JHSR Journal of Historical Studies and ResearchISSN:2583-0198
Volume 5, Number 3 (September - December,2025),PP.296-304.
Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal
Website:www.jhsr.in
Email:jhsr.editor@gmail.com

Megalithic Burials of Krishnagiri District:Types and Cultural Importance

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Abstract: *This paper synthesises field reports, regional surveys and comparative scholarship to describe the major burial types found across the district dolmens (dolmenoid cists and capstone tombs), cairn and cairn-circle burials, cists and porthole cists, sarcophagi, menhirs and large urn (urn-burial) fields and explores their construction, associated material culture, chronology and cultural meanings. Attention is given to characteristic grave goods (iron implements, black-and-red ware and plainware ceramics, beads, and occasional distinctive metal objects), the role of local stone availability in siting graveyards, and relationships between megalithic cemeteries, contemporary habitations and rock-art panels. Drawing on comparative work from Tamil Nadu, the Deccan and wider peninsular India, I argue that megalithic burials in Krishnagiri encode social differentiation (status and lineage), territorial marking and ancestor veneration, and also reflect technical adaptation (stone types, construction) and evolving ritual expression through the late BronzeEarly Iron Age into the early historic period. The article concludes with a discussion of heritage management, threats (agriculture, quarrying, development) and community-based conservation measures that can protect these fragile but essential records of the region's prehistoric past.*

Keywords: *Cairns, Ethnoarchaeology, Heritage,Iron Age, Krishnagiri, Megaliths etc.*

Date of Submission: 10.10.2025 **Date of Acceptance: 15.10.2025**

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Introduction

Across peninsular India, megalithslarge stone monuments associated with burialsform one of the most visible archaeo-landscapes of the late prehistoric/early historic period. In Tamil Nadu, and specifically Krishnagiri district, megalithic monuments survive in abundance and variety: they are not isolated curiosities but part of a patterned funerary tradition that connects material technique, social memory and landscape marking. This article gives a human, narrative account of the types of megalithic burials found in Krishnagiri, places them in regional chronological and cultural frames, and discusses what they tell us about the people who erected them and the communities who live alongside them today.

Key recent surveys and studies have documented large clusters of dolmens and other megaliths in Krishnagiri, including the notable Mallachandram (also spelled Mallasandram) complex where hundreds of dolmens were recorded during systematic explorations. These finds align with broader studies that identify Tamil Nadu as a core region of South Indian megalithism.

Geography and Archaeological Setting of Krishnagiri

Krishnagiri district lies on the north-western edge of Tamil Nadu; its topographylow hills, granitic outcrops and undulating plainsoffers abundant stone suitable for erecting large monuments. Surveys and site catalogues show megalithic burials clustered where rock resources and access routes coincide with ancient habitational zones: gravelly hilltops, ridgelines and river terraces.

Archaeological reconnaissance and published inventories describe prehistoric activity from Paleolithic through Neolithic and Iron Age phases, with megalithic cemeteries overlaying or abutting habitation sites. The district museum and local archaeological reports emphasise both the density and diversity of funerary remains, and that the museum houses find from Beemandapalli, Mayiladumparai and other localities as well as photographs of dolmens at Mallachandram.[1]

Chronology:When were Krishnagiri's Megaliths Built?

Absolute dating in South Indian megalithic contexts remains challenging, but a consensus places the main phase of megalithic funerary construction roughly in the later 2nd and 1st

millennia BCE broadly aligned with the Iron Age in peninsular Indiawith some monuments continuing into early historic times. Local reports from Krishnagiri reference discoveries of burials that are variously reported as around 2,500–3,000 years old (c. 1000–500 BCE), especially for dense dolmen fields like Mallachandram. Regional syntheses show that megalithic traditions may have deep roots and long continuities in the south, and radiocarbon and stratigraphic data from comparable contexts suggest local chronological variation.[2]

Typology of Megalithic Burials in Krishnagiri

Scholars divide South Indian megaliths into several morphological classes[3]; Krishnagiri exemplifies many of these types. Local surveys list and illustrate the following principal burial forms found in the district:

Dolmens and Dolmenoid Cists (Single- Chamber Capstone Tombs)

Dolmens are single-chamber stone tombs formed by erecting vertical orthostats (upright slabs) which support a large capstone. Dolmenoid cists are similar but often smaller and sometimes partly subterranean. In Krishnagiri'sMallachandram cluster hundreds of dolmens (including simple table-type dolmens and larger multi-slab chambers) were documented during surveys and occasional excavation/recording. The dolmen form is intimately associated with inhumation burials and occasional rich grave goods.

