

# MEGALITHIC ANTHROPOMORPHIC STATUES: MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE

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## ABSTRACT

*In South India we come across anthropomorphic statues associated with megalithic burials. These statues represent the human form in a very simple and symbolic manner, without revealing most of the sensory organs and lower limbs. By analogy with the practices of the tribes who include megaliths in their religious beliefs to this day, these anthropomorphic statues would have represented mainly the ancestors and, in a few cases, the god of the tribal peoples. The similarities between figures coming from different regions suggest ancient patterns of long-distance contacts between the various megalithic communities.*

## INTRODUCTION

The peninsular part of India is dotted by numerous megalithic sites. The concentration of these monuments is greater in the hinterland than along the coast. There is considerable variety in the construction methods of these monuments. The simplest modes such as the pit and pot burials as well as elaborate constructions such as the slab circles are present. In general, megalithic burials are associated with lithic assemblages, black-and-red ware, and iron objects. Most of the burials contain multiple interments with only a fraction of all of the skeletal elements present. In the construction method and associated interments, these megalithic sites show similarity with their counterparts in other regions of the world. Megalithic practices have persisted for a long time in India, starting at about 1300 BC, and continuing to be followed actively till about 200 BC (Sundara 1975:198-216; Narasimhaiah 1980:172-90; Rao 1988: 126-34; Rao Nagaraja 1990:319). Some of the tribal groups observe megalithic practices even to this day (Bide 1887:694; Hutton 1926:233; Haimendorf 1945:73-86; Tripathy 1969:37).

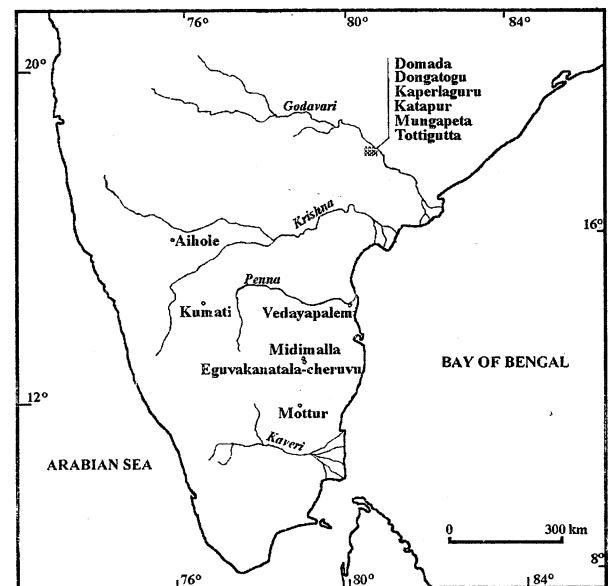


Figure 1. Megalithic sites with anthropomorphic statues in South India

An interesting appendage found in association with some of the megalithic monuments is the anthropomorphic statue, which has been noticed at a few scattered sites in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. However, the evidence is significant and interesting as these statues suggest some aspects of the mentality and beliefs of the "megalithic community". In fact these megalithic statues represent the earliest stone carving tradition on Indian soil, next only to the tradition prevalent in the Indus valley sites (Rao 1993:664-69). The present paper aims to discuss the general features of these statues and the related beliefs.

## GENERAL FEATURES

The megalithic anthropomorphic statues are usually found carved from thick stone blocks, but there are also some statues carved out of thin slabs. The slab statues

