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Megalithic Landscapes and Social Memory in South India: An Archaeological Interpretation

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Abstract

Megalithic monuments constitute one of the most prominent archaeological features of the Iron Age in South India, yet they have often been interpreted primarily through typological classification and chronological sequencing. This article advances an alternative, interpretive framework by examining megalithic landscapes as materialized practices of social memory. Drawing on archaeological evidence from across South India, the study situates burial monuments within their spatial contexts to analyse how durability, visibility, monumentality, and long-term reuse enabled communities to anchor remembrance within lived landscapes. Rather than treating megaliths as static funerary structures, the article argues that they functioned as active mnemonic devices through which ancestry, social identity, and hierarchy were negotiated and reproduced over time. Variability in burial architecture and assemblages is interpreted not only as cultural or environmental variation but as differentiated modes of remembering shaped by social relations and historical trajectories. Through a comparative engagement with megalithic traditions beyond South India, the study suggests that while monumentality reflects a broader human strategy of materializing memory, its meanings are locally configured. Methodologically, the article highlights the analytical value of integrating social memory with landscape archaeology for interpreting protohistoric societies where textual sources are limited. By foregrounding memory-making as a spatial and material process, the study contributes a theoretically transferable approach to the archaeology of mortuary landscapes.

Keywords: Megaliths; Social Memory; Landscape Archaeology; Protohistory; Mortuary Practices; South India

Introduction

Megalithic monuments constitute one of the most visible and enduring archaeological signatures of the Iron Age in peninsular India. Distributed across diverse ecological zones of South India, these burial monuments—dolmens, cists, urn burials, rock-cut caves, menhirs, hood-stones and stone circles—have long attracted scholarly attention due to their monumentality and surface visibility. Early archaeological scholarship approached these

remains largely through typological classification and diffusionist explanations, often treating megaliths as markers of a homogeneous "megalithic culture" or as survivals of externally derived traditions (Fergusson 1872; Wheeler 1948; Rao 1972). While these studies laid an empirical foundation, they remained limited in their capacity to explain the social meanings embedded within megalithic landscapes.

Subsequent archaeological research has firmly situated South Indian megaliths within the broader Iron Age cultural horizon rather than viewing them as prehistoric anomalies. Excavations and surveys across Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh indicate that megalithic burial practices span a long chronological range, broadly from the late second millennium BCE into the early historic period, with considerable regional variability and continuity (Sundara 1975; Leshnik 1974; Rajan 2015). The association of iron implements, Black-and-Red Ware ceramics, beads, and occasional non-local materials within burials indicates not only technological transformation but also increasing social differentiation and expanding interaction networks during this phase (Chakrabarti 1994; Peter 2018).

Despite the accumulation of substantial archaeological data, interpretations of South Indian megaliths have continued to privilege burial typology, chronology, and material inventories. Regional syntheses from Kerala and Andhra Pradesh, for example, provide detailed classifications of burial forms and grave goods but often stop short of examining how these monuments functioned within lived landscapes and collective social practices (Darsana 2010; Varre 2023). As a result, megaliths are frequently treated as static funerary containers rather than as dynamic social markers that mediated relationships between the living, the dead, and the landscape.

Recent scholarship has begun to challenge this limitation by foregrounding mortuary variability as an indicator of social hierarchy, lineage differentiation, and political economy. Studies from Kerala suggest that variations in burial architecture, monument visibility, and grave assemblages correlate with emerging social stratification during the Iron Age, particularly in regions associated with agrarian expansion and maritime exchange (Gurukkal 2014; Peter 2018). Likewise, research from Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh suggests that monument size, architectural complexity, and spatial clustering reflect differential access to resources and labour, pointing to the role of megalithic burials in legitimizing social status and ancestral authority (Brubaker 2001; Narayan 2019).

Building on these insights, this article adopts an interpretive framework that views megalithic monuments as material expressions of social memory rather than mere repositories of the dead. Social memory, as employed in archaeological studies of mortuary landscapes, emphasizes how monuments anchor ideas of ancestry, identity, and territorial belonging within specific spatial settings. In South India, the deliberate placement of megaliths on hill slopes, ridgelines, lateritic plateaus, and near habitation zones suggests intentional acts of memorialization that inscribed the dead into everyday landscapes and social experience (Hodder 1990; Rajan 2014).

Evidence from regionally distinctive forms such as rock-cut caves, umbrella-stones, and hood-stones in Kerala further reinforces this interpretation. These monuments, often reused over extended periods, indicate sustained practices of remembrance rather than isolated burial events. Their architectural elaboration and spatial prominence imply that megaliths functioned as mnemonic nodes through which communities negotiated continuity, ancestry, and collective identity across generations (Raghavan 1936; Joseph 2025). At the same time, the South Indian record resists any notion of a uniform megalithic ideology. Comparative evidence from Andhra

Pradesh and Tamil Nadu indicate significant regional variation shaped by geology, resource availability, and interaction routes, even as shared mortuary principles persisted across the peninsula (Rao 1988; Varre 2023). This combination of shared traditions and local adaptations underscores the need for an analytical approach that integrates landscape archaeology with social interpretation rather than relying solely on culture-historical classification.

This article therefore reorients the study of South Indian megaliths by situating them at the intersection of landscape, memory, and social practice. While grounded in South Indian archaeological contexts, the analytical framework employed here engages with wider debates on megalithic traditions, where monuments are increasingly understood as active agents in the construction of social memory and identity. By foregrounding the mnemonic and spatial dimensions of megalithic landscapes, the study moves beyond descriptive typologies to offer a theoretically transferable model for interpreting protohistoric mortuary practices.

The study adopts an interpretive archaeological approach that integrates landscape analysis, material culture studies, and social memory theory to examine South Indian megaliths as components of lived environments rather than isolated funerary remains. Instead of presenting new excavation data, it synthesizes published archaeological reports, regional surveys, and relevant ethnographic observations to reconstruct how these monuments were embedded within everyday spatial practices. Sites discussed in the study were selected on the basis of reliable excavation documentation, diversity of monument types, and demonstrable spatial relationships with habitation zones, routes, or resource areas.

By moving beyond typological description and culture-historical classification, the article contributes a regionally grounded framework for understanding megalithic monuments as active instruments of remembrance that structured social experience across landscapes. In doing so, it highlights how variability in monument form, placement, and material assemblage reflects differing strategies of commemoration rather than merely chronological or cultural distinctions. This interpretive synthesis aims to bridge archaeological evidence and memory-based approaches, offering a perspective that is both empirically anchored and theoretically informed.

Megalithic Studies in South India: A Historiographical Overview

The study of South Indian megaliths has a long and complex historiography, shaped by shifting theoretical orientations and methodological priorities within archaeology. Early discussions emerged in the nineteenth century through the writings of antiquarians and colonial administrators, who documented megalithic monuments primarily as striking surface features of the landscape. These early accounts, while valuable for site identification, largely interpreted megaliths through speculative diffusionist and racial frameworks, often drawing parallels with European prehistoric monuments (Fergusson 1872; Sewell 1882). Megaliths were thus viewed as cultural imports or survivals rather than as products of indigenous social processes.

