
Protohistoric Megaliths or Graves of Chalukyan Artisans? New Discovery of a Megalithic Site Near Pattadakal

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Received: 21 July 2019; Revised: 01 September 2019; Accepted: 05 October 2019

Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology 7 (2019): 135-158

Abstract: *I report the discovery of a hitherto unreported megalithic site near Pattadakal. The cluster of megalithic monuments, all of them stone circles, are located in a clearing on a hilltop, surrounded by rocky outcrops, at a location called Motara Maradi, which was one of the sandstone quarries of the Early Chalukyan artisans who built the group of temples at Pattadakal. I compare the megaliths with other known megalithic structures in the region, and speculate whether the megaliths belong to the protohistoric period to which the large majority of south Indian megaliths are attributed to, or could they have been the graves of the Early Chalukyan artisans who lived and worked at the quarry.*

Keywords: Pattadakal, Megaliths, Motara Maradi, Stone Circles, Irregular Polygonal Chambers, Badami Chalukyas, Chalukyan Quarries

Introduction

The Valley of the River Malaprabha, in the vicinity of the well-known sites of temple architecture at Badami, Pattadakal and Aihole also contains a large number of megalithic monuments (Gururaja Rao 1972, Sundara 1975, Menon 2012, Kadambi 2011, Menon and Padigar 2018). The early temples in the region were mostly built during the period of Early Chalukyan rule spanning the sixth to eighth centuries AD. The megalithic monuments are believed to predate these, though several instances of temples in close proximity to, and within, megalithic sites, have given rise to speculations of contemporaneity of, and continuity between, these monument types (Morrison 2009, Kadambi 2011, Menon 2014).

During a visit to one of the Early Chalukyan sandstone quarries at a location called Motara Maradi, near Pattadakal, on 22 August, 2013, we noticed a group of stone circles which resembled megaliths. Due to their presence within the Chalukyan quarry, the fragmentary nature of some of the stone used in demarcating the stone circles, and the presence nearby, of what appeared to be squarish bases of tenements of the Early Medieval quarry workers, we were unsure whether the stone circles were megalithic in nature or the bases of circular huts built by quarry workers near their workplace.

However, upon seeing the structure of a vandalized stone circle, we were inclined to recognize the stone circles as megaliths. We returned on 18 January 2018 to count and survey the megaliths, and the results of these studies are summed up below.

The Megalithic Site at Motara Maradi

Motara Maradi is one of the three known sandstone quarries near Pattadakal utilized by the Early Chalukyan artisans for sourcing materials for the group of temples there (Menon 2014, Kuppa and Menon 2018). It was reported by Venkateshiah and others (Singh 2009), along with another quarry at a place called Shankaralingana Gundu, close by. The quarry site (Figure 1) is on top of a rocky spur projecting from the main sandstone range running E-W of the cluster of temples at Pattadakal, and is located at an aerial distance of 2.9km N-N-W of the temples.



Figure 1: Motara Maradi is on top of the rocky spur to the left, projecting from the main sandstone ranges in the background

The route to the quarry site is a scramble up the southern slope of the spur, and leads to a large vertical cliff with inscriptions in eighth century AD Kannada script and a depiction of what appears to be an axe, which was probably the symbol of the guild which owned the quarry (Figure 2). Just before this spot are a few aggregations of sandstone blocks arranged in rectangular forms (Figure 3), which seem to be the bases for walls of dwellings, possibly of the artisans who worked the quarry in the 8th century. These enclosures measure roughly 2m x 2.5m with wall thicknesses of 60-70cm. There are also much larger rectangular enclosures of similar construction (Figure 4), which are probably the bases of “dormitory” like dwellings for large numbers of workers, nearer to the cliff face with the inscriptions.

