

THIRUVANNAMALAI DISTRICT (A STUDY ON ITS MEGALITHS AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCES)

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ABSTRACT

Archaeology is the studies of the ancient human past through the material evidences that have been unearthed. This subject enumerates in detail, about the cultural heritage, civilization and various other aspects of material life of the ancient man, which helps us to correlate it with the modern world. Archaeology in a sense could also be considered as science since various scientific techniques have been involved in the process of exploration and excavation and also dating of the materials.

KEYWORDS: *Material Evidence, Geological and Physiological Factors, Historical Aspects*

INTRODUCTION

The material cultures unearthed unfold the geographical, geological and physiological factors, since the ancient period. A detailed study of the material evidence on the basis of various natural resources would be easy for the researchers to correlate them with adjacent regions.

Tamil Nadu is one of the richest provinces in terms of archaeological vestiges. The settlement pattern is known to have been existed from the earliest times to the dawn of the modern historical times. It is considered, that this state also possesses various physiographical characters, which impress the scholars in doing a detailed study of the State in various categories.

The importance of Archaeological studies in Tamil Nadu was considered so valuable by the scholars, who later conducted extensive field studies all over the State. Among the eminent scholars, who performed well in their research work in Tamil Nadu includes, Robert Bruce Foote, William King, K.V. Soundarajan, V.D. Krishnasami, K.D. Banerjee, H.W. Brecks, B. Narasimiah, B.K. Gururajarao and various other scholars, who examined the State in various archaeological perspective and brought out some previous results.

The topic of the paper was highly concerned to bring out the tangible sources, which would focus especially on the pre and protohistoric and early historical aspects of the “Thiruvannamalai District” which was concealed to a great extent, although some sporadic works have been done by various scholars. The explorations conducted in this district resulted in the discovery of few neolithic sites¹, good extent of megalithic and early historical sites². These discoveries impressed the author to conduct an extensive field survey, which resulted in the discovery of various other sites, which makes the present work inevitable. It is undoubtedly, a necessary act to conduct extensive study of this district that

would result in unearthing the precious archaeological evidence, which expose the ancient history of the mankind in this district. The presence of varied geographical features in this district would lead us to study the various stages of development about the different aspects of ancient history

Sangam literature portrays the ancient history of Thiruvannamalai in an exclusive nature. The area taken up for is considered as one of the sacred places in South India. One of the *Sangam* work called *Perumpanaarrupadai* (103) describes the ruler of this region as *Cevvarai - Natan*. The prefix '*Cevvarai*' means red mountain, probably referring to Javadi Hills - perhaps denoting the color of Javathu, which is red in color. The hill range called *Naviram* mentioned in a *Sangam* work, called *Malaipatukatam* (82, 579) is on the northern bank of river Cheyyar. This hill and the region around the modern town called Chengam was ruled over by a king called *Nannan* mentioned in *Malaipatukatam* (64 - 2), 467, *Akananooru* (15 - 104, 4 - 7, 142 - 9), *Kuruntokai* (73 - 2, 292 - 5).

As a place of worship, the sacred town Thiruvannamalai has its reference in many literary works *Akananooru* (141:6-11) a *Sangam* work has reference to the *Deepam* festival celebrated in Thiruvannamalai. In addition to this work, numerous literary evidences on the sacred place of Thiruvannamalai are available. It is also known that the ancient poet *Maanikkavaacakar* (circa 9th century A.D.) is said to have stayed at Thiruvannamalai, where he composed his poems like *Tiruvempaavai* and *Tiruvannamaai*, which forms part of his *magnum opus Tiruvaacakam*, one the greatest and holiest poems in Tamil literature³. Apart from these sources the important and a very necessary reason, which promoted the author to pursue a detailed study in this area was the presence of countless number of megalithic monuments, which initially had its mentions in the *Sangam* literatures.

