

# Megaliths off the Coast of Tranquebar

Sila Tripati

Marine Archaeology Centre  
National Institute of Oceanography  
Dona Paula, Goa 403 004  
Email: sila@nio.org

The Megalithic culture succeeds the Neolithic in South India and includes a variety of commemorative monuments consisting either of large stone blocks or small cairns. The Tamil term *pandukal* (old stone) is the traditional designation given to these burials in several parts of South India (Leshnik 1974). Manimekhalai, a Sangam epic, mentions that the dead were either cremated or exposed to the elements, or the body was buried in pits in subterranean

vaults. Sometimes the corpse was placed inside a burial urn which was covered with a lid (Ghosh 1989).

In Tamil Nadu, megaliths belong to a period dating from 1000 B.C. to the third century A.D. A cairn circle usually contains pottery and the personal belongings of the dead. The body remains in a pit covered with a capstone, and small boulders are arranged in a circular fashion over

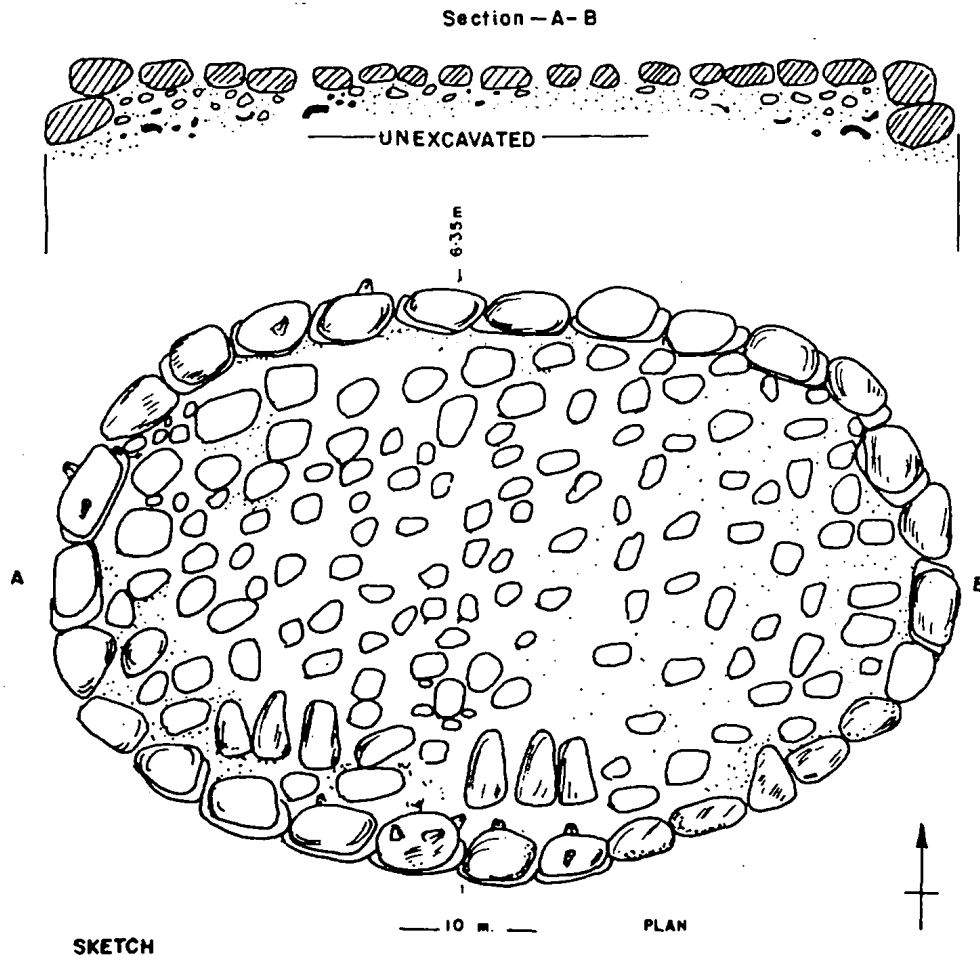


Fig. 1: Cairn circle in the sea off Tranquebar

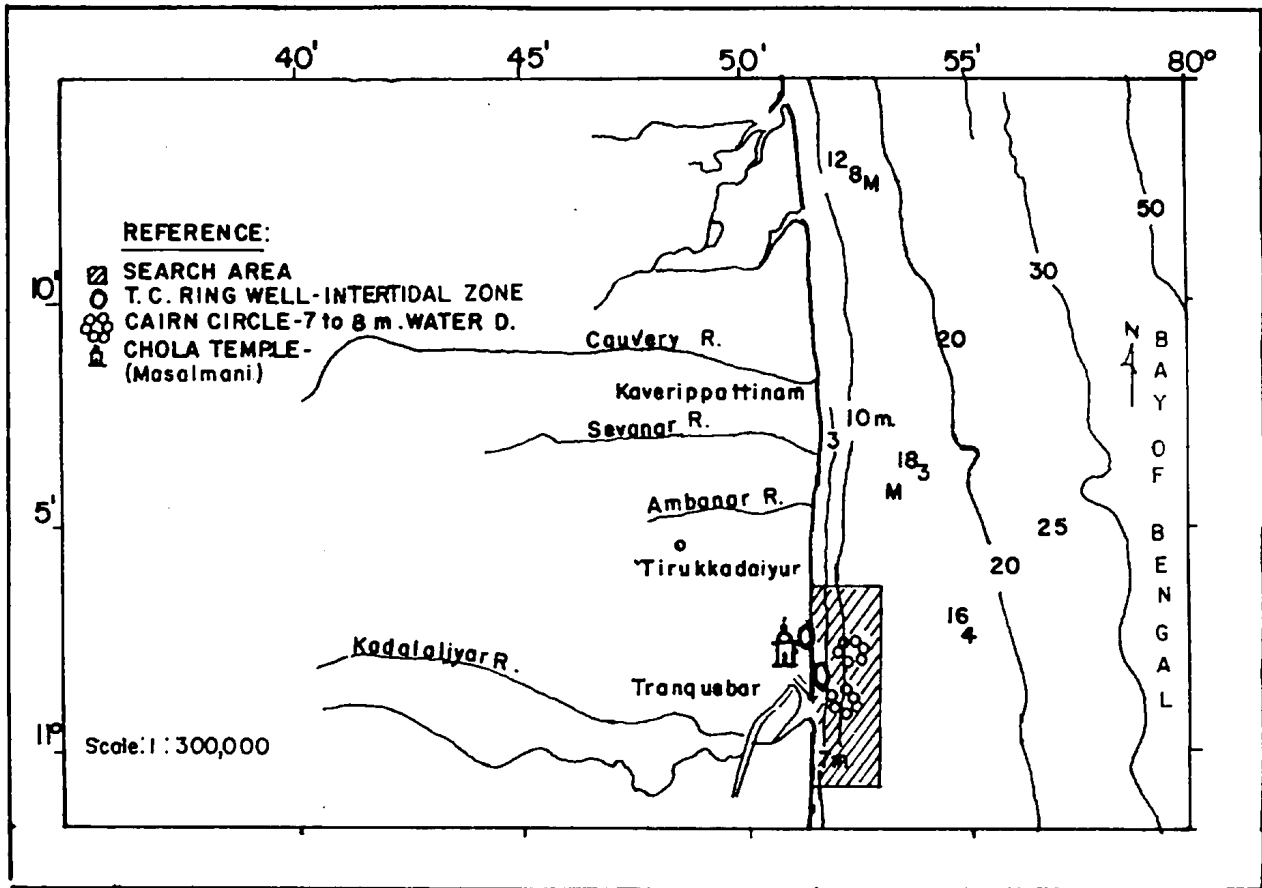


Fig. 2: Offshore study area of the Tamil Nadu coast

it. These monuments were built in order to pay homage to the dead.

Submerged cairn circles around Tranquebar, on the east coast of India (Fig. 1), were noticed for the first time during marine archaeological explorations in 1990. This notes describes the methods employed in underwater exploration, the location of megalithic cairn circles and their archaeological importance.