Cairns and Cairn-Circles (Round Mounds with Bounding Stones)

Cairns are earthen or rubble mounds built over burials; many have surrounding rings or circles of stones (boulder circles) that mark the cemetery boundary. Cairn-circle typessometimes with an internal cist or an urnare commonly recorded in Krishnagiri and across Tamil Nadu. The 'round mound' is one of the simplest and most widespread megalithic forms.

Cists and Porthole Cists

Cists are box-like stone chambers; a porthole cist has a circular hole in one orthostat that may have served for ritual access or symbolic purpose. These forms occur in Krishnagiri and are reported in district catalogues and survey notes.

Sarcophagi and Slab Coffins

Large stone sarcophagi, sometimes open at the top or covered by slabs, occur in some cemeteries. In the Krishnagiri catalogue these are recorded as rarer but significant, representing a more monumental form of burial.[4]

Urn Burials (Urn Fields/ Urn- Cairn Complexes)

Not all Iron-Age burials in Tamil Nadu are megalithic; urn burials (pottery jars containing human remains) are widespread and sometimes associated with mounds or clusters without large stone monuments. Krishnagiri field surveys note urn burials at select localities, demonstrating the variety of mortuary expression.

Menhirs, Stelaf and Standing Stones (Nadukal/Hero Stones)

Single standing stones and memorial stelae (including later historic hero stones) are part of the funerary-memorial landscape. While some nadukal are post-megalithic, the presence of standing stones in megalithic cemeteries is noteworthy for ritual/commemorative practice.

Construction Techniques and Material Choices

Megalith constructors in Krishnagiri show pragmatic adaptation to local geology: granitic outcrops, large boulders and quarried slabs were selected and shaped when necessary. Several studies emphasise that location choice for graveyards is strongly influenced by the proximity and availability of stone raw material; many cemeteries are within a few hundred metres of suitable stone sources, indicating logistic[5] and labour considerations shaped the funerary landscape. Stone working techniques range from minimal dressing of natural slabs to careful

selection and placement of orthostats and capstones; in some dolmens the capstones are massive slabs requiring communal effort to erect.

Grave goods and Mortuary Variability

Excavations and surface collections from Krishnagiri and neighbouring regions record a recurring assemblage: iron tools and weapons (knives, spearheads, simple implements), glass and bead ornaments, earthenware (notably black-and-red ware and various plain wares), and occasional metal objects. Variation in the quantity and quality of grave goods suggests social differentiationsome burials are rich and clearly display higher status or special treatment, while others are impoverished or modest.[6] The presence of iron emphasises the Early Iron Age context of many burials and the new technologies (metalworking, agricultural tools) that shaped these societies.

Burial Rites, Rites of Passage and Social Meaning

Several interlocking interpretations explain megalithic funerary behaviour:

- **Ancestor veneration and lineage memory[7]:** Stone monuments function as durable markers that keep the dead physically present in the landscape, enabling periodic rites and lineage memory.
- **Status differentiation:** Monument size and grave offerings appear correlated with social standing; large dolmens and sarcophagi with richer goods likely reflect community leaders or elite lineages.
- **Territorial marking:** Cemeteries often sit at visible points on the terrain, marking ancestral ties to land and resources.
- **Ritual performance[8]:** The construction and maintenance of megaliths — quarrying, transport, erecting implies organized labour and ritualized events that reinforce social cohesion.

These interpretations derive from a comparative reading of regional data and ethnographic analogies used carefully by archaeologists to avoid simplistic parallels.

Rock-Art and Megalithic Connections

Krishnagiri's megalithic zone also preserves rock paintings and motifs near dolmen clusters and boulder shelters. While the direct relationship between specific murals and particular burials is often difficult to prove, spatial association suggests overlapping ritual landscapes where mortuary, habitation and symbolic expression coexist.[9] The Krishnagiridistrict museum curates' photographs and illustrations that connect dolmens with local rock-art panels, reinforcing a holistic view of the prehistoric cultural terrain.

