the deceased are placed in an urn, which is then buried in the ground, and a stone slab is laid over it and covered with earth. In some places, these urn burials are found within cist burials & rock cut burials.

Kudakkal: "Kudakkal" means "umbrella" in the Malayalam language. These structures are shaped like an umbrella or a mushroom. Structurally, they are megalithic burial structures resembling dolmen burials. Four large clinostats are placed on their sides, leaning inwards (forming a triangular configuration), and a round or hemispherical capstone is placed on top. These structures are generally identified as tombs built over pit burials or urn burials. Such type of tombs are found predominantly in Kerala and southern Karnataka.

Topikal: In this burial method, a pit is dug, and the deceased person's remains are placed in a pot, buried in the pit, and a hoodstone is placed on top. If five to twelve hoodstones are arranged in an inward-leaning manner to cover a burial, such structures are referred to as "**Multiple Hoodstone Burials**". Such tombs are commonly found in Kerala.

Megalithic Sarcophagi Types:

A Sarcophagus is a coffin. The term "sarcophagus" is derived from Greek, from "sark", meaning "flesh", and "phagein"; meaning "to eat". Thus, the word literally means "flesh-eater". There is evidence that the practice of placing deceased in coffins and burying them has been in practiced in Egypt and Mesopotamia since about 3000 BCE. In India this type of burial custom dates back to 1000 BC. These coffins were made using locally available raw materials. According to the archaeological evidence available to us, there are three types of coffins: i) Terracotta sarcophagi, ii) Stone coffins, and iii) Wooden coffins.

i) Terracotta Sarcophagi:

Terracotta sarcophagi, or coffins made of fired clay, have been found in the pit graves, cist burials, and rock-cut burials of the Megalithic era. These terracotta sarcophagi appear in a variety of sizes and designs; some have legs at the base, while others don't. They are shaped like animals, boats, and post boxes, etc... These coffins have a smooth finish and were painted crimson. Tiny holes can be seen at the bottom, which might have been made as part of the burial rites to allow water to drain out. They also have a feature like a porthole on top that was designed to allow the deceased's soul to pass through. Some of these terracotta sarcophagi are in the

shape of a sheep or an elephant. As the sheep is regarded as the vehicle of the fire god, so is the elephant the vehicle of Indra. These forms are believed to symbolise the deceased's journey to the gods, with the human remains placed inside the sarcophagi prior to the sealing of the graves.

During excavations conducted in 1976 by the Department of Archaeology & Museums, Government of Andhra Pradesh, two terracotta sarcophagi were discovered in an unsealed megalithic cist burial in Agiripalli, Krishna district. The sarcophagus is rectangular in shape, measuring 1.37 metres in length, 0.45 metres in width, and 0.47 metres in depth and it has six legs at the base. Another sarcophagus measures 1.12 metres in length, 0.45 metres in width, and 0.50 metres in depth and has no base at the bottom. Cremated human remains were found inside this sarcophagus.

At Colony of the bethani in Guntur district, remains of terracotta sarcophagi were found during excavations carried out in 1985 by the Department of Archaeology and Museums.

Eleshwaram is a village in Nalgonda district, which is now submerged due to the Nagarjuna Satgar dam. An elephant-shaped terracotta sarcophagus (figure no:6) was discovered here, containing cremated human remains. This elephant-shaped sarcophagus is currently preserved in the District Archaeology Museum in Kurnool.

Terracotta sarcophagi with a stupa-like cylindrical shape (figure no:3) that were found during archaeological excavations at Maski in Karnataka are preserved in the Cemetery Heritage Museum in Hyderabad. A terracotta sarcophagus with twelve legs was discovered at Pallavaram near Chennai.

Pedda Marur is a village situated in Veepanagandla Mandal of Wanaparthy District, on the banks of the River Krishna. During the years 1977–1978, the Andhra Pradesh State Department of Archaeology identified and excavated Megalithic-period burials at a locality known as Chinnabavi within this village. The excavations revealed a pit burial with an entrance passage, in which a row of burial stones bearing an anticlockwise swastika symbol was exposed. The burial consisted of two chambers. In the first chamber, a terracotta sarcophagus supported by six legs arranged in two rows was discovered, containing cremated human skeletal remains. In the second chamber, a sarcophagus of barrel or boat shape was found, featuring a square, door-like structure at its central portion. This sarcophagus also contained post-cremation human bones. Additionally, within the same chamber, another post-box shaped sarcophagus was encountered, which likewise contained cremated human remains.

The village of Sankavaram is located in the Kasalapadu mandal of the YSR Kadapa district. In this region, during excavations for the construction of a church in 1935, a baked clay sarcophagus in the shape of a six-legged Ram (sheep) (figure no:4), dating back to the Megalithic period, was discovered. It contained cremated human remains. This sarcophagus is currently housed in a museum in Chennai.

ii) Stone coffins:

Rectangular stone coffins, measuring 6 feet in length and 2 feet in width, have been discovered in dolmens and dolmenoid cist tombs dating back to the Megalithic period. These coffins were made using locally available stone. After cremation, the remains of the deceased were placed in these stone coffins for burial. There are also instances in which more than two of these stone coffins are found together, possibly belonging to the same family. Some of these stone coffins in the tombs have leg-like structures at the bottom. These tombs containing stone coffins are frequently found in the Godavari river basin, such as Kotturu Motlagudem, Damaravai, Malluru, Mangapeta, Padigonigudem, Dongathogu, Kachanapally, and Bayyaram.

iii) Wooden coffins:

Although wooden coffins are widely used in modern times, it is known that wooden coffins were also used in some burials during the Megalithic period. Because of the decomposition of the wood over time, evidence of wooden coffins is rarely uncovered. However, during excavations conducted in 1977 at Uppalapadu in the Mahabubnagar district under the auspices of the Andhra Pradesh Department of Archaeology and Museums, evidence of three wooden coffins was found in a cairn burial.