By the early twentieth century, archaeological attention increasingly shifted towards systematic documentation and excavation. Scholars such as Rea and Wheeler sought to establish typological classifications and chronological frameworks for South Indian megaliths, particularly through excavations at sites like Brahmagiri and Chandravalli (Wheeler 1948). This phase marked an important transition from antiquarian curiosity to scientific archaeology. However, the dominant concern remained classification—burial types, construction techniques, and associated artefacts—rather than interpretation of social meaning.

Mid-twentieth-century scholarship consolidated the identification of megaliths with the Iron Age of peninsular India. Studies emphasized the association of megalithic burials with iron technology, agricultural expansion, and changing settlement patterns, situating these monuments within broader cultural transformations (Subbarao 1958; Rao 1972). While this period successfully challenged earlier diffusionist models, it continued to treat megaliths largely as cultural markers of a chronological phase, reinforcing a culture-historical approach. From the 1970s onwards, regional surveys and excavations significantly expanded the empirical database. Detailed studies from Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh documented an extraordinary diversity of burial forms and regional variations, highlighting the inadequacy of a single, homogeneous "megalithic culture" (Leshnik 1974; Sundara 1975). This phase brought attention to environmental factors, local geology, and resource availability in shaping monument forms, yet interpretation remained largely functional and descriptive.

A major historiographical shift occurred with the growing influence of processual archaeology, which encouraged archaeologists to relate mortuary practices to social organization and economic systems. Scholars began to examine grave goods, monument size, and burial variability as indicators of social differentiation and hierarchy (Brubaker 2001; Chakrabarti 1994). In South Indian contexts, this approach implies particularly productive, as variations in burial architecture and assemblages suggested emerging inequalities and complex social structures during the Iron Age. More recently, post-processual perspectives have further transformed the study of megaliths by foregrounding symbolism, ideology, and social memory. Rather than viewing burials solely as reflections of social structure, scholars have emphasized their role in actively constructing social identities and legitimizing authority (Hodder 1990). In South India, this perspective has encouraged a reassessment of megaliths as meaningful elements within lived landscapes, where monument placement, visibility, and reuse contributed to collective memory and ancestral narratives (Rajan 2014; Peter 2018).

Despite these advances, much of the existing literature continues to privilege burial typology and regional cataloguing over integrated landscape-based interpretation. While recent studies acknowledge social hierarchy and ritual symbolism, few explicitly examine how megalithic monuments operated as mnemonic devices embedded within everyday spatial practices. As a result, the relationship between megaliths, landscape, and social memory remains under-theorized in South Indian archaeology. This article builds upon recent interpretive trends while addressing this lacuna by synthesizing archaeological evidence within a landscape and memory-oriented framework. By situating megalithic monuments within their spatial and social contexts, the study seeks to move beyond typological historiography and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how Iron Age communities in South India used mortuary landscapes to negotiate identity, continuity, and power.

Theoretical Framework: Social Memory and Archaeological Landscapes

The concept of social memory offers a productive framework for interpreting mortuary monuments as active elements of past social life rather than passive residues. Social memory refers to collectively shared understandings of the past that are produced, maintained, and transmitted through social practices, symbols, and material forms. Unlike individual memory, which is personal and transient, social memory is externalized through material culture, ritual, and spatial organization, allowing communities to sustain shared identities across generations (Halbwachs 1992).

Archaeological research increasingly recognizes landscapes as central to the materialization of such memory. Landscapes are culturally constituted spaces shaped by human action and meaning rather than neutral settings. Through repeated practices—such as burial, monument construction, and ritual movement—particular locations acquire mnemonic significance and become anchors for collective remembrance (Ingold 1993). Mortuary monuments are especially important in this regard, as they not only dispose of the dead but also structure how the dead are remembered and how social relationships among the living are reproduced. Their durability and visibility enable them to outlast individuals, transforming death into a persistent social presence and often legitimizing claims to ancestry, territory, and status (Parker Pearson 1999).

In megalithic contexts, monumentality intensifies these effects. The labour involved in constructing large stone structures and their prominent placement in the landscape signal collective effort and coordination, materializing memory through enduring physical presence. Landscape archaeology further emphasizes that such monuments should be understood not as isolated tombs but as components of broader mortuary landscapes that include settlements, agricultural land, routes, and natural features. Clustering, alignment with topography, and proximity to habitation areas suggest deliberate spatial strategies concerning visibility, accessibility, and permanence.

In South India, megalithic monuments frequently occupy hill slopes, ridgelines, lateritic plateaus, and transitional zones between cultivated and uncultivated land. These liminal settings—neither fully domestic nor entirely wild—are well suited to commemorative practices mediating between the living and the dead, embedding ancestral presence within landscapes repeatedly traversed in everyday life. Evidence of reuse, including multiple interments and reopening of burial structures, further indicates that these monuments functioned as long-term loci of remembrance rather than single-event constructions.

This perspective is particularly relevant for South Indian megaliths, where considerable regional diversity coexists with shared mortuary principles. A memory-oriented approach interprets such variability not merely as cultural difference but as locally specific strategies of commemoration shaped by social conditions and historical trajectories. By integrating social memory with landscape archaeology, this study moves beyond typological and purely functional explanations and foregrounds the role of materialized memory in structuring Iron Age social life. This framework provides the conceptual basis for the following examination of archaeological evidence within lived landscapes.

Archaeological Context and Material Evidence

The archaeological record of South Indian megaliths is characterized by a remarkable diversity of burial forms, material assemblages, and spatial settings, reflecting both shared mortuary principles and strong regional adaptations. Rather than treating this variability as merely typological, the present section situates material evidence within the broader archaeological landscapes in which megalithic practices unfolded.

Megalithic burials in South India are distributed across a wide range of ecological zones, including lateritic plateaus of Kerala, granitic uplands of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, and the Deccan landscapes of Andhra Pradesh (Joseph 2025). Common burial forms include dolmens, cists, dolmenoid cists, urn burials, rock-cut caves, menhirs, hood-stones, umbrella-stones, cairns, and stone circles. While these forms vary in construction and scale, they share

an emphasis on durable stone architecture and long-term visibility, underscoring their role as permanent markers within the landscape (Rao 1972; Leshnik 1974).

Material assemblages recovered from megalithic burials provide important insights into the social and symbolic dimensions of these monuments. Iron implements—such as knives, spearheads, sickles, and axes—occur frequently, linking megalithic practices to the technological transformations of the Iron Age (Chakrabarti 1994). Ceramic assemblages, particularly Black-and-Red Ware and associated plain wares, appear consistently across regions, suggesting shared mortuary conventions alongside local stylistic variation. Beads made of semi-precious stones, shell, and occasionally metal further point to craft specialization and participation in wider exchange networks (Brubaker 2001).