Case Study: Mallachandram (Mallasandram) Dolmen Field

Mallachandram a village and ridge in Soolagiri taluk have been singled out in local reportage and field surveys for the extraordinary density of dolmens. Popular press reports (based on archaeological team statements) noted the discovery of over 300 dolmens[10] in a single area, making it one of the largest single concentrations reported in the region; academic descriptions underscore its significance for understanding local variations in dolmen architecture, spatial organization and potential ritual clustering.

Mallachandram's dolmens[11] include simple capstone tables and more complex multi-slab chambers; they are frequently accompanied by surface scatter of pottery and occasional iron fragments. The site has been highlighted in conservation discussions because its scale makes it archaeologically important but also vulnerable to looting and development.

Regional Comparisons:Krishnagiri in the wider South Indian Megalithic World

Krishnagiri's megaliths share morphological and ritual traits with sites across Tamil Nadu, Karnataka (Kongu and Mysore regions), Andhra and Kerala. Scholars have proposed zonation's and cultural spheres for South Indian megalithism; comparative typologies show that while the same broad classes (dolmen, cairn, urn) recur, local styles and preferences (capstone shapes, burial orientations, associated ceramics) vary considerably.[12] This regional comparative framework helps archaeologists infer interaction, migration and technological diffusion across peninsular India.

Social Organisation and Economy Inferred From Megaliths

Megalithic burials do not in themselves explain detailed social structures, but they supply important clues:

- The scale of some monuments implies organized labour and social cooperation (or leadership mobilising labour).[13]
- Presence of iron tools and agricultural implements in burials indicates agrarian economies and iron-age technological adoption.
- Variation in grave goods suggests social ranking, possibly arising from control over resources or hereditary leadership.
- Spatial relationships between habitation sites and cemeteries indicate settlement permanence and landscape attachment.[14]

Taken together, Krishnagiri's megaliths point to communities with complex ritual practices, emerging social hierarchies and technologies that shaped early historic trajectories.[15]

Preservation,Threats and Heritage Management

Megalithic monuments are physically vulnerable: agriculture, road-building, quarrying, uncontrolled tourism and stone-collecting damage or destroy contexts irretrievably. Mallachandram and similar clusters illustrate both the research potential and the conservation challenge. Local museums (Krishnagiri Museum) and archaeological departments have documented finds and attempted community outreach, but conserving widely dispersed, often unprotected megalithic landscapes require multi-pronged[16] strategies: legal protection, community engagement, site documentation (GIS and photographic recording), controlled excavation where appropriate, and integrating local knowledge and ownership into management. Recent newspaper and journal articles emphasise the urgent need for inventorying and protective measures.

Community Values, Living Memory and Intangible Heritage

Beyond scientific interest, megaliths are part of living cultural landscapes. Local oral traditions sometimes attach stories, rituals or taboos to standing stones and dolmens; hero

stones (nadukal) may carry inscriptions or memory narratives that link historic events with the landscape. Engaging communities not only as informants but as custodians and interpreters is essential for sustainable heritage.[17] Educational programmes in schools and interpretive materials at local museums can foster pride and protective attitudes.

Research Gaps and Future Direction

Main research priorities for Krishnagiri include:

1. **Systematic mapping and GIS-based cemetery inventories** to assess distribution, density and threat levels.
2. **Selective scientific dating (radiocarbon/OSL)** of organic and stratigraphic contexts to refine local chronology.[18]
3. **Targeted archaeological excavation** at representative cemeteries to link monument form with inhumation practice and material culture.
4. **Interdisciplinary analyses** (archaeo-botany, zoo-archaeology, metallurgical studies) to reconstruct economy and ritual provisioning.
5. **Ethnoarchaeological work**[19] to record contemporary memory and local knowledge linked to monuments.

Such projects will help move Krishnagiri from descriptive inventory to integrated narratives of social change. Several recent reports and surveys provide a solid platform for such work.

Conclusion

The megalithic burials of Krishnagiri district are eloquent testimonies of a past in which stone, community labour and ritual combined to make long-lasting marks on the landscape. Dolmens, cairns, cists, sarcophagi and urn fields together represent a repertoire of mortuary expression that encoded social differentiation, ancestral claims and ritual imagination. Protecting these monuments and investigating them with modern methods will illuminate how small, agrarian communities in peninsular India navigated technological change, social complexity and memory. Local museums, district surveys and scholarly syntheses already point the way; what remains is sustained, collaborative research and conservation that places Krishnagiri's megalithic heritage at the centre of both academic and local cultural life.

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