

Megalithic Culture in Thagadur (Dharmapuri Region)

Dr. C. Murugesan, MA., B.Ed., M.hil., Ph.D.,
Associate Professor, Department of History,
Government Arts College, Dharmapuri

Abstract

The Thagadur region, corresponding to the present-day Dharmapuri district of Tamil Nadu, represents one of the most significant centres of megalithic culture in South India. Archaeological explorations and excavations conducted in this region have revealed a wide range of megalithic burial monuments, including stone circles, cist burials, dolmens, urn burials, menhirs, and sarcophagi. These monuments, primarily associated with the Iron Age, reflect complex funerary practices, technological advancement in iron usage, and deeply rooted belief systems concerning death and the afterlife. This paper attempts a comprehensive study of the megalithic culture of Thagadur by examining burial typology, architectural features, grave goods, iron tools, pottery traditions, and associated ritual practices. The study also situates Thagadur within the wider framework of South Indian megalithic culture and explores its cultural continuity into the early historic period.

Keywords: Megalithic culture, Thagadur, Dharmapuri, Iron Age, burial practices, South India

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Introduction

The Megalithic culture of South India constitutes one of the most enduring and archaeologically visible cultural traditions associated with the Iron Age. Characterised by monumental stone-built funerary structures, the tradition reflects complex social organisation, technological advancement, and deeply embedded ritual beliefs concerning death and ancestry. Within this broader South Indian context, Thagadur (Dharmapuri region) emerges as a significant yet insufficiently studied centre of megalithic activity¹.

Although large-scale excavations are limited, extensive surface explorations and comparative studies indicate that Thagadur preserves a dense concentration of megalithic monuments representing varied architectural forms and mortuary practices². These monuments not only attest to the widespread adoption of Iron Age cultural traits but also demonstrate regional adaptations and continuities into the Early Historic period³. This study seeks to critically examine the megalithic culture of Thagadur, focusing on burial typology, material culture, chronology, and ritual practices, while situating the region within the wider South Indian Iron Age tradition⁴.

Iron Age and Megalithic Cultural Framework

The Megalithic period in Tamil Nadu is conventionally placed between c. 1000 BCE and 200 CE, though recent archaeological discoveries and scientific dates have pushed its beginnings further back in time⁵. The term “megalithic” refers primarily to the construction of stone monuments associated with burials; however, culturally, this phase is inseparable from the introduction of iron technology, the widespread use of black-and-red ware pottery, and elaborate funerary rituals⁶.

In South India, the Iron Age does not represent a sudden cultural break but rather a

gradual transformation from earlier Neolithic and microlithic traditions⁷. Scholars have observed a strong continuity in settlement patterns, subsistence strategies, and ritual practices, suggesting an indigenous development of megalithic traditions rather than their introduction through large-scale migrations⁸.

Stratigraphic Position and Cultural Continuity

Stratigraphically, the megalithic culture of Tamil Nadu presents regional variation. In northern Tamil Nadu, including the Thagadur region, the Iron Age directly succeeds the Neolithic phase without a discernible cultural hiatus⁹. At sites such as Paiyampalli and Hallur, Neolithic and Iron Age levels overlap, indicating a transitional phase during which stone tools and iron implements coexisted¹⁰.

This continuity is particularly significant in understanding the megalithic monuments of Thagadur, many of which remained in use or were reinterpreted during the Early Historic period¹¹. The prolonged survival of megalithic funerary practices over several centuries reflects the resilience of ancestral cults and mortuary ideologies within Tamil society¹².

Megalithic Burial Practices

Megalithic culture is best understood through its mortuary practices. Burial monuments served not merely as repositories for the dead but as enduring symbols of lineage, memory, and social identity¹³. In Thagadur, surface evidence reveals a wide range of burial types, including cists, dolmens, dolmenoid cists, cairn circles, urn burials, sarcophagi, and menhirs¹⁴.

Grave goods recovered from comparable sites in Tamil Nadu—such as pottery vessels, iron implements, ornaments, and beads—indicate beliefs in an afterlife and the continuation of social status beyond death¹⁵. The presence of luxury items in certain graves

further suggests social differentiation within Iron Age communities¹⁶.

Varieties of Dolmenoid Cist Burials

Among the various burial forms, dolmenoid cists constitute one of the most architecturally complex and symbolically rich types observed in the Thagadur region¹⁷. Dolmenoid cists combine features of dolmens and cist burials, reflecting a transitional architectural form within the megalithic tradition.

Several Varieties of Dolmenoid Cists Can Be Identified

Subterranean Dolmenoid Cists – In this type, the burial chamber is partially sunk below ground level and constructed using upright stone slabs, covered by a large capstone. The chamber is often concealed beneath cairn packing¹⁸. **Surface Dolmenoid Cists** – These consist of orthostatic slabs placed directly on the ground surface, supporting a massive horizontal capstone. Such monuments are often associated with stone circles¹⁹. **Cairn-Covered Dolmenoid Cists** – Here, the stone chamber is surrounded or entirely covered by rubble stones, enhancing the monument's visibility and permanence²⁰.

Port-holed Dolmenoid Cists – Some dolmenoid cists feature circular or trapezoidal openings on one of the slabs. These portholes are interpreted as ritual features facilitating offerings, secondary burials, or symbolic communication with the deceased²¹. The diversity of dolmenoid cist forms in Thagadur reflects regional innovation, ritual variation, and possibly social differentiation within Iron Age communities²².

Material Culture and Technological Aspects

The material assemblage associated with megalithic burials demonstrates a high degree of technological proficiency. Iron implements such as ploughshare tips, sickles, hoes,

axes, spears, and swords indicate advanced agricultural practices, woodworking skills, and martial activities²³. The presence of iron horse equipment further points to elite status and mobility²⁴.

Ceramic assemblages are dominated by black-and-red ware, accompanied by red ware, black polished ware, and russet-coated painted ware²⁵. Post-firing graffiti marks on pottery—often geometric or symbolic—are widely regarded as precursors to writing and may represent early forms of identity or ownership marks²⁶.

Chronology of the Megalithic Culture

Establishing a precise chronology for the megalithic culture has been one of the most challenging aspects of South Indian archaeology²⁷. Early scholars relied primarily on stratigraphy and associated artefacts such as Roman coins to determine temporal limits²⁸. More recent radiocarbon, AMS, and OSL dates from sites like Porunthal, Kodumanal, Paiyampalli, and Adichchanallur have significantly refined the chronological framework²⁹.

The available dates suggest that megalithic practices in Tamil Nadu began around c. 1400–1000 BCE, flourished during the first millennium BCE, and continued into the early centuries of the Common Era³⁰. Evidence from Dharmapuri, including Roman and Indo-Scythian coins found in disturbed burials, further supports the survival of megalithic traditions into the Early Historic period³¹.

Conclusion

The megalithic culture of Thagadur represents a dynamic and regionally distinctive manifestation of the South Indian Iron Age. Through varied burial architectures—particularly dolmenoid cists—rich material culture, and long chronological continuity, the region offers valuable insights into Iron

Age social organisation, ritual ideology, and technological development. Despite limited excavation, the cumulative evidence underscores the need for systematic archaeological investigation to fully understand Thagadur's role within the wider megalithic landscape of South India³².

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