Objects found in Megalithic burials:

In Megalithic graves, along with the dead, objects that the person used during his or her lifetime were placed, including agricultural tools, household utensils, and ornaments. Terracotta figurines, clay beads, ivory objects, Black-and-Red Ware pottery, iron objects such as axes, sickles, knives, spearheads, blades, copper knives, rings, and grinding stones have been found. In some burials, gold and silver ornaments were also recovered. Apart from these, remains of barley, rice, wheat, black gram, horse gram, peas, jujube fruits, and gooseberries have also been found.

Conclusion:

During the Palaeolithic period, humans left the body of the dead person to nature. From the Neolithic period onwards, practices such as cremation or burial of the body can be seen. In the Megalithic period, people began to construct large burial monuments for the dead and erected huge stone slabs as memorials. The people of that time had strong beliefs in the soul and rebirth. Rituals were performed at the burial sites so that the spirit of the deceased would not trouble the living. During agricultural activities, especially at the time of sowing seeds, a few grains were placed near the burial and then the work was started. In South India, some megalithic burials have anthropomorphic statues, which are believed to represent their leaders. Even today, such burial practices are followed among tribal communities like the Marias, Gonds, Savaras, Kurumbas, and Khasi.

REFERENCE:

- [1]. Allchin, F.R., 1956 *The stone alignments of southern Hyderabad*”, “Man, 56, pp . 133-136.
- [2]. Brubaker, R. (2001). “Social Organization in South Indian Megalithic Burials”. Asian Perspectives, 40(2), pp . 137–154.
- [3]. Hunt, “*Hyderabad Cairn Burials and Their Significance*”, The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, Vol.54, 1924, pp. 140-156.
- [4]. K.P. Rao, “*Understanding Megalithic Practices – An Ethnological Approach*”, published in Proceedings of the Andhra Pradesh History Congress, XVII Session, 1993, pp. 18-21.
- [5]. Narasimhaiah .B “*Neolithic and megalithic cultures in Tamil Nadu*” , Published by Delhi, Sundeep Prakashan, Delhi, 1980.
- [6]. Subrahmanyam, B. (1980). “*Megalithic Culture in Andhra Pradesh*”. Puratattva, 12, pp . 35–40.
- [7]. Sundara, A., 1975. “*The Early Chamber Tombs of South India: A Study of the Iron Age Megalithic Monuments of Karnataka*”. Delhi, University Publishers.
- [8]. Venkatreddy , “*Megalithic culture in mulugu – a study*”, international journal of history, akinik publications,pp.129-132.
- [9]. Wheeler, R.E.M., 1947, “*Brahmagiri and Chandravalli 1947*”. *megalithic and other cultures in the Chitaldrug District, Mysore State*”. Ancient India, IV, pp . 81-308.
- [10]. Wheeler mortimer , “*Early India and Pakistan to ashoka period*”,1959, bombay.

Archaeology Excavation reports:

1. B.K Thaper, “*Excavations at Uppalapadu*” ,Mahabubnager district. in Indian Archaeology a Review(1977-1978)1980, Archaeology Survey of India.
2. G.Krishnam raju, “*Excavations at Bethani*”, Guntur district in AAR(1985-1986)1988, Archaeology & Museums Department , Andrapradesh.
3. G.Krishnam raju, “*Excavations at Chinna marur*”, Mahabubnager district in AAR(1979-1980)1988, Archaeology & Museums Department , Andrapradesh.
4. N.R.V Prasad, “*Excavations at Tenner*”, Krishna district in AAR(1969-1970)1982, Archaeology & Museums Department , Andrapradesh.
5. V.V.Krishnasastray, “*Excavations at Agiripalle*”, Krishna district. in AAR(1976-1977)1978, Archaeology & Museums Department , Andrapradesh.
6. V.V. Krishnasastray, “*Excavations at Peddamarur*”, Mahabubnager district. in AAR(1977-1978)1978, Archaeology & Museums Department , Andrapradesh.

Illustration:



Figure 1:Ship shaped Terracotta Sarcophagus at Centenary Heritage Museum, Hyderabad.



Figure 2: Post box shaped Terracotta Sarcophagus at Centenary Heritage Museum, Hyderabad.

Figure 3: Cylindrical shaped Terracotta Sarcophagus at Centenary Heritage Museum , Hyderabad.



Figure 4:Ram shaped Terracotta Sarcophagus at Government Museum, Chennai.



Figure 5: Stone Sarcophagi at Kothuru motlagudem, Mulugu.



Figure 6: Elephant shaped terracotta Sarcophagus at District Archaeology Museum, Kurnool.



Figure 7: 12 Legs Terracotta Sarcophagus at Centenary Heritage Museum, Hyderabad.