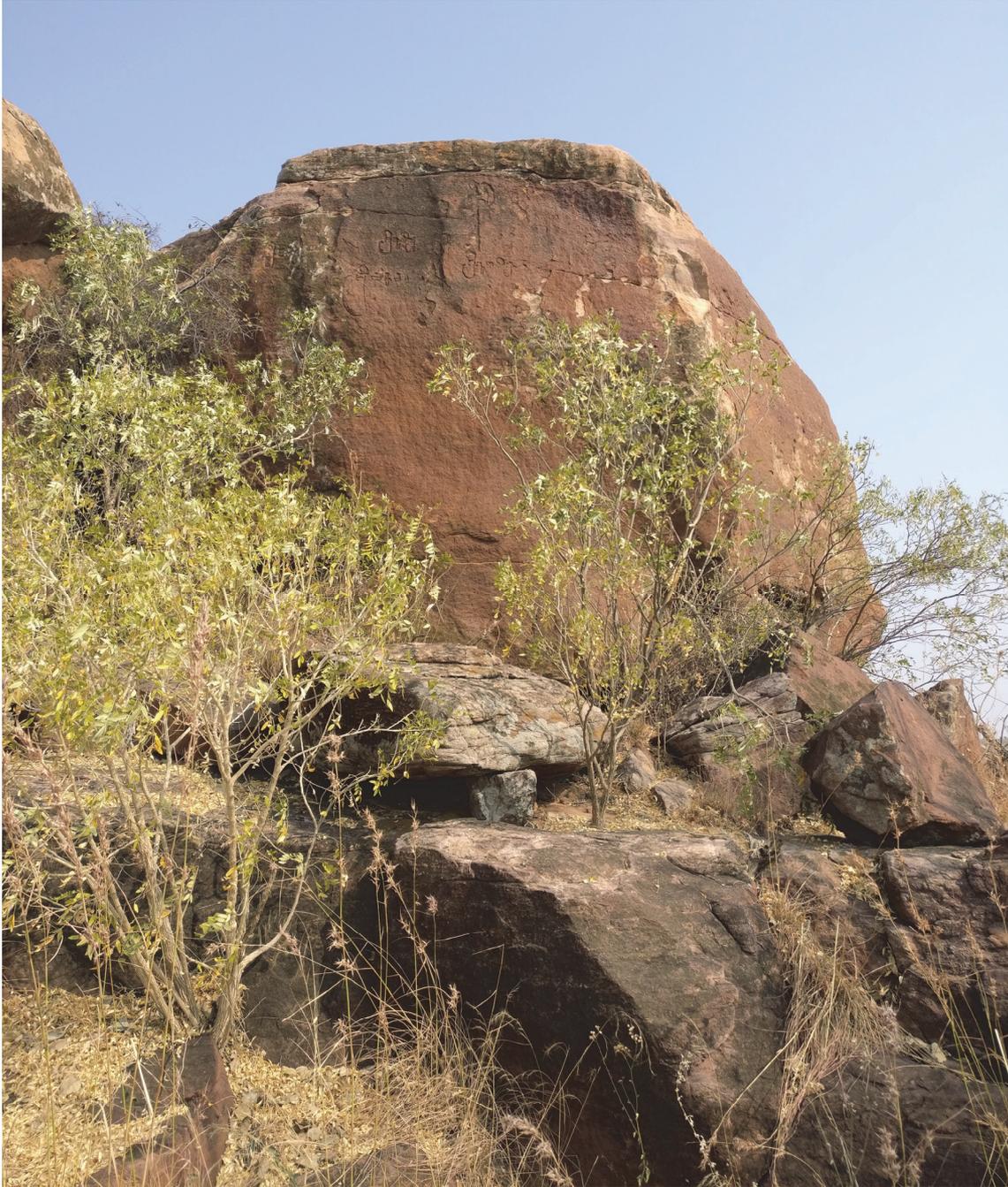


Figure 2: A large cliff face with inscriptions and the depiction of an axe at Motara Maradi

From this area, there is a spectacular view of the valley below (Figure 5), and one can see the cluster of temples at Pattadakal beside the sweep of the Malaprabha River (Figure 6), some of which definitely utilized the stone quarried at this location. The main area of quarrying is concentrated on the sandstone outcrops immediately to the west and north of the cliff with inscriptions. Signs of ancient quarrying can be encountered throughout this area, comprising of wedge holes and wedge marks, quarried blocks and slabs (Figure 7).



