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Megalithic anthropomorphic statues in the Lower Godavari Basin: A study of Dameravai and surrounding belt, Mulugu District

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Abstract
This research paper analyzes the Megalithic culture prevalent in the Godavari basin, specifically focusing on Dameravai, Kothur Motlagudem, Bhupathipuram, and Bommaigudem. Based on primary and secondary sources alongside direct fieldwork, this study examines the architectural styles of the discovered dolmens, dolmenoid cists, and anthropomorphic statues. The field evidence reveals the technical expertise of early humans and their strategic utilization of local geographical resources. Notably, the anthropomorphic statues reflect ancestor worship, religious beliefs, and concepts of the afterlife. This study highlights the cultural significance of the Godavari basin while emphasizing the urgent need for the preservation of these archaeological sites and further research.

Keywords: Megalithic, anthropomorphic statues, dolmen, dolmenoid cist, cruciforms, stone sarcophagi, godavari basin

Introduction

In Telangana, the period between 1000 BCE and 300 BCE is designated as the Megalithic Age. The term 'Megalithic' derives from the Greek words 'megas', meaning large, and 'lithos', meaning stone. People of this era held a strong belief in the afterlife and the rebirth of the soul; consequently, to contain the spirit and honor the deceased, they constructed elaborate monuments using massive stones. These funerary architecture styles exhibited distinct regional variations based on locally available stone types and prevailing cultural customs. In the forested terrain of the Lower Godavari Basin in Telangana, Megalithic remnants are particularly abundant, dominated by dolmens and dolmenoid cists. These structures frequently feature square orthostats with circular port-holes that were securely sealed using custom carved stone slabs, surrounded by protective stone circles. Notably, the Lower Godavari region has yielded an unmatched concentration of anthropomorphic stone monoliths, an extraordinary occurrence within the Indian Megalithic context. Sculpted into vertical, cross-like shapes with extended arms, these majestic monoliths serve as a unique testament to the mortuary traditions of ancient Telangana.

All the megalithic burials in this region belong to the secondary burial practice. That is, the body of the deceased was initially either cremated or left exposed to nature. Subsequently, the remaining bones were collected and deposited within a stone sarcophagus. Along with the skeletal remains, objects used by the individual during their lifetime, weapons, and food grains were also placed inside these burials. The people of this era held a strong belief in an afterlife or rebirth. Multiple stone sarcophagi were recovered from a single burial site. These sarcophagi are not uniform in size while some are large, others are smaller. This suggests that these burials likely belonged to members of the same family.

Geographical Conditions of the Region

The Megalithic culture is extensively distributed across the valley ecosystems and forested hill ranges of the Lower Godavari Basin in Mulugu District, specifically encompassing the rural belts of Dameravai, Kothur Motlagudem, Bhupathipuram, and Bommaigudem.

The unique physiographical conditions of this region provided an exceptionally favorable habitat for the proliferation of Megalithic settlements. Dense forest cover, coupled with the riverine landscape of the Godavari valley, ensured perennial water resources and rich subsistence abundance essential for long-term human habitation. Furthermore, the local availability of natural sandstone beds and slabs significantly facilitated the construction of numerous dolmens and dolmenoid cists throughout these sites.

Surakondayya Gutta (Dameravai): Dameravai is a village in SS Tadvai Mandal of Mulugu district. Situated east of Dameravai village, this site harbors over 120 dolmens and dolmenoid cists. It is sustained by continuous natural perennial springs from the Gouraram Stream.

Jajirala Gutta (Bommaigudem): Bommaigudem is a village in Mangapet Mandal of Mulugu district. Located along the Gouraram Stream on the outskirts of Bommaigudem, this site features over 100 documented dolmen burials.

Kappalayya Gutta & Rajaram Sudda Gutta (Kothur-Motlagudem): Kothur Motlagudem is a village in Mangapet Mandal of Mulugu district. Kappalayya Gutta, located to the north of Kothur-Motlagudem, boasts the highest concentration in the region with over 150 dolmens. To the west lies Rajaram Sudda Gutta, which also houses extensive dolmen structures.