Variability in grave goods and burial architecture is especially significant. Some burials contain modest assemblages, while others include elaborate stone constructions and rich material deposits. Such differentiation has been widely interpreted as evidence of social hierarchy and unequal access to resources (Peter 2018; Pratheesh & Reema, 2024). When viewed through the lens of social memory, however, this variability also reflects differential strategies of remembrance, whereby certain individuals or lineages were commemorated more prominently within the landscape than others.

Spatial patterning strengthens this interpretation. Megalithic burials are rarely isolated; instead, they tend to occur in clusters or cemeteries located near habitation zones, agricultural land, or natural features such as hillocks and water sources. In many regions, burials are positioned on elevated ground or along ridgelines, enhancing visibility and reinforcing their role as landmarks within everyday movement routes. Such placement suggests that megaliths were deliberately integrated into lived landscapes rather than relegated to marginal or hidden spaces (Sundara 1975; Rajan 2014; Pratheesh 2025).

Evidence of reuse and long-term engagement further highlights the mnemonic function of megalithic monuments. Archaeological reports frequently document multiple burials within the same structure, reopening of cists, and continued use of burial grounds over extended periods. These practices indicate that megaliths were not conceived as single-use tombs but as enduring loci of ancestral memory, repeatedly revisited and reinterpreted by successive generations. The persistence of burial traditions into the early historic period in several regions underscores this continuity (Rajan 2015).

Regionally distinctive forms add further depth to this picture. Rock-cut caves, hood-stones, and umbrella-stones of Kerala, for instance, represent localized architectural expressions that nevertheless conform to broader megalithic principles. Their repeated occurrence in specific ecological zones suggests conscious engagement with local geology and landscape features, reinforcing the idea that memory was materially anchored in place-specific forms (Raghavan 1936; Pratheesh 2025). Similarly, the elaborate dolmen fields and cairn complexes of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh reflect regionally inflected approaches to monumentality and commemoration (Varre 2023).

Taken together, the archaeological context and material evidence indicate that South Indian megaliths cannot be reduced to funerary containers or chronological markers alone. Their material variability, spatial organization, and long-term use reveal them as active components of social life, through which memory, identity, and hierarchy were negotiated. By embedding the dead within visible and enduring landscapes, Iron Age communities transformed burial spaces into mnemonic arenas that structured collective experience over time. This empirical foundation sets the stage for a more focused interpretation of megalithic

landscapes as memory-making practices, which is explored in the following section. The archaeological patterns outlined above—particularly the clustering of burials, variability in monument scale, and repeated use of cemetery spaces—provide the empirical basis for interpreting megalithic landscapes as arenas of social memory. These material features indicate that the monuments functioned not merely as burial markers but as enduring reference points within inhabited environments. The following section examines how such spatial and material configurations contributed to memory-making practices in Iron Age communities.

Regional Distribution of Megalithic Sites in Kerala

Within South India, Kerala presents a distinctive megalithic landscape shaped by its lateritic midlands, riverine valleys, and forested highlands. Megalithic sites are distributed across all physiographic zones of the state but show a marked concentration in the central and northern laterite belt, where the availability of workable laterite facilitated the construction of characteristic monument types such as umbrella-stones (kudakkal), hat-stones (topikkal), and multiple hood-stones (Peter 2015; Valsa 2015). These monuments often occur in clusters, indicating the existence of formal cemeteries serving nearby settlements rather than isolated burials.

Thrissur district, in particular, contains one of the densest concentrations of megalithic remains in Kerala. Sites such as Cheramanangad, Ariyannur, Porkkulam, Kakkad, and Ramavarmapuram preserve diverse burial forms including umbrella-stones, capstones, stone circles, and menhirs. At Cheramanangad (Kudakkallu Parambu), nearly seventy monuments are grouped within a restricted area, demonstrating organized spatial planning and long-term use as a communal burial ground (Rahul & Vinuraj 2023–24; Valsa 2015). Excavations at this site have revealed urn burials accompanied by pottery, metal objects, and fragmentary human remains, confirming the funerary function of these surface structures.

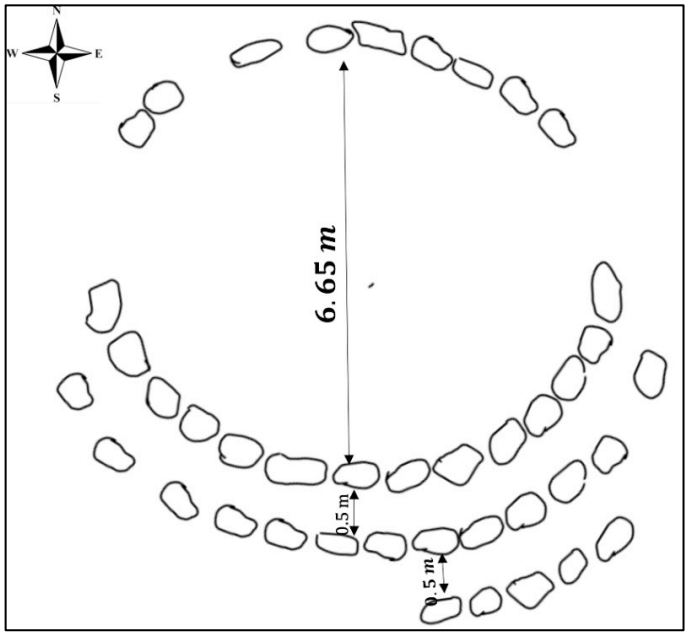

Figure 1: Schematic plan of a newly documented stone-circle burial from Thrissur District, Kerala.

Source: Adapted from The Megalithic Portal, "Cherumangadu Kudakkalparambu," <https://www.megalithic.co.uk> [accessed 24 January 2026]

This monument consists of two clearly defined concentric stone rings with indications of a third, fragmentary outer ring. The inner circle, measuring approximately 6.65 m in diameter, is formed by about twenty-four stones of varying sizes projecting 0.08–0.12 m above the ground surface (Fig. 1). A second ring, set about 0.5 m beyond the inner circle, comprises roughly twelve stones. Remains of a discontinuous outer alignment suggest a tiered or multi-ring arrangement, though its full extent is uncertain. Detailed excavation is required to determine the original plan and function of the structure.

The lateritic uplands of northern Kerala similarly contain extensive clusters of umbrella-stones and related monuments. Architectural studies indicate that these structures typically consist of four dressed laterite slabs supporting a domical capstone and are erected above subterranean urn burials (Peter 2015). Their standardized construction and orientation suggest shared ritual norms across sites, while variations in size and finish may reflect differences in status or local traditions.

In contrast, the eastern highland regions bordering the Western Ghats exhibit a different configuration of megalithic remains. In the Marayur–Anjunad Valley of Idukki district, burial monuments occur alongside habitation deposits and rock-art sites, forming an integrated cultural landscape. Excavations at Nachivayal near Marayur have documented cist burials, urn burials, menhirs, and associated settlement materials such as pottery, beads, terracotta objects, iron fragments, and grinding stones. The proximity of habitation and cemetery areas indicates that mortuary activity was embedded within everyday living spaces rather than segregated from them. Large stone slabs scattered across the site are interpreted as remnants of destroyed dolmens or cists, suggesting earlier monumental constructions (Purātattva 42, 2012; Nihildas 2014; Nihildas 2020).

