



New Light on the Unresolved Problem of Megalithic Habitation Sites in Kerala

N Nikhil Das*, P P Joglekar† and R K Mohanty‡

Abstract

This paper is intended to evaluate one of the major research problems in Kerala Archaeology, the absence of a habitation site in the Megalithic (Iron Age Early Historic period) context. Although a number of Megalithic sites have been reported from Kerala, the absence of habitation remains as a lacuna to understand the entire cultural processes of this period. Recent investigations conducted in the eastern fringes of Kerala brought to light habitation evidences associated with burials. This paper discusses problems and misconceptions related to the Megalithic habitation in Kerala on the basis of recent discoveries.

Keywords: Megalithic, Habitation, Iron-age, Early historic, Pottery, Site, Kerala

Introduction

The Megalithic culture is the period when man used huge stones to construct their graves. The tentative period of the Megalithic culture in India can be broadly dated back to ca.1000 BC to ca. 5 century AD. This was the period when iron used extensively for a

* Deccan College Post-Graduate and Research Institute, Yerwada, Pune - 411006, Maharashtra, India; nikhildasn@gmail.com

† Professor in Bioarchaeology, Department of Archaeology, Deccan College (Deemed University), Pune 411 006, India; pramjog@yahoo.co.in

‡ Prof. in Proto & Ancient Indian History, Dept of Archaeology, Deccan College Post Graduate and Research Institute, Yerwada, Pune - 411006, Maharashtra, India.; rabikm@rediffmail.com

number of purposes and hence this culture is also known as Iron Age. The first ever megalithic grave in India was discovered by J J Babington in 1823 from the northern Kerala (Babington 1823). However, Babington's discovery did not inspire other scholars to take up the study of Megaliths on a large scale. Nevertheless, scholars gradually started to pay attention towards the understanding of the Megalithic Culture and this culture has now become one of the most discussed matters in Indian archaeology after the ever green topic of the Harappan civilisation (Wheeler 1948; Leshnik 1974; Rajan 1994, 1997). However, we are still fully unaware of the Megalithic way of life apart from their burial customs. In India, Vidharbha region of Maharashtra and South India have the largest distribution of Megalithic graves, though in north eastern India, it is still a living tradition. In southern India, the Megalithic culture is spread in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Chronologically, the Megalithic culture in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka are prior to the Megaliths of Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

Problem of habitation site

Unlike other south Indian states, one of the major research gaps in Kerala Megalithic is the absence of a habitation site. Although enumerable Megalithic monuments in different architectural models have been discovered from Kerala, there was no tracing of a habitational deposit of the same in Kerala so far. In contrast, other states like Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra and Karnataka often come across habitation deposit both as solitary findings and also along with burial grounds (Sundara 1975; Mohanty 1996; Rajan 1994). Excavations conducted in these habitation sites so far have revealed significant information regarding the Megalithic way of life and their subsistence activities (both plant and animal-based) etc. (Rajan 1994). However, this information is lacking in the context of Kerala as no habitation site has even been discovered yet.

Scholars working on the Megalithic culture of Kerala put forward various theories/reasons for the absence of habitation sites in Kerala. Reasons such as thick population density of Kerala, acidic nature of soil resulting into the perishable nature of materials, and inhospitable environmental settings bringing about the washing

away of the sites etc. have been hypothesised from time to time to explain the absence of the habitation sites in Kerala. In addition, the dearth of systematic archaeological survey and explorations in Kerala has also been cited as one of the reasons (Gurukkal and Varier 1999, Darsana 2010). Furthermore, there is a common presumption among different scholars working in Kerala that the Megalithic people were pastoralist or practised slash and burn cultivation. Due to this way of living and their taboo related to funeral rituals may have persuaded them to migrate from one place to other (Ajith Kumar 2006).

However, recent excavations conducted at the site Pattanam have brought to light on the occurrence of an Iron Age habitation layer. At one of the trenches at the site, one thick sand layer having a thickness of 60 cm containing potsherds of coarse red ware and black-and-red ware was identified. As this layer was succeeded by the Early Historic layer; it is termed as a transitional phase between the Megalithic and the Early Historic period. Although the excavators claimed it as the discovery of Megalithic layer, this site has thrown light more on the nature of Early Historic than the Megalithic. This example is the solitary evidence ascribed to the Megalithic-Iron age period in Kerala (Cherian et al 2009). However, paucity of other cultural materials and immediate succeeding of Early-Historic layer has to be further verified. In fact, it is quite obvious that, there is no serious attempt or problem oriented research has been conducted so far to understand the non-occurrence of Megalithic-Iron age habitation. Thus scholars mostly use grave goods as the sole parameter to understand the Iron Age society. On this background, the present researchers undertook a systematic regional archaeological survey in eastern fringes of Kerala to understand the cultural process of Megalithic people.