Bhupathipuram: Bhupathipuram is a village in SS Tadvai Mandal of Mulugu district. A small hillock to the north of

Bhupathipuram village contains numerous dolmen burials, further demonstrating the dense mortuary landscape of the Lower Godavari Basin.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to comprehensively map and document the geographical distribution of anthropomorphic and cruciform monoliths across key Megalithic sites in the Lower Godavari Basin, with a specific focus on Dameravai, Kothur Motlagudem, Bhupathipuram, and Bommaigudem.

Furthermore, this research aims to analyze the distinct morphological and sculptural attributes of these monuments, particularly their monolithic fabrication, symmetrically extended lateral arm projections, rounded apexes, and purely abstract, featureless forms. Additionally, the study evaluates Iron Age quarrying methodologies, masonry practices, and technological capabilities involved in shaping these massive stone slabs. Ultimately, it seeks to assess the socio-religious significance of ancestor veneration within the Megalithic cultural complex through a comparative evaluation with parallel sites across South India.

Methodology

In the formulation of this research paper, primary and secondary sources were thoroughly analyzed alongside extensive field study.

Primary Sources: Reports published by the Archaeological Department of His Highness the Nizam's Dominions serve as the fundamental primary source for this study. Additionally, early investigative reports such as Captain Mulheran's 1868 [6] report on anthropomorphic sculptures in the Godavari Agency, and the historic research reports by William Hunt, who conducted extensive documentation on Megalithic burials while serving in the former Hyderabad Contingent have been utilized as primary evidence.

Secondary Sources: Secondary sources include research papers published in various national and international journals on Megalithic culture, authoritative books authored by renowned archaeologists, and specialized articles published in newspapers.

Fieldwork: Fieldwork constitutes the core aspect of this research. Ancient sites along the Lower Godavari River Basin were personally visited to examine on site the invaluable anthropomorphic statues and dolmens. Detailed recording of their dimensions, stylistic features, and present state of preservation was systematically carried out.

Characteristics of Anthropomorphic Statues

1. All these memorial statues were carved out of a single piece of locally available stone slab without any jointing.
2. Stone parts project horizontally from both sides of the main vertical shaft, giving the statue a unique cross shape.
3. The top part of these statues, which represents the head, is slightly round in shape.
4. The shoulder portions extend outward from the main structure, looking like arms. There are no separate legs; the structure runs straight and even from the neck down to the bottom.
5. No facial features like eyes, nose, or ears are carved on them. They are purely abstract human forms.
6. Some anthropomorphic statues found in Padugonegudem, Domada, and Janampeta have circular shapes like female breasts on their chests. But male statues have not been found anywhere.