Figure 3: An arrangement of rubble which could have been the base for a residential structure at the Early Chalukyan quarry at Motara Maradi



Figure 4: Base of a larger structure which could have been a dormitory type of accommodation for quarry workers



Figure 5: The view towards south from Motara Maradi



Figure 6: The Malaprabha River and the group of temples at Pattadakal, as seen from Motara Maradi



Figure 7: Quarried blocks of stone bearing wedge holes and wedge marks

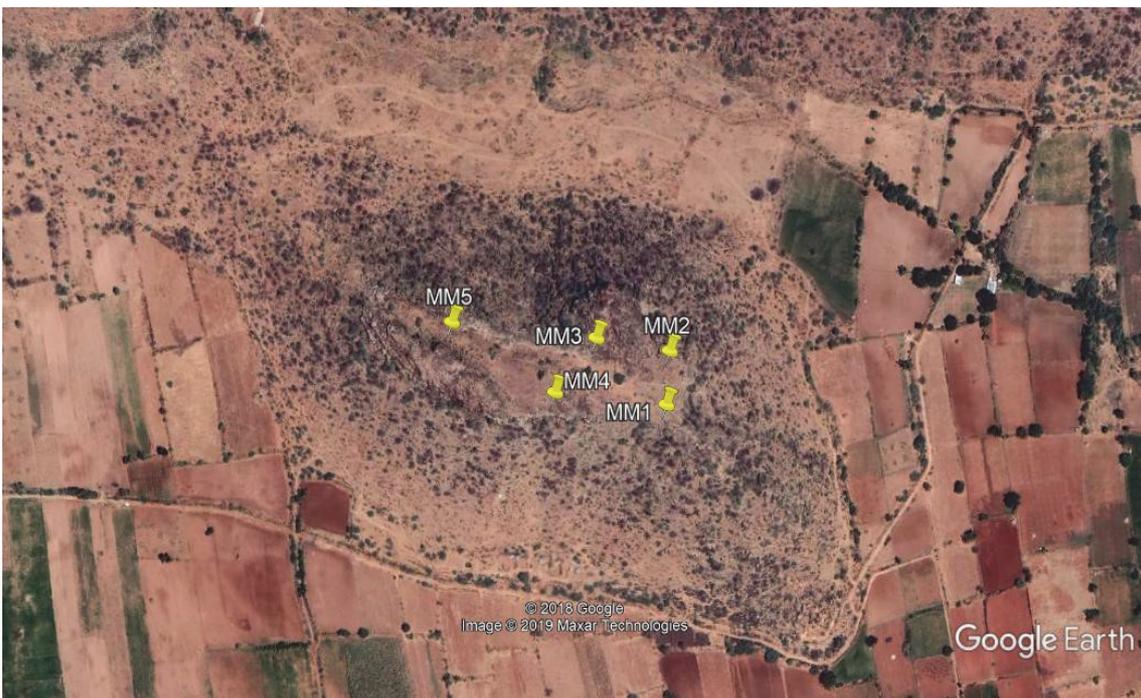


Figure 8: A satellite image of the site at Motara Maradi. All the megaliths are distributed within the area defined by the pins MM3, MM4 and MM5. The cliff face with inscriptions is near MM2, and the residential structures are near MM1



Figure 9: A view of the megalithic site from the sandstone outcrop bounding it on the east



Figure 10: A view of the megalithic site from the sandstone outcrop bounding it on the west



Figure 11: A dense grouping of stone circles, in the southern part of the site



Figure 12: A more spaced out grouping of stone circles, in the northern part of the site