Recent findings

Recent Archaeological investigations conducted in the Marayoor Regions of Idukki district by the authors, brought to light a number of Megalithic graves along with two habitation sites. Marayoor is one of the regions in Kerala where the largest concentration of dolmens was found. Therefore, this survey was intended not only to understand the nature of the Megalithic monuments but also to

identify any other cultural traits associated to these burials. As illustrated above, the absence of the habitation sites have intrigued the scholars for a long time. The same problem also struck the authors before this survey. The problem was really intriguing and prompted the authors to ask again and again, how could people construct such large dolmens and cist until or unless these people were having a proper settlement pattern? It was also impossible to believe that if at all habitation was present, in the course of time it must have been perished. Therefore maximum attentions were given to look for habitation sites while visiting burial localities.

Methodology

Keeping the above problem in mind, the researchers formulized a clear-cut survey techniques comprising of village-to-village survey, identification of resource areas by using topographic and geological maps of the region, survey in the water channel, and also spatio-temporal aspects of the Megalithic monuments. Observations were made on the basis of occurrences of habitation site elsewhere in the country. Each locality was recorded by using GPS and Google maps. Trail trenching was also done in one of the site.

Marayoor region

Marayoor (10° 16' 30.6" N; 77° 09' 36.8" E) is located in the north-eastern parts of Devikulam Taluk of Idukki district, bordering Tamilnadu. Marayoor is situated at a distance of 45 km north-east of Munnar and 40 km from the famous town Udumelpet in Tamilnadu. The interstate highway of Munnar Udumelpet runs through Marayoor. This land is well known for its prehistoric rock shelter painting and Megalithic monuments. Marayoor consist one of the parts of the Anjunad Valley (the land of the places/villages), the area lies in the gap formed between both the Anaimali and Palani hill tracts. The probable origin of word Marayoor is, '*Mara*' means hidden and *Ur* means land or village, the land hidden in mountains. Marayoor is famous for its natural growing sandal wood and other forest products (Fig.1).

Environmental settings

Marayoor lies in North South directions on both sides of the Gap between Anamudi hills and Palani Hill tract (Fig.2). This gap has 3 table lands, Manupatti plain, Chinnar and Marayoor. Mountains surrounding these table lands are thick forest with undulated and steep terrain. The high mountains of Western Ghats - Anamudi Ranges - standing as a barrier in its west side and Palani high ranges in south east and Chinnar hills leaning towards the plains in its north are the boundaries of this table lands. Granite, Gneiss, sand stone are the major rock systems. The soil is sandy to sandy loam in texture. The soil reaction varies from slightly alkaline to strongly acidic depending on the vegetation type. Pambar or Pambar is the major river passing through Marayoor. It rises from Anamudi in Eravikulam National Park and flowing towards east through Thalayar and merges with Amaravathi River. The river is passing through gaps and gorges.

Habitation-cum-burial site at Nachivayal

The tiny settlement of Nachivayal (10° 14' 59.0" N; 77° 09' 35.9" E) lies 4 km south-east of Marayoor village in Devikulam Taluk of Idukki District, at an elevation of 943 AMSL (fig.3). This village lies on the right side of Marayoor-Kanthallor road at a distance of 2 km and located on the confluence of river Pambar and Koodavayalar. There are numerous legends associated to the origin of this settlement. At present, this area is occupied by the people from the various places of Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Although scholars have reported a number of dolmens in this locality, but at present, there is not a single dolmen found here (Tampi 1983).

The habitation site

This site (10° 15' 03.8" N; 77° 09' 46.7" E) lies on the north-eastern corner of the present village, surrounded by a private land (at 950 m AMSL) owned by one Mr. Roy Mathew. His 1.5 ha land is locally known as *Nacholi* which is located in the middle of the Marayoor tableland. The habitation site is sloping towards river Koodavayalar in the eastern direction (Fig.4). This small Koodavayalar river is also known as Melaadipuzha or Koodakkadu Odai which rises from the Eravikulam National park

at an altitude of 2000 m AMSL and flows through the south western portion of Chinnar Wildlife sanctuary across the Marayoor Sandal division and merges with Pambar river at Kovilkadavu.