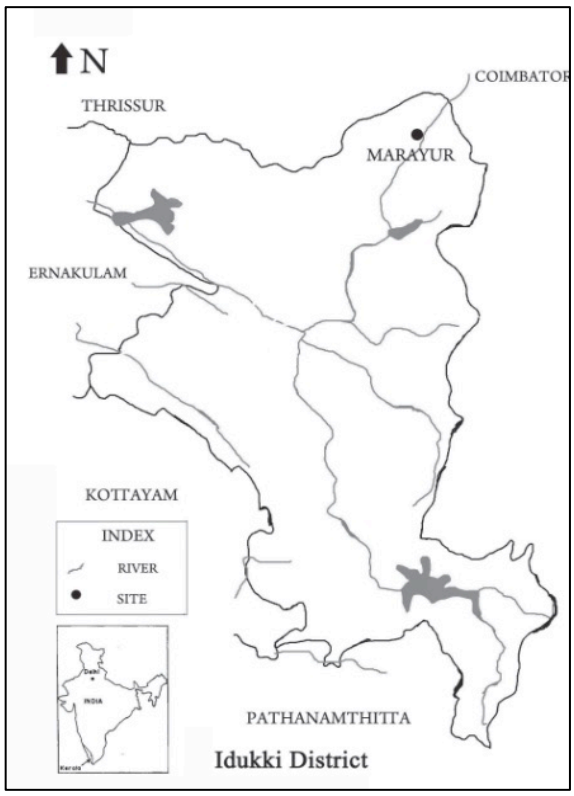

Figure 2: Map showing the megalithic cites Thrissur and Marayur (Idukki).
Source: Site Plan of Megalithic Sites in Thrissur and Marayur (Idukki), Kerala, Archaeological Survey of India, Thrissur Circle.

Kerala's rock-cut cave burials constitute another distinctive regional form, particularly in the northern and central districts. These subterranean chambers, carved into laterite or bedrock, often contain multiple urns and grave goods, indicating collective or repeated interments, while their architectural complexity points to advanced technical knowledge and sustained investment in funerary construction. A representative example is the rock-cut burial cave at Eyyal in Thrissur District (Fig. 3), a circular chamber accessed through a single entrance and designated as a protected monument, illustrating the formalized design and enduring significance of such funerary spaces. The coexistence of rock-cut caves with surface monuments within the same regions underscores the diversity of mortuary practices adopted by Iron Age communities.

Figure 3: Burial Cave at Eyyal, Thrissur District, Kerala.
Source: Excavation Report of the Burial Cave at Eyyal, Thrissur District, Kerala, Archaeological Survey of India, Thrissur Circle.

Across the state, megalithic monuments are frequently situated on elevated ground, laterite plateaus, or hill slopes overlooking cultivable land and water sources. Such locations ensure both visibility and accessibility, reinforcing the interpretation of these sites as enduring landmarks within inhabited landscapes. The clustering of monuments, evidence of repeated use, and association with settlements all point to long-term engagement with ancestral spaces rather than episodic burial events.

The regional distribution of megalithic sites in Kerala therefore reveals a pattern of localized architectural innovation within a broader South Indian tradition. While monument types vary according to geology and terrain, their consistent placement within prominent landscape settings suggests a shared concern with visibility, permanence, and collective remembrance. These features support the view that Kerala's megalithic cemeteries functioned not merely as burial grounds but as socially significant places where memory, identity, and territorial attachment were materially inscribed.

Case Study: Kudakkallu Parambu Megalithic Burial Complex (Thrissur District)

The Kudakkallu Parambu at Cheramanangad in Thrissur district constitutes one of the most significant megalithic burial complexes in Kerala's lateritic midlands. Archaeological documentation records approximately sixty-nine monuments clustered within a limited area, indicating the existence of a formal cemetery rather than isolated burials (Rahul & Vinuraj 2023–24; Valsa 2015). The site, now protected, preserves multiple monument types representing a developed mortuary tradition of the Iron Age–Early Historic period.

The burial complex contains several distinct monument forms, including umbrella stones (Kudakkal), hat stones or capstones (Topikkal), multiple hood stones, and stone circles. Umbrella stones represent the most characteristic structures of the site and of Kerala's megalithic culture generally (Peter 2015). Each umbrella stone consists of four dressed laterite orthostats arranged to form a square at the base, converging inward to support a circular domical capstone. The outer faces are carefully finished, producing a parabolic profile. The orthostats meet along the diagonals, creating a stable platform for the capstone. These monuments exhibit deliberate orientation toward cardinal directions, suggesting standardized construction norms (Rahul & Vinuraj 2023–24).

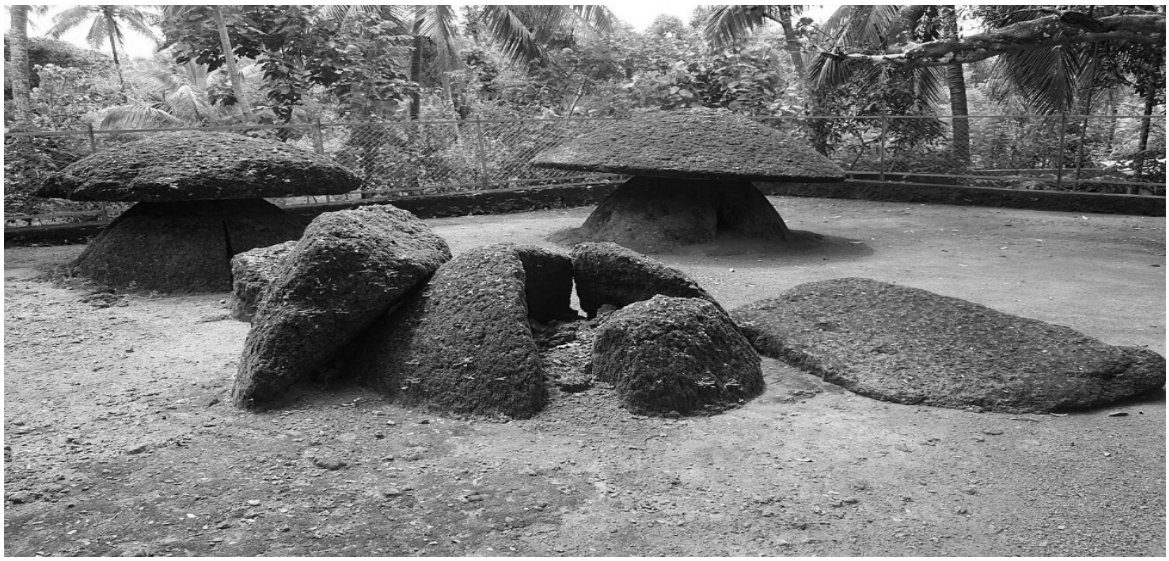

Figure 4: Kudakkallu Parambu Megalithic Burial Complex, Cheramanangad, Thrissur District
Source: Interim Report (2012), *Kudakkallu Parambu Megalithic Burial Complex, Cheramanangad, Thrissur District*, Archaeological Survey of India, Thrissur Circle.