In the past scholars like F.J. Richards, B. Narasimhaiah, Prof. R. Nagasamy, R. Poonkundran, K. Rajan, State Department of Archaeology, Tamil Nadu, the French Institute of Pondicherry have all done extensive field works in this district and the adjoining districts. Among the discoveries of B. Narasimhaiah, a unique discovery was a huge monolithic anthropomorphic figure found at *Mottur* in the Chengam Taluk. This structure was used as one of the huge boulders in a stone circle. As a result of this discovery, the Archaeological Survey of India conducted excavation at this site in 1978 – 79. Later, when K. Rajan had conducted field surveys he identified more than 100 archaeological sites pertaining various cultural periods. From the year of 1980, the scholars of the French Institute in Pondicherry have done field in the temple city of Thiruvannamalai and its adjoining areas. They copied almost all the inscriptions in the Thiruvannamalai temple, which are later published under two volumes.

Excavations were conducted by State Department of Archaeology, Tamil Nadu at *Mottur* (Thandarampattu Taluk) in 1978-79, *Padavedu* (Polur Taluk) in 1994 and *Andipatti* (Chengam Taluk) in 2004. These excavations yielded various pottery types like red ware, black and red ware, black ware, channels made out of bricks and stones, coins pertaining to Delhi Sultanate, Rajaraja I, Pratabarayar, the basement of a building, glass objects etc have been discovered. Another important and interesting finding in *Andipatti* was a hoard of 143 lead coins with Brahmi legend that was unearthed in 1968. On the basis of the material evidence, the cultural deposit was dated as follows. Period I was assigned to 100 A.D to 600 A.D and period II was assigned to 600 A.D to 1200 A.D

However, Thiruvannamalai district, which is surrounded by the districts namely Vellore on the north-west, Krishnagiri on south-west, Villupuram on south and Kanchipuram on the east, yields only a stray evidence in the form of solitary stone tools pertaining to the Palaeolithic period. This tool could have migrated from the neighboring Vellore and

Krishnagiri districts, which are rich in possessing cultural materials ranging from Palaeolithic times to the medieval period.

In this connection, it is pertinent to mention here, that Thiruvannamalai district doesn't have any of the perennial rivers. It gets mainly drained by the rivers like Ceyyar, Tenpennai and Palar, which are initially seasonal rivers. Point one of the tributaries of river Palar also seems to be a seasonal one. These tributaries during their course forms many small streams and rivulets, which normally stores water for the usage in the neighboring areas. In the geomorphological concept the Pennaiyar river valley witnessed the pastoral economy in its upper course, as this region was highly consisted of hillocks. The lower Pennaiyarr valley, which is deltaic in nature was useful for agrarian economy. This conformity and continuity in the river courses probably forced the prehistoric people to get settled in the areas, where the river has its run. The prehistoric man is supposed to have selected the hilly tracts of Javadis, which is part of Tamilnadu hills lying on the Baramahal terrace of the Mysore plateau for his settlement, as it comprised of various hills and hillocks such as Melagiris, Royakottai, Angusagiri, Tirtamalai and Maharajakadai, Thiruvannamalai, Gingee and few other hillocks. This presence of varied natural components initially paved way for the availability of water source, accessibility of eatables, shrubs, and rocks, which initially served as the shelter, food, and basic amenities of livestock.

Compared to other neighboring districts, Thiruvannamalai district possesses very little material evidence pertaining to Mesolithic culture. Raw materials for microlithic tools are scarce in this district and this might be a reason for the absence of microlithic tools.

The districts surrounding Thiruvannamalai had a high profile of Neolithic sites yielding various material evidence. These findings around Thiruvannamalai district made the scholars to pursue, an intensive exploration in this district as well.

Only a few Neolithic sites are found in the district under study that too situated very close to Javadi Hills. Evidence for the continuous habitation of various parts of Thiruvannamalai district, since the Neolithic period is brought to light by scholars like F.J. Richards, S.R. Rao, B. Narasimaihah, Dr. K. Rajan and by the excavations conducted by the Department of Archaeology, Government of Tamilnadu. As a result, the following sites had already been discovered by the above scholars. They are Kilasilambadi, Kilvilampuchchi, Kuttattur, Palaya Talur, Urkkavundanur,⁴ Koluthampattu,⁵ Andipatti,⁶ Tirumalai,⁷ Vinnamangalam⁸, and Puliyur⁹. All these sites lie scattered on the Javadi hills, which formed a suitable base for the Neolithic people. Each of these sites yielded pecked as well as grained stone axes, probably used in agriculture.