At present, the newly discovered site is under sugarcane cultivation and areca nut plantation. Some of the newly constructed houses and a Christian seminary are located on the eastern slope of the site. Archaeological evidence like potsherds, beads, terracotta objects, stone objects, iron fragments, etc. were found during exploration. Many stone slabs (average dimensions: 1.5 x 0.70 x 0.6 m) were seen in scattered manner, that were perhaps parts of dolmens or cists. Occurrence of large number of potsherds and other cultural materials provided an unambiguous evidence for the possibility of a habitation deposit which might belong to earlier period.

Burial locations

The burial ground at Nachivayal is located at a distance of 400 m to the south of Nachivayal settlement and 300 m south-west of newly discovered habitation site. Four cist burials were discovered within 200 m radius. One of these cists is with a menhir erected in its front. Due to thick vegetation, these burials are inconspicuous and not easily noticeable. All of them were partially disturbed and capstones were missing. Approximate measurements of chamber are 1.50 m (length) x 1 m (width). This chamber is oriented in north-south direction and the menhir was found in the northern side. The menhir erected in front of a Cist was made of an undressed stone which is 1 m in height.

An urn burial was discovered further 700 m south of the burial ground at a place called Manjapattikoda (10° 15' 04:6" N 77° 10' 23:5" E). Here an intact unearthed urn was found from the private land of one Arumughan at Manjapetti. This urn was discovered while clearing the field for the cultivation. It is 0.45 m in diameter at the top and 1.12 m at the base. Middle diameter is 2 m. It is 0.82 m in length and 0.4 m in thickness. A hole has been noticed in the base which measures 14 cm in diameter. Further explorations in the region brought to light six more intact urn burials entombing capstones from nearby forest land.

Surface survey findings

A systematic survey conducted in the habitation site brought to light a number of archaeological materials like pottery, beads, terracotta objects, iron fragments and stone objects, etc. Due to continuous cultivation of paddy, sugarcane and Areca nut, the site has been enormously damaged. Pottery and antiquities were exposed and collected from the surface and artificial terraces made for the cultivation. Potsherds were also found in pits, ditch and rainwater channels.

Beads

Beads made of glass and semi precious stones like quartz were found in the survey. Though the beads are less in number, the context is culturally important signifier. Two quartz beads were found which are bicorn and hexagonal in shape. The glass beads were in spherical, circular, tiny tubular and bicorn shape. Their size varies from 2.25 mm to 16 mm (Fig.5).

Terracotta objects

Terracotta objects found during surface survey were quite varied. These objects consist of terracotta cakes, an ear ring, ear lobes, a hop scotch, sling balls and a few pieces of unidentifiable objects. Terracotta cakes were noticed with thumb impressions. The ear ring is made of coarse fabric with some decoration on the front side. The ear lobes obtained were blackish in colour and of medium fabric. The hop scotch and the gamesman were reddish in colour and well-polished (Fig.6).

Stone Objects

Numbers of grinding stones have been noticed at Nachivayal. These are in different size and shape. A chert tool was found which is of non-local material in this region. A quartz fragment was also found.

Pottery

The ceramics from this site can broadly be classified into two groups: Red ware and Black ware. Although Black-and-Red ware was found in the survey, its quantity remains marginal. Red ware

and Red slipped ware were predominately noticed. These ceramic types are made of slow wheel-made and the fabric is medium to fine, which is having variant texture and colour.

In Red ware two varieties are available: coarse Red ware and Red slipped ware. In coarse Red ware, the fabric is medium to ill-fired and it has coarse grain particles in the core and on the surface. Quality of ware is inferior. Black patches are noticed on the exterior surface. Grooves are found in the neck portion. The Red slipped ware is another type found both in the trial digging and surface findings. The fabric of Red slipped ware is medium to fine. It is a well-fired pottery having incised designs on the neck and body portions. Some of the shapes noticed in the Red ware are; nail-headed pottery, beaded rim with constrained neck and straight shoulder, grooved externally on the neck. Globular pot having simple everted rim, lead-cum-bowls and V-shape bowls were noticed (Fig.7).

In Black ware coarse variety is available and the absence of Black polished ware suggests a later date to the site. Regarding the fabric, this ware has more or less similar features of the Red ware. Main Black wares shapes are jars having flaring or straight neck where the rim is simple or bulbous in nature. Sometimes it is internally under-cut.