Measured examples indicate substantial size and engineering skill:

- Largest umbrella stone: approximately 270 cm in height from apex to mid-base
- Base length: about 150 cm
- Another specimen: about 210 cm high and 130 cm wide above ground

Such dimensions indicate considerable labour investment and imply social importance attached to these burials.

Hat stones (Topikkal) form another major category. These consist of dome-shaped laterite capstones placed directly on the ground without supporting slabs. Excavation has

shown that they typically cover urn burials beneath the surface, functioning as surface markers rather than burial chambers (Rahul & Vinuraj 2023–24; Valsa 2015). Intermediate forms known as multiple hood stones are also numerous, with about thirty-three examples recorded. These monuments comprise several sector-shaped slabs arranged radially to form a circular structure with a central opening. The slabs incline inward but do not meet at the top, producing a hood-like appearance. This design likely covered subterranean burials while allowing ritual access to the interior.

Figure 5: Hat Stoe (Topikkal) from Thrissur Site.
Source: Interim Report (2012), *Kudakkallu Parambu Megalithic Burial Complex, Cheramanangad, Thrissur District*, Archaeological Survey of India, Thrissur Circle.

Stone circles at the site occur in two principal forms:

1. Urn or cist burial enclosed by a circular arrangement of dressed laterite blocks measuring about 1.55 m in diameter, capped by a granite slab.
2. Circles composed of irregular laterite boulders surrounding an urn covered by a capstone (Rahul & Vinuraj 2023–24).

Excavations conducted by the Archaeological Survey of India during 1990–91 and subsequent seasons opened representative examples of each monument type to determine their internal structure. These investigations confirmed that the visible stone constructions functioned as markers for subsurface burials.

Recovered materials include:

- Large funerary urns made of red ware
- Black-and-red ware pottery (bowls, vases, sherds)
- Russet-coated ware vessels
- Iron implements
- Copper bowls
- Tripod stands
- Fragmentary human bone remains

Later excavations yielded additional ceramic vessels and metal objects, reinforcing the funerary nature of the site (Rahul & Vinuraj 2023–24). The presence of bone fragments suggests that these monuments mark actual burial deposits rather than purely commemorative structures. The association of urns with ceramic and metal grave goods suggests complex mortuary rituals involving deposition of offerings alongside the remains of the deceased.

The coexistence of multiple monument types within a single cemetery indicates variability in burial customs, possibly reflecting social differentiation, chronological development, or both. Umbrella stones, owing to their size and visibility, may have marked burials of higher status individuals, whereas simpler capstones or stone circles could represent less elaborate interments. The clustered arrangement of monuments suggests prolonged use of the site as a communal burial ground across generations. Such cemeteries would have functioned not only as disposal spaces for the dead but also as focal points for ritual activity and collective memory within the landscape.

Case Study: Marayur Megalithic Complex (Idukki District)

The Marayur region in Devikulam Taluk, Idukki District, represents one of the densest concentrations of Iron Age–Early Historic megalithic remains in the southern Western Ghats. Located within the intermontane corridor between the Anaimalai and Palani hill systems (approximately 10°16′ N, 77°09′ E), the landscape consists of rocky hillocks, forest margins, and cultivated tablelands that together preserve an extensive mortuary terrain. Archaeological research indicates that burial monuments here occur in close association with habitation zones, indicating an integrated cultural landscape rather than isolated funerary grounds (Nihildas 2020; Purātattva 42, 2012).

Marayur is widely described as a “land of dolmens,” reflecting the predominance of dolmenoid cists across exposed rock surfaces and elevated slopes. These monuments typically consist of orthostatic stone slabs forming a chamber, surmounted by a massive capstone. Architectural variation is substantial, including differences in chamber size, slab thickness, and arrangement, suggesting multiple construction traditions or chronological phases. In addition to dolmens, the region contains cist burials, urn burials, cairn structures, and menhirs, forming a diverse megalithic assemblage (Nihildas 2020). Cist burials generally occur on relatively level ground, especially on tablelands adjacent to habitation areas. They may appear as single chambers or as multiple and transept forms, indicating variability in mortuary practice. Menhirs occur both as isolated standing stones and as associated markers placed in front of burial structures, implying commemorative or territorial functions within the funerary landscape.

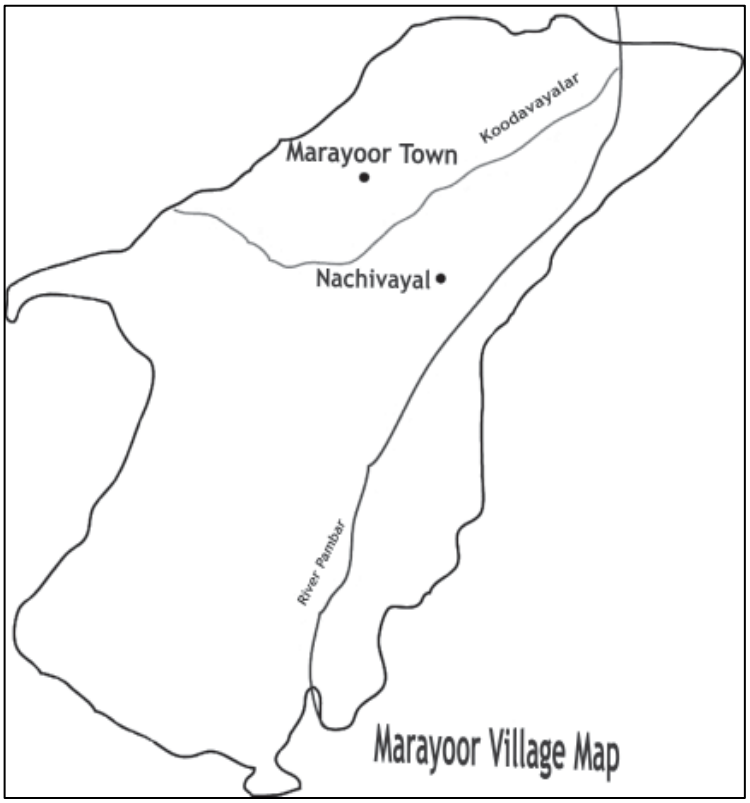

Figure 6: Map Showing Nachivayal Site, Marayur
Source: Adapted from "Map of Nachivayal Site, Marayur" in M.A. Valsa, (2015), "Megalithic Monuments in Thrissur in Historical Perspective," *Rural South Asian Studies*, 1(1), p. 60.