As far as the Neolithic culture of this district is concerned, systematic surveys based on various scientific aspects were conducted earlier, which resulted in the identification of various sites revealing the agropastoral settlements. This earliest farming community of Indian subcontinent had their occupation in and around the areas, where the hills and hillocks were present, as it would be suitable for terrace cultivation and would yield raw materials for manufacturing tools. During the present survey conducted by the author during the course of his research program two more Neolithic sites namely *Melsippili* and *Thumbakadu* were identified. These sites were discovered on the slopes of Javadi hills. The presence of polished stone axes with fine-grained technique revealed the technical skill of the protohistoric people. These tools were identified from the surface level itself. It is interesting to note that these equipment were worshipped by the local tribal people as they believe that these tools have some spiritual and superstitious spirit on them, due to the peculiar shape and fine grained and polishing made on the tools. The varied ecological and environmental

factors that prevailed in the Thiruvannamalai district provided a solid base for the Neolithic cattle keepers to get settled over the hilly terraces of the district. The identification of the Neolithic tools points to the ancient history of this district and seems to establish the vast time span of human habitation in the district. The district seems to have continued cultural resemblance and wealth from the period of ProtoHistory in Early History as known from the material remains unearthed.

The Megalithic burials mentioned frequently in the *Sangam* works are found scattered all over the district. The district encloses varied geological formations, which in turn resulted in the classification of burials conveniently. Megalithic cultural identifications such as burial types like cairn circles, dolmen, dolmenoid cist and urn burials have been identified from the previous surveys. More than 50 sites pertaining to Megalithic cultural assemblage had been identified in the previous surveys. Apart from this nearly 15 sites, namely *Atthuvampadi, Daniyar, Ettivadi, Kannakurukkai, Kunnathur, Melmalachi, Mettupalayam, Olagalapadi, Pakkripalayam, Potharai, Puthupalayam, Sengunam, Sevarapondi, Thesurpalayam and Veeranam* have been identified by the author itself during the course of the field survey. The sites like Kunnathur, Sengunam, Veeranam etc yielded Megalithic burials in more numbers and in disturbed condition. This indicates that these areas could have been thereby inhabited. The boulders, which are huge and unhewn, used in the constructional process of the burials prove the skill and technique, the manpower handled in transporting such big stones from one place to another.

The presence of Javadi hills in the north consisting of granite gneiss rock and Dharmapuri district in the west consisting of numerous clusters of detached hill ranges favors the settlement of Megalithic people.

The present study in the Thiruvannamalai district has contributed much useful data on various aspects of the Iron age culture of the district in particular and to some extent, Tamil Nadu in general. The sites in the present investigation cover different types of Megalithic monuments. The occupational debris found scattered from the hilly tracts to the river fed areas proves that the area was thickly populated by the Megalithic folk.

The analysis of various Megalithic sites on the basis of the available topography unfolds the fact that the Early Megalithic folk had occupied the elevated field or the slopes of the hills. In Thiruvannamalai region, Megalithic burials with types such as Cairn circle, Cairn circle entombing cist, Dolmen and Dolmenoid cist with Sarcophagus interment and urn burial have been encountered. The present study as well as the data from the previous works shows that none of the burial complexes contain any evidence for the isolated and indigenous origin of this culture in this district. Obviously the culture spread from the adjoining regions, probably as part of a macro level development in the Tamil region.

The cairn circle entombing cist burial seems to be an influence from the neighboring Krishnagiri district through the Chengam pass. The dating of this custom in this district is discussed below. The cairn circle is found to be an extension of the burial practice in the region of Kaveri having its source in the Mandya district of Karnataka. Obviously the slopes of foothills, where these types of burial complexes are found in Thiruvannamalai district, were water - fed from the river Pennaiyar and its tributaries. The availability of water source was an incentive for the people to get settled in these terrains.

Urn burial is found scarcely, when compared to other modes of burials. It seems reasonable to infer that the urn burials could have intruded from the south Pennaiyar region. This type of burial was present widely in areas of Cuddalore and Villupuram districts and this mode should have spread to Thiruvannamalai District.