Trial trench

Since the materials provided an ample proof for a habitation deposit, it was decided to dig a trial trench. A trench (1 x 1 m) named NVL-1 (10° 15' 03.3" N; 77° 09' 44.7" E) was laid out in the south-western corner of the land at a place where several fragments of potsherds and beads were found on the surface. Due to sloping nature of the land it was decided to open a trench on the maximum elevated area to get a complete stratigraphy of the site. Three layers were located in 1 m depth of the trench.

The first layer measured 30 cm in thickness and yielded a number of potsherds of red ware. These shreds were medium in fabric, bowls and dishes of simple, everted and beaded rim, including body portions were found (Figs. 9-11). Soil is blackish in colour and loose in texture. Total 900 gm potsherds were unearthed from this

layer. The second layer has thickness of 30 cm (at 31-61 cm depth) and it has many fragments of potsherds of both Black ware and Red ware variety. Soil was light brownish and hard in nature. Most of the potsherds obtained from this layer are of Red ware, Red slipped ware and Black ware. Some of the shreds looked like they were burnished. In contrast to other layers, this has yielded about 4.50 kg potsherds of different variety. Few artifacts like iron fragments, a glass bead of tiny tubular shape, a gamesman and unidentifiable terracotta object was also found. The third and last layer (thickness 30 cm) contains the same pottery assemblage as of the previous layer. However, the quantity of potsherds was equal to layer 1. No antiquity was retrieved from this lot. It was noticed from the trail dig was, this site has undergone massive destruction due to continuous agriculture.

Alampetti

The habitation site at Alampetti (10° 18' 47.3" N 77° 10' 51. 8" E) lies at an altitude of 1034 MSL which is 7 km northeast of Marayoor town on the left side of Marayoor Chinnar road. This area has yielded numerous cultural monuments like dolmens, cists, rock shelter paintings etc. Topographically Alampetti is located in the lower fringes of Anamalai hills which is overlooking to Chinnar. There are several small streams and rivulets that drained this region. At present, the tribe of Malapulaya (also Known as Hill Pulayas) inhabit the region of Alampetti.

Habitation site

Evidence of habitation was noticed in a private land owned by Mr. Eswaran, a resident of Alampetti settlement in Chinnar Wildlife Sanctuary. This site is located about 1 km west of Alampetti settlement and close to the vazhathura dolmen site (Fig.8). This site was noticed from a 2.5 hectares land which was cleared for coffee plantation. A number of potsherds of black-and-red ware, red ware, red slipped ware, black polished ware etc. were found in a pit dug by the land owner. This pit was documented and potsherds were examined. Some potsherds were also collected from the surface where these were lying scattered. Explorations conducted

in and around the site brought to light similar evidences of potsherds along with other antiquities like beads and stone objects.

Pottery

Potsherds found during the survey can be broadly classified into two groups, i.e., red ware and black ware. In the category of red ware, there are varieties comprised of red ware, black-and-red ware and red slipped ware. While in the category of black ware, the main type found was black polished ware. These potteries are made of wheel thrown technique and fabric is medium to fine (Fig.9). In the case of black-and-red ware, the ware is mostly plain with occasional grooves on the exterior. Some of the shapes observed in this ware are bowls and dishes. Rimless or incipient rim shreds were mostly present. Due to the poor firing these pottery did show variations in colour. Red ware potteries are found more or else similar in fabric to the black-and-red ware. Their quality was poor, and grooves, black patches were often noticed on the exterior surface. Common shapes noticed were basins, storage jars etc. In the case of red slipped ware, the slip had occasionally come out. Another interesting type obtained from the site was black polished ware. It was highly polished and well-fired. The polish was generally noticed both on the interior and exterior surface. Some of the important shapes were small vases with narrow mouth, straight-sided neck and feature less rim (Fig.10).

Antiquities

Antiquities found from this site are very limited in nature. Except one paste bead and few grinding stones, nothing could be found from this limited survey. The bead was found in the bottom portion of the pit; about 0.50 m depth. It is 3.9 mm in diameter and roundish in shape. This bead is typologically indo-pacific bead type and has opaque reddish brown in colour. Few stone objects found as surface finding clearly evident as a grinding stones. Due to the limited nature of the survey very less amount of antiquities were obtained.