In a clearing on the top of the spur, about 120m to the west of the cliff with inscriptions, and measuring roughly 130m in the E-W direction and a maximum of 55m in the N-S direction (Figure 8), are distributed 19 stone circles, with 5 of them enclosing cairns. This clearing is bound by two large outcrops of sandstone in the S-E and S-W corners (Figures 9, 10). The stone circles are more densely clustered towards the southern part of the clearing, in the space bounded by these two outcrops (Figure 11), and more sparsely spaced out in other parts (Figure 12). Individual circles are quite loosely defined, using stone blocks of varying size, from a few very large blocks to numerous smaller pieces (Figure 13).



Figure 13: A closer view of one of the stone circles, clearly showing stone blocks of various sizes and stone chips which define the circle



Figure 14: One of the stone circles which measures 2.6m (inner diameter). Most circles at the site are of this size



Figure 15: A stone circle with associated cairn material



Figure 16: Two of the IPC's at the site



Figure 17: Closer view of one of the IPC's in Figure 16



Figure 18: Closer view of the other IPC in Figure 16



Figure 19: The third IPC at the site, near the N-W corner



Figure 20: A closer view of the IPC-like structure at the base of the cliff with inscriptions shown in Figure 2

The stone circles are mostly around 2.6m in inner diameter (Figure 14) and, as mentioned, five of the nineteen circles have cairn material associated with them (Figure 15). Apart from the stone circles with or without associated cairns, there are four structures that could be termed irregular polygonal chambers (or IPC's) from the classification of Sundara (1975). Two of them (Figure 16) are near the cliff with inscriptions, towards the N-E corner of the distribution of megaliths. IPC's usually consist of a natural boulder or a quarried slab propped up on one or more smaller boulders with the gaps beneath plugged with chips of stone, leaving a small opening. In the case of these possible IPC's at Motara Maradi, one of them (Figure 17) consists of a large slab-like boulder propped up on a smaller rock, while the other (Figure 18) consists of a large boulder propped up on four smaller rocks. The third IPC-like structure (Figure 19) at this site is also a large boulder, propped up on a single smaller rock, located towards the N-W corner of the megalithic site. In all these cases, there is no scatter of stone chips, which might have been used to define an enclosure, in the near vicinity. The other structure (Figure 20) which resembles an IPC is situated at the base of the cliff with inscriptions, also discernible in Figure 2.

Known Megalithic Sites Near the Malaprabha Valley

There are many megalithic sites reported from the Malaprabha Valley. They are at Meguti Hill (Gururaja Rao 1972, Sundara 1975, Menon 2014), Ramalingeshwara Hill (Kadambi 2011, Menon 2014), near Galaganatha Temple (Sundara 1975, Menon 2014), Kyaddigere (Sundara 1975, Menon 2012), Benakanawari (Padigar 2004, Menon and Padigar 2018), Bachinnagudda (Sundara 1975, Menon 2012), Akkaragal (Sundara 1975) Gajendragad (Sundara 1975), Guligudda (probably Guledgudda, Gururaja Rao 1972) etc.

The megaliths at Meguti Hill are mostly dolmens (Figure 21) and IPC's (Figure 22). The megaliths at Ramalingeshwara Hill, south of the temple complex are IPC's (Figure 23) and cairns, one of them associated with hero stones (Figure 24), and another encompassing a passage grave (Figure 25). One megalith located near a temple of the Galaganatha group (Figure 26) has been shown to be an IPC like the one in Figure 23, which was later modified by the temple builders, by Menon (2014). The Galaganatha group is situated very close to the Ramalingeshwara group, and it is conjectured (Menon 2014) that the two temple groups were located within a large megalithic field. The megaliths at Kyaddigere were mostly boulder circles and cairns, some of them enclosing chambers (Sundara 1975), possibly like the one in Figure 25, but unfortunately, all of these were destroyed in 2008 in land clearance operations (Menon 2012). The megaliths at the megalithic site between Benakanawari and Siddhana Kolla consist of cairns (Figure 27) and IPC's (Figure 28) and very few low dolmens. There are only two megaliths surviving at Bachinnagudda, of which one is a dolmen built of granite slabs (Figure 29) and the other, of sandstone.