The Sarcophagus is also found as interred in the burial monuments in this district, which was obviously super-imposed by the Urn burials. Therefore, the sarcophagus should have been in use before the intrusion of the other types of burial.

The Dolmen and Dolmenoid cists variety are concentrated in the hilly tracts of Javadis. The Chittoor district of Andhra Pradesh has this burial type in high profusion, later paving the way for its entrance into the Thiruvannamalai district via Gudiyattam and Jolarpet areas of Vellore district. The Dolmenoid cist with multi orthostats could have also made its entrance into the Thiruvannamalai district from the Kanchipuram district. This type of burial is sparse, when we move towards the lower Pennaiyar valley, where the occupation of urn burial is more. On the basis of comparative study made with the neiboghing states the end phase of dolmenoid cist with multiorthostats has been dated to 250 B.C and the sarcophagus seen in interment in these burials have been dated to 300 B.C.¹⁰

The excavation conducted at Andipatti in Chengam taluk has also revealed two cultural phases - Period I dating from 1st A.D to 6th A.D and Period II dating from 6th A.D to 12th A.D. These dates were assigned on the basis of Roman potteries, and potteries with Brahmi script unearthed in the excavation. These also support the overlapping period of Megalithic with Early Historical cultural debris.

Considering all these factors, it can be assumed that the Megaliths of Thiruvannamalai district can be reasonably dated to around circa 1000 B.C.

On the basis of the above studies, we could infer that the Megalithic cemeteries in the district under study would slightly be a modified development of the Megalithic burials present in the neighboring regions. The extensive field works of earlier scholars and the author or the present work have yielded a comprehensive picture of the development of burial complexes in the Thiruvannamalai District.

As far as the Early Historical Culture of this district is concerned, it is well known from the findings of various hero stones throughout the district. *Sangam* works mentions many places and personalities of this district under study. For instance the ruler of this region was described as *Cevvarainatan* in *Perumpanaatrupatai* (103). *Cevvarai* means red mountain, which is presently known as Javadi hills. The river Cheyyar is mentioned as *Ceyaru* in *Malaipatukatam* (476, 555), that traverse the red mountain region and drains the red soil. The same work also mentions a hill called *Naviram* (*Malaipatukatam* :82, 579), situated on the northern bank of Cheyyar. This site is situated in between Thiruvannamalai, the region of our study and Dharmapuri that was ruled by Atiyaman a chieftain. As far as the Early History of Thiruvannamalai district is concerned, we have the rich resource of inscriptional evidences found written all over the district on the hero stones and numerous temples, which enable us to know about the Early History Thiruvannamalai.

Thiruvannamalai district, with its innumerable hero stones opened a new era in the studies of the early society in Tamil Nadu. As this district is surrounded by hills and hillocks with forest, there was much scope for cattle raising and its recovery and also for hunting of wild animals. In Thiruvannamalai district hero stones were seen erected in and around the Chengam taluk, which was once ruled by the king *Nannan* as already noted. This region is studded with grasslands and cattle – pens. These cattle – pens are regarded in the *Sangam* works as *kavum palliyum* – ‘Ka’ means grazing land and ‘Palli’ means cattle – pens. Usually scholars used to consider the village name ending with suffix ‘palli’ as Jain or Buddhist monastery. But in the case of Dharmapuri and Chengam it generally stands for cattle - pens.¹¹ these cattle were considered

as a wealth by the people in Tamil Nadu. Consequently, whenever there was a battle between two groups, these cattles were recovered by the rivalry group. In this process, many had lost their live. In order to commemorate the warriors, who lost their live, the hero stones were erected in those areas. Hence, the Chengam and Dharmapuri areas are impregnated with numerous hero stones. The State Department of Archaeology, Government of Tamil Nadu under the guidance of R. Nagaswamy,¹² had identified numerous Herostones with *Vatteluttu* inscription, and thereby opened a new vista on the study of hero stones. Later on R. Poonkundran¹³ and K. Rajan¹⁴, have done extensive field surveys in the area of our study and brought to light, a number of hero stones with and without inscriptions. R. Poonkundran had made a critical study of the Herostones, and advanced the view that the hero stones of Chengam region was erected in memory of the heroes of the local communities, who had laid their life for the sake of their region or community.