are confined mostly to the region covered by the districts of Chittoor in Andhra Pradesh (Rao, 1988:Plates 13 and 14), Bellary in Karnataka (Poonacha 1996:118-19, Plate XII), and North Arcot in Tamil Nadu (Narasimhaiah 1975:157-59; 1980:127-203, Plate X-A). On the other hand the statues carved out of thick blocks of stone are found in the districts of Khammam, Nellore and Warangal in Andhra Pradesh (Mulheran 1868:116-17; King 1877:179-82; Rao 1988:Plates 15 and 16; Rao 1991:363-69), and at Aihole in the Bijapur District of Karnataka (Sundara 1975:36, Plate XIV-4). Most of these anthropomorphic statues are found either in association with a megalithic monument or are located in a megalithic burial ground. Their association with the megalithic monuments is confirmed by those places where these statues form an integral part of the architecture of the megalithic monument. The best examples in this category come from Eguvakanathalacheruvu (Ramabrahmam 1996:115, Pl. IX) and Midimalla in Chittoor District (Rao 1988: Pls. 13 and 14). At the above places the anthropomorphic statues form part of the circle around the dolmen. On the whole these statues reveal the following general characteristics.

1. These statues represent the human form in a very simple abstract manner.
2. The statues are carved in the round, though it is very difficult to distinguish between the ventral and dorsal views of most of them.
3. Organs such as the eyes, ears, mouth and nose are not carved.
4. The upper limbs are sometimes suggested by elongations at the shoulder area, but the full limb is never carved.
5. The lower limbs are not distinctly represented. Probably, however, elongation of the lower body is meant to represent the lower limbs.
6. The sex of most of the statues cannot be distinguished as no sexual features are depicted on them. A very few statues reveal female features such as breasts.
7. So far no statue with male anatomical features has come to light.
8. The statues usually measure 5 to 8 feet (1.7 to 2.6 metres) in height, though both smaller and larger statues are reported from various places.
9. These statues are usually planted vertically, though some of them have fallen in the course of time.

#### ANTHROPOMORPHIC FIGURES WITH FEMALE FEATURES

There are a few anthropomorphic statues whose sex could be identified, in all cases involving feminine characteristics. Lingala (Krishna District, Andhra Pradesh), Tottigutta (Warangal District, Andhra Pradesh) and Ve-

daya Palera (Nellore District, Andhra Pradesh) are the only sites to have female anthropomorphic statues.

At Tottigutta an anthropomorphic statue with two breasts carved in relief on the chest portion was noticed (Rao 1991:Fig. 3). The figure measures 185 cm in length, 56 cms breadth across the shoulders, and 31 cm breadth at the base. The thickness of the slab is 28 cm. Significantly there are more statues at the site, but they do not contain any sexual features.

At Vedaya Palem one statue contains a circular cup-like cavity on its abdominal area, probably to indicate a female sexual feature. The measurements of this statue are not available at present. Of the two statues at Lingala, one has female features in the form of concentric circles placed side by side on the chest (Kantha 1982:28). This statue measures four feet six inches (1.37 metres) in height and one foot eleven inches (58 cm) in width at the shoulders, with a thickness of nine inches (23 cm).

The above are the only instances where we could clearly determine the sex of the anthropomorphic statues associated with megalithic burials. Otherwise, most of the statues are 'asexual'. This is probably to represent the human figure in its most abstract form, rather than being some statement on the (lack of) gender of the statue, and may be intended to represent the supreme being or the ancestors.

#### TRADITIONS AND BELIEFS

The reasons behind the erection of these statues, and their association with megalithic burials, are not very clear. In this situation, we can derive some clues on the statues' associations by observing the practices of the tribes who still include megaliths in their religious beliefs. For example, in ethnographic times the Gadabas, Gonds, Kurumbas, Morias, Mundas, Nagas and Savaras still construct megalithic monuments for the dead (Bide 1887:694; Tripathy 1969:37; Hutton 1926:233; Haimendorf 1945:73-86; Elwin 1955:340-66).

The Gonds, Kurumbas, Morias and Savaras plant and worship stone menhirs and, sometimes, wooden pillars. Some of these wooden pillars are carved with a rounded projection at the top to represent the human head (Mehta 1984: 333). These tribal people consider these posts to represent their god or, occasionally, the spirit of the dead. The beliefs of the various tribes differ with respect to the stone and wooden menhirs erected in connection with the death rites. The Gonds believe that the spirit of the dead resides in a stone (Mehta 1984:332). Thus the wooden pillars and stone menhirs are believed to contain the soul of the dead.