In order to search for anomalous objects on the sea floor (Fig. 2), a marine geophysical survey was conducted off the coast, near Masalamani temple, with the help of an echo sounder and a side scan sonar. The echo sounder indicated the depth of water at regular intervals, and the side scan sonar showed objects that lay on the sea bed. In order to confirm the data recorded on these two instruments, diving was undertaken up to depths of 7 to 8 m off the Masalamani temple of Tranquebar (Rao 1991). A circular search pattern of manual exploration was followed due to poor visibility in this area.

The diving operation revealed the presence of small boulders arranged in a circular fashion. The average diameter of the circles is 10 to 15 m. Interestingly, cairn circles of the same diameter are also found on land.

It is inferred that, in Tranquebar, human habitation initially extended up to the area that is presently under 8 m of water, which represents the encroachment of the sea (Rao 1991). Besides the megaliths, terracotta ring wells of the third and fourth centuries A.D. as well as Chola and Danish coins have been found in Tranquebar. The descriptions of Silappadikaram concern human settlements on the shore that have been swallowed by the sea. Hence much that is referred to in the Sangam text is not poetic imagination, but historical fact.

The boulders of the submerged cairn consist of metamorphosed-anorthosite gneisses of the Archaean series (R.R. Nair and V. Purnachandra Rao, personal communication) Generally this rock type is found near Pattalur on the Kaveri river, and from Sittampudi to Suryaputti in Salem, as also around Kadavur in Tiruchirapalli District of Tamil Nadu (Krishnan 1968).

The boulders are covered with shells which have been cemented in a beach environment. The sediment sample, containing sand, indicates that a high energy environment prevailed at the site (R.R. Nair and V. Purnachandra Rao, personal communication).