The erection of memorial stones is mentioned in many poems of the *Sangam* works (*Akanaanooru* : 297: 7-8, 343: 5-7, 387: 14, *Ainkurunooru* : 352: 1-2, *Puranaanooru* : 221: 13, 223: 3, 314:3). Some of these poems portray the stages of the evolution of Menhirs into hero stones. *Tolkaappiyam*,¹⁵ the earliest grammar enumerates the stages in erecting memorial stones in honor of heroes.

Most of the hero stones of this region do not mention the name of the person, for whom it was erected. Possibly this is an indication of the motivation being mainly in social consciousness. Some of the hero stones of the Chengam region are found on the river basins, trade routes and forest areas mentioned in the *Sangam* works like *Akanaanooru* (verse 53:10-11, 131:10-11, 179:8- 9), *Malaipattukatam* (verse 338 - 39) and *Puranaanooru* (verse 264, 314). In this context, it is pertinent to mention here, that in the same Chengam taluk at Andipatti, during the course of excavation, potsherds with Tamil Brahmi scripts dated to 1st century A.D had been recorded. No hero stones with Tamil Brahmi inscriptions could be noticed in Chengam. The earliest herostone¹⁶ with inscription is dated to 583 A.D and the script used in the hero stone is *Vatteluttu*. This goes to show, by 6th century A.D, the people of Chengam were using *Vatteluttu*. From this, it could be construed that by 5 – 6th century A.D, Tamil – Brahmi was given up and its place was taken by *Vatteluttu* as evinced by the archaeological findings.

The inscriptions on the hero ones record the information on the skirmishes between two tribal villages or communities during the cattle raiding. There are nearly 59 hero stones found with inscriptions. Obviously the worship of the Hero stones, among the people of Chengam area, was based on the belief that the worship of the hero stones would bring prosperity to their society and their region. An important fact to be noted here is, that most of the hero stones are still under worship and locally called as *Vediyappan*, *muniyappan*, *ayyanaarappan*, and *krishnaarappan*.¹⁷ Apart from the above -mentioned sites there were nearly 13 sites, namely *Atthimoor*, *Edappirai*, *Gangalamahadevi*, *Kettavarayanpalayam*, *Kilvanakampadi*, *Kilravandavadi*, *Melvanakampadi*, *Melvanniyanoor*, *Perumuttam*, *Pirayampattu* pertaining to Early Historical Period were identified by the author in his field survey.

Apart from the hero stones, the Thiruvannamalai region, is studded with a number of archaeological sites, dated to the early historical period. The presence of 12 sites like *Adichchanur*, *Andipatti*, *Chengam*, *Kuppanattam*, *Mandakolattur*, *Mangalam*, *Neepatturai*, *Paramanandal*, *Sadupperi*, *Saanarpalayam*, *Sattanur*, *masoor* of Early Historical period unfolds the fact that the society in this region had a horizontal mobility. It is endorsed by the fact that these sites are found in various taluks like Chengam, Polur and Thiruvannamalai. These sites were discovered by various agencies like Archaeological Survey of India, Department of Archaeology, Government of Tamil Nadu and other individuals.

Apart from this, 5 sites such as *Gangalamahadevi, Kettavarayanpalayam, Mambattu, Poondi, Veeranam* belonging to the later period were also discovered, in which 2 also yielded the hero stones. This information might perhaps be useful to future workers in this field.

CONCLUSIONS

The important fact observed during the study is the presence of Megalithic burials and the Hero stones in close vicinity in many sites. Many of the hero stones were engraved with an inscription which has been dated to 10th -11th century A.D. From this, it could be construed that the sites were continuously used as burial sites for the Megalithic period.

The observations made on the cultural vestiges and the extensive and critical studies on the material evidence collected so far enables us to trace the ancient history of Thiruvannamalai district from the Neolithic to the Early Historical period. However, further excavations on a larger scale in more places in the region under study would unfold the hidden treasures of the region.

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