At Nachivayal, approximately 4 km south-east of Marayur, excavation revealed a cemetery containing several cist burials within a radius of about 200 m. One cist had a menhir erected on its northern side. The burial chamber measured roughly 1.50 m in length and 1.00 m in width and was oriented north–south. Many structures were partially disturbed, and several capstones were missing, indicating antiquity or later disturbance. The menhir associated with one burial measured about 1 m in height and was fashioned from an undressed stone slab (Purātattva 42, 2012).

Urn burials were also documented in the same region. An intact urn discovered at Manjapattikoda measured approximately 0.82 m in height, with a diameter of about 0.45 m at the mouth and 1.12 m at the base. A perforation of approximately 14 cm in diameter was observed at the base of the vessel. Subsequent exploration revealed additional urn burials with capstones in nearby forested areas, confirming the presence of multiple interment practices within the same cultural horizon (Purātattva 42, 2012).

Excavations at Nachivayal identified a habitation deposit in close proximity to the burial ground, demonstrating that funerary activity occurred within a settled landscape. The habitation area, situated on the Marayur tableland at roughly 950 m above mean sea level, yielded abundant cultural materials during surface survey. Recovered artefacts included large quantities of pottery sherds, terracotta objects, beads, iron fragments, stone implements, and architectural debris. Numerous large stone slabs (approximately 1.5 × 0.70 × 0.6 m) were found scattered across the site and are interpreted as remnants of destroyed dolmens or cist structures.

The density of artefacts and structural debris strongly suggests the presence of a substantial occupation phase associated with the burial complex (Purātattva 42, 2012).

Beads recovered from the site include examples made of glass and semi-precious stones such as quartz. These occur in several forms, including spherical, tubular, bicorn, and hexagonal types, ranging from approximately 2.25 mm to 16 mm in size. Terracotta artefacts include ear ornaments, ear-lobes, sling balls, gaming pieces, terracotta cakes with thumb impressions, and other utilitarian objects. Grinding stones and other lithic implements indicate food processing activities, while iron fragments point to metallurgical usage during the occupation phase (Purātattva 42, 2012).

Ethnographic observations among contemporary tribal groups of the Marayur region—particularly the Hill Pulayans and Muthuvans—provide important contextual insights. Present-day burial grounds often contain erected stones and offerings, suggesting the persistence of commemorative practices centred on stone markers. Although direct continuity with Iron Age traditions cannot be assumed, such practices suggest enduring ritual engagement with ancestral landscapes (Nihildas 2020).

In addition, later cultural interventions at megalithic sites indicate prolonged symbolic significance. An inscription in archaic Tamil recorded on a monolith near a dolmen at Marayur Ur Grama suggests that these monuments continued to be venerated or reused long after their construction, reflecting changing belief systems layered onto older structures (Nihildas 2020). Marayur forms part of the broader Anjunad Valley cultural zone, which also contains rock art shelters, engravings, and additional Iron Age–Early Historic remains. Surveys in the valley document numerous painted rock shelters situated on cliffs, hillocks, and riverine settings, frequently in proximity to megalithic monuments. Many shelters show evidence of occupation, including pottery fragments, grinding stones, and faunal remains, indicating that ritual, habitation, and subsistence activities were closely intertwined within the same landscape (Nihildas 2014).

Ethnographic observations from several parts of South India indicate continued ritual engagement with ancestral burial sites, including offerings, commemorative practices, and the association of megaliths with local narratives. Although such practices cannot be directly projected into the Iron Age, they demonstrate that megalithic monuments remained embedded within social memory across generations.

Interpreting Megaliths as Memory-Making Practices

Interpreting South Indian megaliths as memory-making practices requires moving beyond the view of mortuary monuments as static reflections of social structure toward understanding them as active instruments through which collective identities, ancestral legitimacy, and social continuity were produced and sustained (Pratheesh & Reema, 2024). The archaeological evidence discussed in the preceding section—particularly the clustering of burials, variability in monument scale, association with habitation zones, and long-term reuse—indicates that these structures were embedded within everyday landscapes rather than isolated ritual spaces. In this perspective, megaliths did not simply encode pre-existing social relations but participated in their continual reproduction by materializing memory in durable, spatially organized forms. Memory thus emerges not as a passive residue of the past but as an ongoing social process enacted through interaction with monuments that remained visible and accessible over extended periods.

Material permanence constitutes the foundation of this mnemonic capacity. Constructed from large stone slabs or carved directly into bedrock or laterite, megalithic monuments were designed to endure far beyond individual lifespans. Their durability allowed remembrance to be externalized from oral traditions and anchored in material forms that could be encountered repeatedly by successive generations. Evidence from sites such as the Marayur complex demonstrates that burial structures were integrated with habitation areas and resource zones, ensuring continued interaction rather than abandonment. In such contexts, the endurance of stone transformed the dead into persistent social actors within the landscape, converting death from a discrete event into a long-term condition of presence embedded in everyday spatial experience.

Visibility amplified this effect by situating monuments in positions where they could be repeatedly seen and navigated around. Many South Indian megaliths occupy elevated ground, ridgelines, open plateaus, or other prominent locations overlooking cultivable land and movement routes. These placements suggest deliberate strategies aimed at maintaining visual prominence rather than concealment. The repeated encounter with monuments during routine activities—agriculture, herding, or travel—would have continually reactivated memory, embedding ancestral presence within habitual movement patterns. In dense cemetery clusters such as Kudakkallu Parambu, the cumulative visual impact of numerous monuments would have reinforced the sense of an enduring ancestral landscape, transforming burial grounds into fixed reference points within the social geography of communities.

Monumentality and architectural variation further indicate that remembrance was selectively structured. Larger or more elaborate constructions required substantial labour mobilization and technical skill, implying differential investment in commemoration. At sites where multiple monument types coexist—such as umbrella-stones, cists, urn burials, and menhirs—variation in scale and complexity suggests that certain individuals or lineages were commemorated more prominently than others. This uneven distribution of effort reveals that memory itself operated within hierarchies, with monumental forms amplifying the social significance of particular ancestors. Through their enduring visibility, such structures naturalized distinctions of status and authority, embedding them within the physical environment and reproducing them across generations.

Continuity of use provides additional insight into the active nature of megalithic memory-making. Archaeological evidence from several South Indian regions indicates reopening of burial structures, multiple interments within the same monument, and prolonged use of cemetery spaces. These practices demonstrate that megaliths were not conceived as sealed tombs but as enduring ancestral loci to which communities returned repeatedly. Each act of reuse renewed the monument's relevance, allowing new generations to insert themselves into existing lineages and renegotiate social identities in response to changing circumstances. Memory in this context was cumulative and dialogic, shaped through ongoing engagement with material traces of the past rather than fixed at the moment of initial construction.