These megaliths can be compared with those of the adjacent area, especially Korkai and Punjeri in

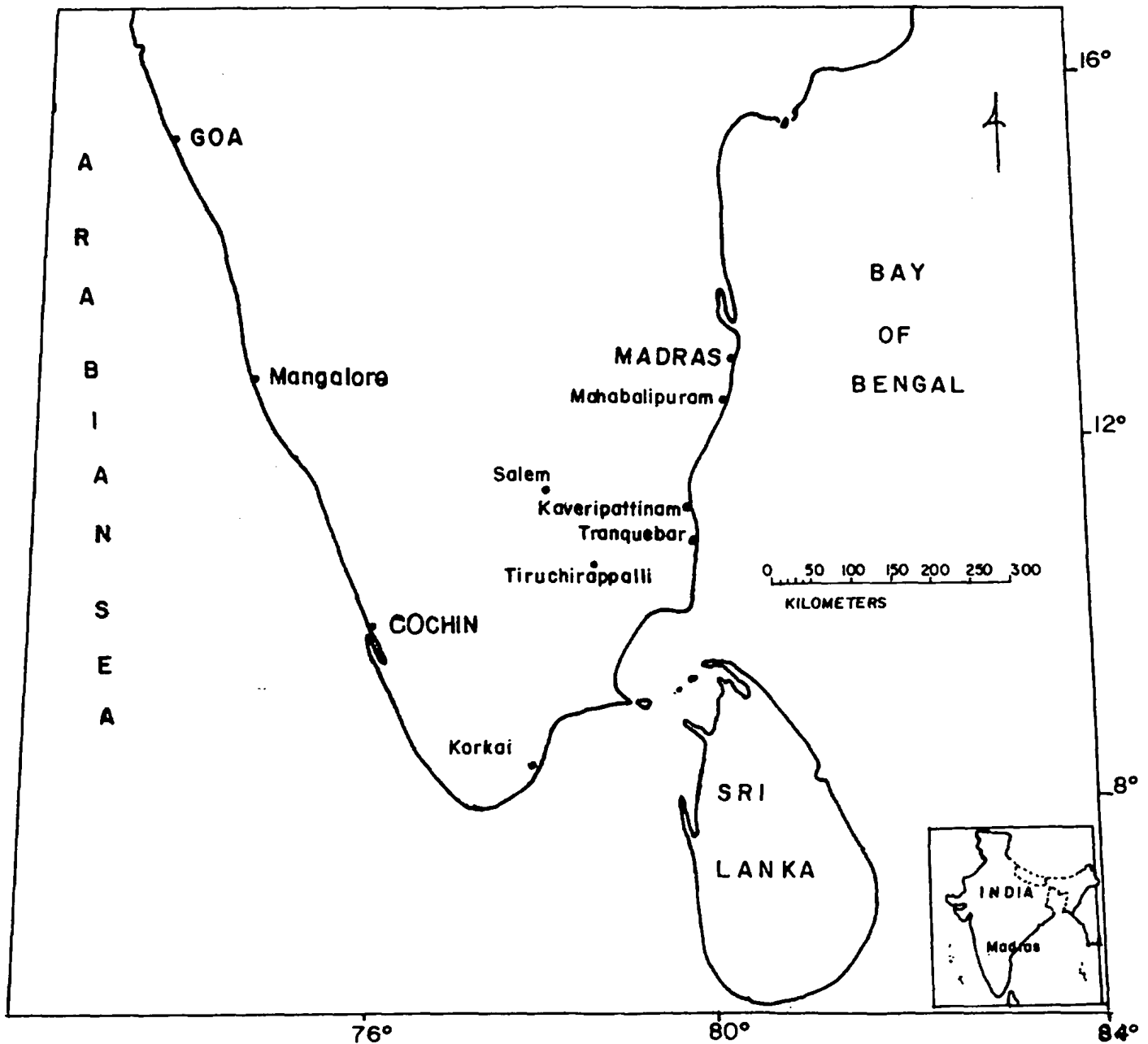


Fig. 3: Location map showing the area of study

Mamallapuram (Fig. 4). Urn burials were found at Manigramam, to the north-west of Melaiyur, and to the south-west of Melapperumpallam. Red ware was found at both the places.

Korkai, an ancient Pandyan port, was famous for pearl fishing, as mentioned in the Sangam literature (Ghosh 1989), but the sea has now receded five miles (Leshnik 1974). The excavation at Korkai has revealed megalithic urn burials, terracotta ring-wells and Chola coins (Nagaswamy 1971). Stone circles and urn burials have also been found in the vicinity of Punjeri, the city of the Pallavas of Mamallapuram (Dayalan 1987).

The megaliths of Tranquebar may be of an earlier period as they are presently submerged in 7 m of water, which can be accounted for by sea-level changes.

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Fig. 4: Boulders of the cairn circle

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