The megaliths of Akkaragal seem to have been mostly port-holed dolmenoid cists, but they were in utter ruins even when Sundara (1975) noticed them. The megaliths at

Gajendragad are all pit burials, some of them with disturbed stone circles bounding them (Sundara 1975) and remnants of cairns. The megalithic types encountered at Guledgudda are cairns with low dolmenoid cists (Gururaja Rao 1972).



Figure 21: One of the dolmens at Meguti Hill, Aihole, built of sandstone slabs



Figure 22: An IPC at Meguti Hill



Figure 23: An IPC at Ramalingeshwara Hill, Aihole, located to the south of the temple group



Figure 24: A cairn with hero stones on Ramalingeshwara Hill



Figure 25: A cairn with a passage chamber on Ramalingeshwara Hill

As can be seen, there are various megalithic types encountered in this region – ranging from simple pit burials and low cairns enclosing chambers, to large and elaborately conceived dolmens. The megaliths of the newly discovered site at Motara Maradi, which are stone circles with or without cairns, appear different from most of the other sites in that they use stone blocks of varying size – from big blocks to small fragments, though similarity with some of the cairns (for instance, Figure 27) at Benakanawari-Siddhana Kolla site can be noticed.

Discussion

The first impression on viewing the stone circles at Motara Maradi was that they might have been the bases of circular huts built by the Chalukyan quarry workers for housing. This is mainly because, in contrast to other known stone circles (Moorti 2008), the stones used to demarcate the circle are not boulders of uniform or at least similar size, and seem to consist of dressed stones of moderate size, as well as smaller blocks and even chips, which appear to be by-products of dressing (Figure 30). This opinion was also echoed by Sundara (personal communication, 2016). Local legend in the region speaks about Motara Maradi being the site of an old settlement called “Motara Ooru”, which was one of the three settlements that relocated to form the settlement at Pattadakal.

The clustering of the stone circles, to the south and west of the quarried area, separate from the oblong structures which were probably the bases of tenements of the quarry workers, does suggest that they are different in nature, and it is possible that they are

graves. An examination of two stone circles vandalized by local treasure hunters (Figures 31, 32) showed similarity with megalithic stone circles encountered elsewhere, with the larger stones defining the circle closely spaced (Figure 31) and rubble and chipped stone pieces scattered outside it. Unfortunately, paucity of time did not permit a thorough examination of the material which had been dug out. Only excavation can help settle the issue if indeed these are megalithic graves, and, from which period. If proved so, these structures can make a case for classification, under megalithic monuments, as “rubble circle” rather than stone circle!



Figure 26: A dolmen behind one of the temples of the Galaganatha group at Aihole



Figure 27: A cairn at the megalithic site near Benakanawari and Siddhana Kolla



Figure 28: IPC's at the megalithic site near Benakanawari and Siddhana Kolla



Figure 29: The granite dolmen at Bachinnagudda



Figure 30: A stone circle at Motara Maradi, which seems to have made use of some dressed blocks of sandstone



Figure 31: One of the vandalized stone circles at Motara Maradi



Figure 32: Another vandalized stone circle at Motara Maradi



Figure 33: A closer view of the vandalized megalith shown in Figure 32, where the closely fitted large stones defining the circle can be clearly seen

Because the stone circles employ rubble of various sizes, seemingly the by-products of stone working, is it possible that they are the graves of the artisans who worked in the quarry during the period of Early Chalukyan rule? This is a definite possibility, given the unique form of these stone circles, distinct from other known megalithic stone circles, and their proximity to the quarried area. It must be remarked, however, that no wedge marks – which are indisputable evidence of involvement of stone-cutters of the Chalukyan period, were encountered on any of the blocks defining the stone circles. Also, similar structures, or, for that matter, even the bases of residential structures, are not seen in the other two quarries near Pattadakal, which also belong to the Chalukyan period.