Cemetery organization also reveals how remembrance was spatially structured. Rather than random aggregations of graves, many megalithic burial grounds display patterned arrangements, including clustering of similar monument types, alignment with topographical features, and variation in size within confined areas. Such spatial ordering suggests deliberate planning that encoded relationships among the dead while simultaneously structuring social interaction among the living. Cemeteries functioned as collective memoryscapes—material archives in which lineage histories, territorial claims, and communal identities were visually

inscribed and publicly accessible. The coexistence of different burial forms within the same site further indicates that remembrance strategies could operate simultaneously at multiple social levels.

Regional diversity does not contradict this interpretation but highlights locally specific expressions of a broadly shared mortuary logic. In Kerala's lateritic midlands, umbrella-stones and hood-stones represent architectural adaptations to available materials, while upland regions exhibit cist burials and dolmenoid structures integrated with settlement landscapes. Rock-cut cave burials, such as those found in central Kerala, demonstrate an alternative technological approach that nonetheless serves similar commemorative functions. Despite differences in form, these monuments share key features—durability, visibility, spatial integration, and evidence of repeated use—indicating convergent strategies for materializing memory across diverse ecological contexts.

Viewed collectively, South Indian megaliths emerge as active agents in the reproduction of social life rather than as passive relics of mortuary ritual. By embedding the dead within prominent and enduring landscape features, communities established material anchors for ancestral narratives, territorial affiliation, and collective identity. These monuments structured how the past was remembered, how authority was legitimized, and how continuity was articulated over time. Memory was therefore not merely preserved in megaliths but continually generated through interaction with them, making megalithic landscapes central arenas of social practice during the Iron Age rather than peripheral ritual domains.

Comparative Perspectives: Megalithic Landscapes, Memory, and Monumentality

A comparative perspective is essential for situating South Indian megalithic landscapes within broader archaeological debates on monumentality, memory, and mortuary practice. However, comparison must move beyond earlier diffusionist models that sought to explain megaliths through migration or cultural borrowing based on morphological similarities. Contemporary archaeological comparison instead emphasizes convergent social strategies, examining how different societies, operating in distinct historical and ecological contexts, independently mobilized monumentality to materialize memory, authority, and social continuity.

Across many regions of the world, megalithic monuments emerge during periods of social transformation marked by changing subsistence strategies, technological innovations, and reconfigured social relations. In Neolithic and Bronze Age Europe, for instance, megalithic tombs have been interpreted as responses to emerging territoriality and collective identity in increasingly sedentary communities (Pratheesh 2025). Rather than serving only as burial places, these monuments structured movement through the landscape, organized ritual gatherings, and anchored claims to land through ancestral presence. Archaeological analyses indicate that monument placement was often carefully calibrated to visibility, intervisibility, and access routes, embedding memory into everyday spatial experience.

A similar logic is evident in African megalithic traditions, though expressed through different material and social forms. In parts of northeastern Africa and the Horn of Africa, stone monuments function as lineage markers, territorial signifiers, and mnemonic anchors for oral histories. Ethnoarchaeological studies highlight that these monuments are not static relics but active reference points used to recall genealogies, adjudicate land claims, and legitimize social authority. The endurance of stone enables memory to persist across generations, stabilizing social knowledge in contexts where written records are absent or marginal.

East and Southeast Asian megalithic landscapes further emphasize the importance of continuity, reuse, and reinterpretation (Nesterkina et al. 2022). In several regions, monuments are periodically re-engaged through ritual activity, modification, or incorporation into later cultural practices. Such long-term engagement suggests that megalithic monuments often function as open mnemonic systems, capable of absorbing new meanings while retaining their ancestral significance. Memory in these contexts is not fixed at the moment of construction but continually reworked through interaction with material forms.

When placed against this broader comparative backdrop, South Indian megalithic landscapes display both strong parallels and significant distinctions. Like their counterparts elsewhere, South Indian megaliths emphasize durability, visibility, and spatial integration, suggesting a shared social logic of materializing memory. Monument placement on ridgelines, plateaus, and liminal zones echoes global patterns where burial monuments occupy transitional or symbolically charged spaces. The clustering of monuments into cemeteries similarly reflects collective strategies of remembrance rather than individual commemoration.

At the same time, the South Indian case is distinguished by its close association with Iron Age technological change and the emergence of complex social formations. Unlike many European megaliths, which predate metallurgy, South Indian megaliths are deeply embedded in a technological landscape shaped by iron production, agrarian expansion, and craft specialization (Wells 2008). This association suggests that monumentality in South India was not only about commemorating ancestry but also about negotiating social differentiation in societies undergoing economic and political transformation.

Another critical distinction lies in the temporal longevity of megalithic practices in South India. Archaeological evidence indicates that megalithic burial traditions persisted well into the early historic period and, in some regions, overlapped with emerging urban centres and long-distance trade networks (Ramya & Bari 2022). This prolonged continuity contrasts with regions where megalithic monument construction was relatively time-bound. The extended lifespan of South Indian megalithic traditions underscores their adaptability as mnemonic frameworks capable of accommodating changing social realities.

Comparison also highlights differences in the relationship between megaliths and writing. In regions where written records emerged early, monuments often coexist with textual forms of memory, sometimes diminishing the centrality of material commemoration (Abhayan 2018; Peter 2015). In South India, however, megalithic practices flourished largely in pre-literate or minimally literate contexts. As a result, stone monuments assumed heightened importance as durable memory media, compensating for the absence of textual archives. This condition intensified the mnemonic role of landscapes, making material forms central to the transmission of social knowledge.

Importantly, comparison reveals that megalithic monuments do not convey universal meanings despite shared material strategies. Monumentality does not automatically signify hierarchy, nor does burial elaboration always correlate directly with social rank. Instead, meanings emerge through local historical contexts and social practices. In South India, variability in burial architecture and assemblages reflects not only inequality but also differing modes of remembering, shaped by lineage structure, regional ecology, and interaction networks (Bauer & Johansen 2022). Comparative analysis thus cautions against reductive interpretations while reinforcing the interpretive value of memory-oriented frameworks.

By situating South Indian megalithic landscapes within this wider comparative field, the present study indicates that these monuments are neither isolated nor derivative phenomena.

They represent a regionally specific articulation of a broader human strategy: the use of durable material forms to anchor memory, stabilize social relations, and negotiate continuity during periods of change. Comparison, in this sense, strengthens rather than dilutes the South Indian case, highlighting its analytical relevance for global archaeological discussions on mortuary landscapes and social memory.

This comparative engagement ultimately reinforces the central argument of the article. Megalithic landscapes in South India were not passive reflections of social organization but active arenas in which memory, identity, and power were materially produced and contested. By recognizing both shared logics and local specificities, the study positions South Indian megaliths as crucial contributions to the archaeology of memory, landscape, and monumentality.

Implications, Methodological Reflections, and Limits of Interpretation

The interpretive framework advanced in this article—combining social memory with landscape archaeology—has implications that extend beyond the specific case of South Indian megaliths. At a methodological level, it suggests how mortuary monuments can be analysed not merely as reflections of social organisation but as active media through which memory, identity, and authority were materially produced. This approach shifts analytical emphasis from typology and chronology toward spatial practice, durability, and long-term engagement, offering a means of interpreting protohistoric societies where textual evidence is limited or absent.