Discussion and Conclusions

While the information on habitation sites located during the present investigations at Marayoor region is preliminary in nature, it undoubtedly provides material evidence of the existence of such sites in Kerala. It is interesting to note that both the habitation sites were discovered within a very close distance from the Megalithic burial grounds. Site at Nachivayal burial ground was located at a distance of just 300 m away from the habitation site, whereas at Alampetti, it is hardly at a 500 m distance. Potsherds found as surface collections and the material obtained from the pit from Alampetti revealed a diverse nature, many of which were for domestic use. The potsherds found from Alampetti is characterised by medium fabric, simple and feature less rim portions. Few shreds were having everted rim, which looks very similar to the one found from Uraiyyur in Tamil Nadu (Gurumurthy 1981). The designs and features of rim found from Nachivayal looks more towards those generally recovered from the Early Historic and Historical phases. However, their occurrences associated to burial grounds are imperative.

Since the present survey was preliminary and limited in nature, the present researchers are not in a position to ascertain any particular chronology to these sites. However, discovery of these two habitation site are conspicuous by the associations of burials. In the preliminary survey, it can be said that the potsherds like black-and-red ware, red slipped ware; black polished ware found at Alampetti can clearly be dated back to pre-Christian era. Similar evidences have also been noticed at various sites in Tamil Nadu like Kodumanal, Thandikudi etc. (Rajan 1994, 2011). The Potsherds found at Nachivayal are more of the Early Historic or Historic in nature due to the similarity of the artefacts with the sites in Amaravathi Valley in Tamil Nadu (Yatheesh Kumar 2011). Therefore, it is a possibility that the habitation discovered here may belong to the later period of first millennium. Thus this work clearly shows that it is impossible to have such mega structures (associated to burial custom) unless the people are sophisticated in their subsistence activities. A thorough knowledge on the environmental setting and a systematic survey can bring out much

better data on the habitation sites as the present work has shown. While this research has thrown light on some important aspects of the Megalithic habitation, there are still a number of questions that require answers. The future researches will certainly bring out more data and help to have a better understanding of the same. However, till that time, these sites can be considered as key sites to search more habitation sites in Kerala.

Acknowledgements

The authors express their deep gratitude to the Department of Forest, Kerala for granting permission to conduct a scientific survey in the region. We are equally grateful to Archaeological Survey of India for giving permission for conducting excavation in Marayoor Village. We extend our sincere thanks to Eswaran Alampetti, Roy Mathew Nachivayal, Midhun. C. Sekhar and Sony. J. Mathew for their kind support and encouragement. At last, the first author would like to thank Pankaj Goyal who has been his inspiration and motivation in academics.

References

- Babington, J. (1823). Descriptions of the Pandoo Coolies in Malabar. *Transactions of the Literary Society of Bombay* 3: 324-30.
- Cherian, P. J., V. Selvakumar, & Shajan, K. P. (2009). Maritime traditions of the Malabar Coast and the findings of Pattanam Excavations-2007 In Paddayya, K, P. P. Joglekar Kishor K. Basa, Reshma Sawant (eds) *Recent research trends in South Asian archaeology; Proceedings of the Professor H. D. Sankalia Birth Centenary Seminar (10-12 December 2007)* pp 321-333. Deccan College Post Graduate and Research Institute, Pune.
- Darsana, S. (2010). Megalithic burials of iron age-early historic Kerala: An overview, *Man and Environment*, 35(1).
- Gurukkal, R. & Varier, Raghava M. R. (eds.) (1999). *Cultural history of Kerala* (1). Tiruvananthapuram: Department of Cultural Publications.
- Gurumurthy, S. (1981). Ceramic traditions in South India (Down to 300 A.D.) University of Madras.
- Kumar, A. (2006). An Ethno-archaeological study of Cholanaickans of Nilambur and its reflection on the Megaliths of Kerala, *Journal of*