Similarly, the IPC's do not have stone chips or cobbles scattered nearby, like IPC's at sites like Hire Benakal, or Mallasandram, for instance. It is quite likely that they were erected in their current form and were not intended to form chambers. They are also found very close to the quarried area. It is worth exploring the possibility that they were not megaliths in the usual sense, but maybe ritualistic altars of some sort used by the artisans at the quarry. Sundara (1975: 167) has also speculated similarly about a peculiar megalithic structure at Motebennur, though in a different context. The nature

of the IPC shown in Figures 2 and 20, situated at the foot of the vertical cliff face with inscriptions and the guild symbol, is amenable for interpretation as a possible ritual altar for offerings.

Though there are megalithic structures at a number of places in the vicinity of the newly discovered site, as detailed above, which showcase a variety of monument-building traditions, this site at Motara Maradi bears most resemblance to the one near Benakanawari-Siddhana Kolla. There is an urgent requirement to establish the dates of all these megaliths and compare their chronological framework with respect to the early temples in this region. Did the megalith-building tradition begin in the Iron Age, or even earlier periods, and continue even alongside the temple-building traditions?

It is quite likely that the practice of erecting megalithic monuments which are funerary or memorial in nature began in the Malaprabha Valley long before it came under Chalukya rule. It is also likely that this practice continued even during the phase of construction of stone temples in the region subsequently. There have been discussions of the megalithic cultures preceding, as well as co-existing with the temple culture (Kadambi 2011, Menon 2014, Korisettar personal communication 2008). The findings of Menon (2014, 2017) suggest that the early temples of this region were most probably continuing the commemorative traditions represented by the megaliths.

However, these conjectures need to be tested by planned excavations addressing these questions at selected sites in the Malaprabha Valley. This is a very important problem in unraveling the origin and evolution of monument-building traditions in the Malaprabha Valley and one of the great contributions this newly discovered site, with both megaliths and evidence of quarrying in Chalukyan times, could provide. Could the stone circles of Motara Maradi, or rather, the rubble circles, be the graves of the intrepid artisans of Pattadakal?

Conclusion

The newly discovered megalithic site is a cluster of nineteen stone circles, five of them containing cairns, located at Motara Maradi, near Pattadakal in north Karnataka. Motara Maradi is also the site of one of the sandstone quarries which supplied stone for the construction of the temples of Pattadakal. There are also a few structures which look like IPC's. However, the stone circles are made of what appears to be rubble of varying sizes, giving them a unique character different from the usually encountered megalithic stone circles. Excavations are required for establishing whether the megalithic monuments represent an earlier, protohistoric phase of occupation of the site, or whether they belong to the phase of temple building during the period of Early Chalukyan rule in the region, when the area was occupied by the early medieval quarry workers. Establishing the chronology of the megaliths of the Malaprabha Valley is important to understand the history of monument construction in the Valley, and settle the important question whether the construction of megaliths continued alongside the building of the early stone temples of this region. If the stone circles are

indeed the graves of the Early Chalukyan artisans, it is humbling to think of those early artisans who lived, worked and died in modest living conditions on this lonely windswept hillock, creating some of the most enduring masterpieces of Indian architecture.

Acknowledgements

I wish to gratefully acknowledge the considerable, and invaluable help afforded by Somasekhara Kallappa Kudachi of Pattadakal, and Kalakappa of Badami in all my explorations in the Malaprabha Valley. Shrinivas V. Padigar has been a source of support and advice throughout, and I am deeply indebted to him for this. I am also thankful to A. Sundara and Ravi Korisettar for insightful discussions and advice. I thank the Homi Bhabha Fellowships Council for support during the initial visit to Motara Maradi.

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