One of the principal methodological contributions of this study lies in its treatment of landscape as an active component of social memory rather than as a neutral setting. By foregrounding monument placement, visibility, clustering, and reuse, the analysis moves beyond site-based interpretation to examine how memory was embedded in lived environments. This perspective is particularly productive for megalithic studies, where monuments are often spatially prominent but analytically isolated from their surrounding contexts. Integrating landscape-scale analysis allows mortuary practices to be understood as part of broader social strategies involving movement, territoriality, and everyday engagement with ancestral presence.

At the same time, the memory-oriented approach adopted here avoids treating monuments as transparent expressions of belief or ideology. Social memory, as used in this study, is not equated with shared mental representations alone but is understood as a materially mediated process shaped by practice, repetition, and selective emphasis. This distinction is crucial, as it prevents the interpretation of megaliths from slipping into speculative symbolism detached from archaeological evidence. Memory is inferred here not from assumed meanings but from material durability, spatial patterning, and long-term reuse—features that are archaeologically observable and analytically tractable.

Nevertheless, the interpretation of megalithic landscapes as memory-making practices is not without limitations. The absence of contemporary textual sources for much of the South Indian Iron Age constrains direct access to indigenous categories of remembrance, ancestry, and ritual meaning. Mortuary symbolism is inherently multivalent, and similar material forms may have carried different meanings across regions or periods. This study therefore does not claim to reconstruct specific beliefs or cosmologies associated with megalithic monuments. Instead, it advances a more cautious claim: that these monuments functioned as durable anchors for social memory, regardless of the precise symbolic content attached to them.

Another limitation concerns the uneven quality of archaeological documentation across regions. Many megalithic sites were recorded during early surveys with limited contextual data, while later excavations vary in methodological rigor. This unevenness restricts fine-grained comparison and necessitates reliance on broader spatial and material patterns rather than detailed intra-site analysis. The interpretive framework employed here partially mitigates this constraint by focusing on landscape-scale regularities—such as monument placement and reuse—that remain visible even in imperfect datasets. Nonetheless, future research would benefit from systematically integrating high-resolution spatial data to refine these interpretations.

The analytical emphasis on memory-making also raises the question of agency: whose memories were materialized through megalithic monuments? While variability in monument size and elaboration suggests differential commemoration, archaeological evidence alone cannot always distinguish between individual, lineage-based, or communal modes of remembrance. This ambiguity is acknowledged rather than resolved, as it reflects a broader challenge in mortuary archaeology. Rather than forcing a singular social explanation, the framework adopted here accommodates multiple scales of memory-making, allowing for the coexistence of household, lineage, and community-level commemorative practices within the same landscape.

Importantly, the approach outlined in this article is not intended as a universal model for interpreting all megalithic traditions. Megalithic monuments emerge in diverse historical contexts, and their meanings cannot be assumed to be identical across regions. The value of the South Indian case lies in its ability to illustrate how memory-making through monumentality operated within a specific constellation of Iron Age technological change, agrarian expansion, and emerging social differentiation. The framework is therefore best understood as theoretically transferable rather than universally prescriptive, inviting application and modification in other contexts rather than direct replication.

This perspective opens several avenues for future research. Systematic spatial analyses using GIS-based visibility and movement studies could further clarify how monument placement structured everyday encounters with the past. Closer integration of settlement archaeology with mortuary landscapes would help illuminate how living communities related to ancestral spaces over time. Micro-regional studies focusing on single river valleys or ecological zones could refine understanding of local strategies of remembrance, while heritage-oriented research could explore how contemporary communities engage—often unconsciously—with megalithic landscapes as part of inherited memory scopes.

By explicitly acknowledging both its interpretive strengths and its limits, this study positions itself within a reflective and methodologically transparent archaeological practice. Rather than offering definitive explanations, it seeks to suggest how a memory- and landscape-oriented approach can generate more nuanced and socially grounded interpretations of megalithic monuments. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates on mortuary archaeology, social memory, and landscape studies, setting the stage for a concluding synthesis of the article's broader arguments and contributions.

Conclusion

This article has examined South Indian megalithic landscapes through the combined lenses of social memory and landscape archaeology in order to move beyond descriptive and culture-

historical interpretations of mortuary monuments. Rather than treating megaliths as static funerary structures or chronological markers, the study has argued that they functioned as active memory-making practices through which Iron Age communities materially negotiated ancestry, identity, and social continuity.

By situating megalithic monuments within lived landscapes, the analysis has indicated that burial practices were embedded in everyday spatial experience. Monument placement, visibility, clustering, and long-term reuse reveal deliberate strategies through which memory was anchored in durable material forms. These strategies likely enabled the sustained social presence of the dead, transforming landscapes into mnemonic arenas that mediated relationships between past and present. Memory, in this sense, was not merely preserved but continuously produced through engagement with monumentality and space.

The article has further shown that variability in megalithic architecture and material assemblages should not be understood solely as evidence of cultural diversity or environmental adaptation. Instead, such variability reflects differentiated modes of remembrance shaped by social hierarchy, lineage structure, and historical context. Monumentality selectively amplified certain pasts while marginalizing others, embedding social distinctions into the landscape and reproducing them through commemorative practice. In doing so, megalithic landscapes became central to the social reproduction of Iron Age communities.

Comparative engagement with megalithic traditions beyond South India has reinforced the analytical value of this interpretation. While regional contexts differ, the use of durable material forms to anchor memory and legitimize social relationships emerges as a shared human strategy rather than a diffusion-driven phenomenon. The South Indian case, distinguished by its association with Iron Age technological change and long-term continuity, suggests how memory-making through monumentality can operate within dynamic social and economic transformations.

Methodologically, the study contributes to archaeological scholarship by illustrating the analytical potential of integrating social memory with landscape-scale interpretation. This approach offers a means of addressing the interpretive challenges posed by protohistoric societies, where textual evidence is limited and material culture assumes heightened significance as a medium of social knowledge. By focusing on spatial practice, durability, and reuse, the framework avoids speculative symbolism while remaining sensitive to the social dimensions of material remains.

In emphasizing both interpretive possibilities and evidentiary limits, the article advances a balanced and reflective reading of South Indian megaliths. It does not claim to reconstruct specific belief systems but indicates how mortuary monuments functioned as durable anchors for collective memory. The conclusions reached here invite further research that integrates high-resolution spatial analysis, settlement archaeology, and micro-regional studies to refine understanding of how memory, landscape, and social organization intersected in the past.

Ultimately, this study positions South Indian megalithic landscapes as analytically significant beyond their regional context. By foregrounding memory-making as a material and spatial process, it contributes to wider archaeological debates on monumentality, mortuary practice, and the social construction of the past. In doing so, it underscores the importance of reading landscapes not merely as settings for human activity but as active participants in the production of social memory and historical meaning.

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