The veneration of the wooden and stone pillars is evident in the practices of the Marias (or Morias) who apply turmeric and oil. They sacrifice a buffalo and offer rice and worship these stones in the belief that the spirit

of the dead resides in them (Mehta 1984:334; Elwin 1955:360). The Soaras (or Savaras), before sowing, present the seeds in front of the pillars and sacrifice animals to promote the fertility of the seeds. Similarly, the Alu Kurumbas approach the megalithic monuments of their ancestors whom they implore to help them tide over their difficulties (Kapp 1985:502). The Gonds mention three reasons for erecting pillars and dolmens: "first, the spirit of the dead not to wander after death; second, they must not worry or harm the descendants; third, they must help by bringing rain and driving away the harmful spirits" (Mehta 1984:337).

The practices of the tribal people mentioned above indicate their belief that the spirit of the dead resides in the stone or wooden pillars which they erect. These pillars are venerated and worshipped with various offerings. If the spirits are satisfied they can grant boons and on the other hand they can cause harm, if they are not satisfied.

At Mottur in Tamil Nadu, a 'headless' anthropomorphic statue was noticed amidst a megalithic site. The local people call the megalith *Valiyar Vadu* (house of the Valiyar) and the anthropomorphic statue *Valiyar Daivam* (god of the Valiyars) (Narasimhaiah 1975:157-8, Pl. XA). There is a very interesting tradition current in this locality. According to the tradition, the Valiyars were pygmies of 10 to 15 centimetres stature, who used to plough the fields with the help of rabbits. On one occasion they came to know that it would rain fire, and if they stayed where they were they would perish. To escape the conflagration, they decided to leave the place, and request their god to accompany them. But when their god refused to come along, they cut off his head and took it with them. Hence, the statue now stands headless (observation of the statue's photograph, and comparison with statues from other places, indicate that it is not a headless statue). This tradition suggests that some communities consider the megalithic, anthropomorphic statues to represent their god.

The Savaras (of the Koraput and Ganjam districts of Orissa) construct a miniature hut over the place where the dead are cremated or the bones are buried. They keep wooden figures in the huts to accommodate the soul of the dead till the Gaur ceremony is performed (Elwin 1955:345). Interestingly, figures with female features are used, if the 'soul house' is meant for a woman. During the elaborate Gaur ceremony, which is conducted by the whole community of a particular village or a group of villages, menhirs are erected to represent the dead, who are believed to have reached the 'Under World'. That is why during the Gaur ceremony "the stones are washed with water – so that the dead can get a bath in the Under World – and oil and turmeric are used so that they can anoint themselves and do their hair. For whatever is

given at the Gaur goes straight down to the Under World" (Elwin 1955:360).

The above-mentioned practices and beliefs of the tribal communities indicate that wooden and stone statues are mainly meant to represent their ancestors. At Mottur alone, the local people believe that the anthropomorphic statue represents the god of the ancestors. Further, where statues with feminine features are erected they would represent a female member who has passed away.

#### SIMILARITY WITH SOUTHEAST ASIA

The similarities in the megalithic monuments, their contents and the mortuary disposal methods evident at the sites, comparing the South Indian and Southeast Asian megaliths, are already known (Ramanna 1983). Now some evidence is available indicating similarity between the South Indian megalithic statues and the Southeast Asian Iron Age anthropomorphic statues. For example, the anthropomorphic statues from the Khammam, Warangal and Nellore districts have a close resemblance to the ones from Java (Christie 1961:281, Pl. 9). Further investigations are required to extend these comparisons.

#### CONCLUSION

The above study suggests that what may be the earliest rock carving tradition in South India, assignable to the period when megaliths were erected, was very simple and abstract in form. The masons tried to represent the human being in a very symbolic form. Apart from indicating some beliefs among certain ancient communities, these statues also help us in understanding contact zones, both within and beyond the Indian subcontinent.

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