- Kerala Studies* (XXIII): 1-13. Thiruvananthapuram: Department of History, University of Kerala.
- Kumar, Y. (2011). *Archaeology of Amaravathi River Valley, Tamil Nadu* (Unpublished Ph. D. thesis), University of Pondicherry, Tamil Nadu.
- Leshnik, L. S. (1974). *South Indian megalithic burials: The Pandukal complex*. Germany: Franz Steiner Verlag GmbH Wiesbaden
- Mohanty, R. K. & Joshi, P. S. (1996). The Megalithic problem of Vidharbha: Retrospect and Prospect in Margabandhu, C and K. S. Ramachandran (eds) *Spectrum of Indian culture (Prof. S. B. Deco felicitation volume)*. 136-150. Delhi: Agamkala Prakashan.
- Rajan, K & Athiyaman, N. (2011). *Archaeology of the Palani Hills: A Case Study of Thandikudi*, Sharada Publishing House, Delhi.
- Rajan, K. (1997). *Archaeological Gazetteer of Tamil Nadu*. Manoo Pathippakam, Tanjavur.
- Sundara, A. (1975). *Early chamber tombs of South India*. New Delhi: Agamkala Prakashan.
- Thampi, S. P. (1983). *Prehistoric archaeology of South Central Kerala with special reference to the valley of Anjunad* (Unpublished PhD Thesis), Deccan College Post Graduate Research Institute, Pune.
- Wheeler, R. E. M. (1947). Brahmagiri and Chandravalli 1947: Megalithic and Other Cultures in the Chitaldurg District, Mysore State. *Ancient India*, (4), 188-194.

List of figures

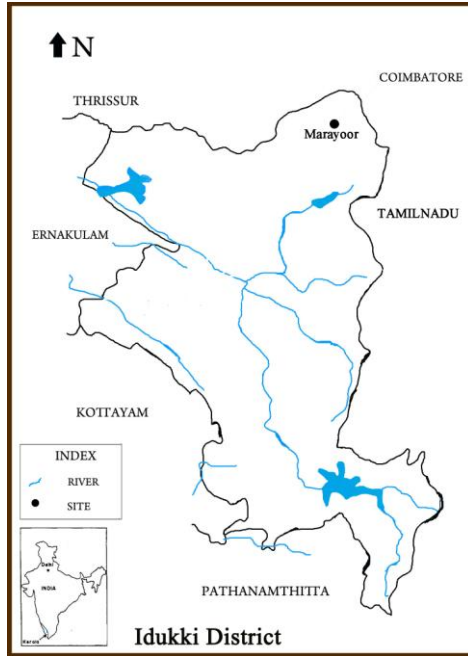


Fig.1 Map location map of Marayoor



Fig.2 Marayoor table land

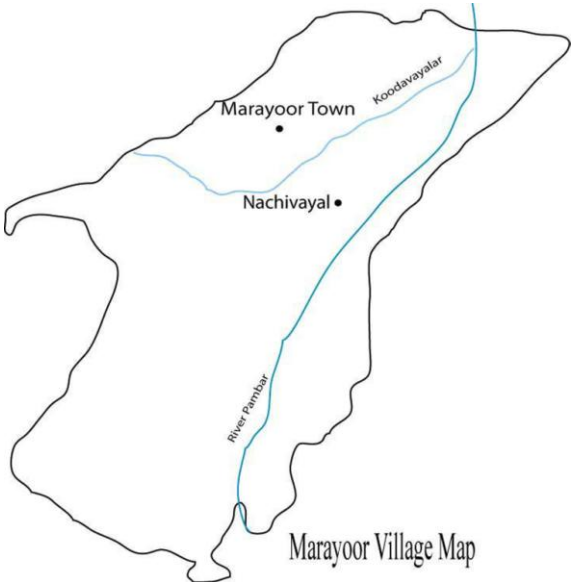


Fig.3 location of Nachivayal



Fig.4 Habitation site at nachivayal, Marayoor



Fig. 5 Glass beads found at Nachivayal



Fig.6 Terracotta objects from Nachivayal



Fig.7 Ceramics found at Nachivayal



Fig.8 Habitation site Alampetti



Fig.9 red ware and black-and-red ware from Alampetti

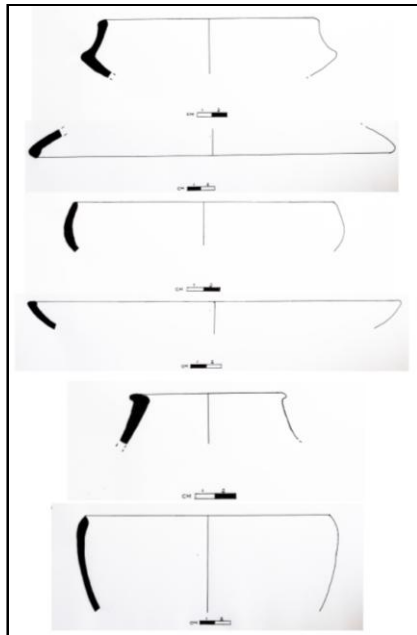


Fig.10 red ware, black-and-red ware, black polished ware shape drawing