Fig 1: Anthropomorphic Statue, Dameravai

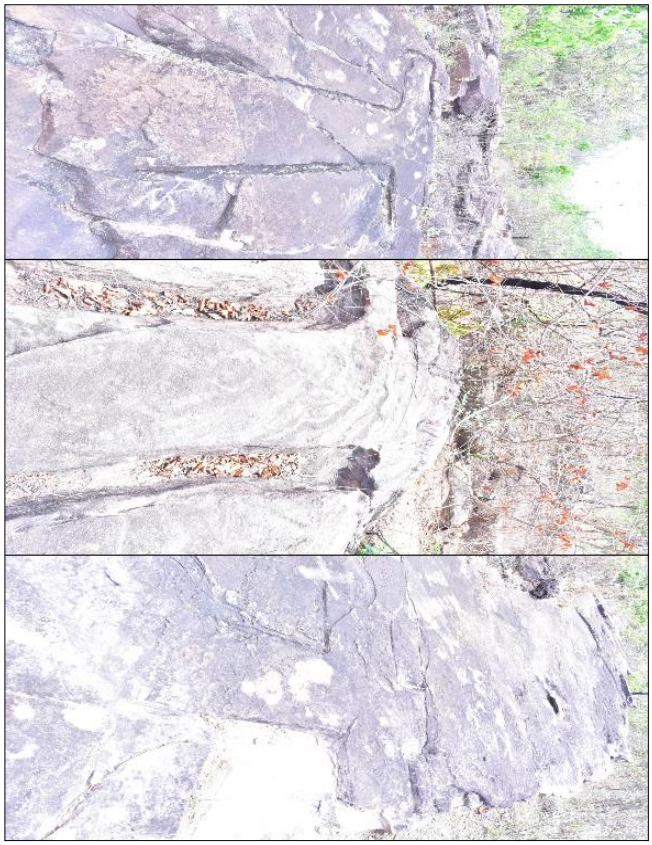


Fig 2: Rock cut Unfinished Three Anthropomorphic Statues, Dameravai

At the foot of Surakondayya Gutta in Dameravai village, four cross-shaped anthropomorphic statues measuring approximately 12 feet in length, over 7 feet in width, and more than 1 foot in thickness are carved onto a flat bedrock. Among these, one statue is completely carved (figure no 1), while the remaining three (figure no 2) were left incomplete on the rock surface. Such rare contextual evidence has not been found anywhere else. These serve as crucial archaeological evidence for understanding the quarrying and

sculpting techniques employed by the people of the Megalithic period.



Fig 3: Five Anthropomorphic statues, Dameravai belt

The five anthropomorphic statues shown in Figure 3 are scattered around the surrounding areas of Dameravai, near the Singaram and Erragunta streams. Some of these are cross-shaped and triangular-shaped. All of them appear to have been displaced from their original locations.

On top of Jajirala Gutta, situated to the left after crossing the Gauraram stream on the route from Kothur Motlagudem to Bommaigudem, there are three anthropomorphic statues (figure no 4). One of them is cross-shaped, measuring 3.7 feet in length and 2 feet in width. It is leaning against a tree; someone might have propped it up against the tree in recent times. Close to this, another statue is lying on the ground, measuring 2 feet in length and 2 feet in width, and is currently in a broken condition. At a distance of about one hundred meters from these two, near the base of a tree, another cross-shaped anthropomorphic statue measuring 4.3 feet in length and 3.1 feet in width is currently in a broken condition.



Fig 4: Three Anthropomorphic Statues, Bommai gudem



Fig 5: Anthropomorphic Statue, Bhupathipuram

On top of the hill located to the north of Bhupatipuram village, there are more than 50 Megalithic burials. In this area, a cross-shaped anthropomorphic statue (figure no 5) measuring 10.8 feet in length, 8.8 feet in width, and 1.8 feet in thickness is lying on the ground.



Fig 6: Three Anthropomorphic Statues, Kappaleru gutta

On Kappaleru Gutta, situated to the north of Kothur Motlagudem village, there are three anthropomorphic statues. Among them is an anthropomorphic statue measuring 3 feet in length and 2.4 feet in width. Nearby lies another broken anthropomorphic statue. A short distance away from these, there is another cross-shaped anthropomorphic statue measuring 4.5 feet in length and 3.3 feet in width.



Fig 7: Anthropomorphic Statues, Rajaram Suddagutta

On Rajaram Sudda Gutta, located near Kothur Motlagudem village, two anthropomorphic statues are situated side by side. One of these statues measures 4.5 feet in length and 2.9 feet in width. The second statue measures 3.9 feet in length and 1.8 feet in width, with an additional round stone placed separately at its head portion. Generally, anthropomorphic statues are monolithic structures; however, this particular statue uniquely features an extra added round stone to represent the head.

Conclusion

This study comprehensively highlights the cultural and architectural significance of the Megalithic sites across Dameravai, Kotghur, Motlagedem, Bhupathipuram, and Bommaigudem in the Godavari basin. Through primary data, secondary literature, and extensive fieldwork, the research demonstrates that the dolmens, dolmenoid cists, and anthropomorphic statues reflect the remarkable engineering skills and resourcefulness of early human societies. Significantly, the presence of anthropomorphic statues provides compelling evidence of ancestor worship, spiritual beliefs, and early concepts of the afterlife. Ultimately, these archaeological findings establish the Godavari basin as a vital cultural corridor in South Asian prehistory. However, these ancient monuments face severe threats from environmental weathering, modern encroachments, and lack of awareness. There is an urgent need for government authorities and archaeological departments to designate these areas as protected sites. Further scientific excavations and multidisciplinary research in these regions are essential to unearth deeper insights into the Megalithic heritage of this region.

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