

MENHIR: HISTORY

NEWS: Menhirs of Mudumal in Telangana's Narayanpet on tentative list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites

WHAT'S IN THE NEWS?

The Mudumal megalithic menhirs in Telangana's Narayanpet district, dating back 3,500-4,000 years, are set to become the second UNESCO World Heritage Site in the state. These menhirs, believed to serve as astronomical observatories and ceremonial markers, offer crucial insights into prehistoric human cultures.

Mudumal Megalithic Menhirs in Telangana's Narayanpet District

1. What Are Menhirs?

- **Definition:** A menhir is a large, upright stone that is often tapered at the top. It is sculpted and placed by humans, typically in prehistoric times, as part of a megalithic culture. The word "menhir" is derived from Brittonic words that mean "long stone," referring to their elongated shape.
- **Size and Prominence:** Menhirs can vary in size, with some standing as tall as 20 meters. The largest known menhir, the Grand Menhir Brisé located in Brittany, France, originally stood 20.6 meters tall, making it one of the most notable examples. Menhirs have often captured the imagination in popular culture, especially through the character Obelix from the *Asterix* comic series, who is depicted carrying a large standing stone.
- **Cultural Importance:** Menhirs are significant in both European and Indian prehistoric cultures. In India, menhirs, as part of the megalithic culture, are associated with ancient civilizations' religious, cultural, and astronomical practices.

2. Purpose and History of Menhirs

- **Origins and Association with Beaker Culture:** Menhirs are closely linked to the Beaker culture of Europe, which existed during the late Neolithic and early Bronze Age (around 4800–3800 BP). However, the oldest menhirs, particularly in Europe, have been dated back to as early as 7,000 BP, suggesting they were used in societies far before the Beaker culture. These large stones were primarily erected as part of burial rituals, ceremonial purposes, or astronomical observations.
- **Mudumal Menhirs:** The Mudumal menhirs, located in Telangana's Narayanpet district, are dated between 3,500 and 4,000 years ago, making them the oldest known menhirs in India. These megalithic structures were likely used for various purposes, including ceremonial rituals, as grave markers, and possibly for tracking celestial events like solstices. Their exact purpose remains debated, but evidence suggests they were integral to the social and religious life of early communities in the region.

3. Significance of the Mudumal Site

- **Astronomical Function:** The Mudumal menhirs have been described by UNESCO as a “megalithic astronomical observatory.” This designation highlights the alignment of several menhirs at the site with significant astronomical events. For example, some menhirs are aligned with the sunrise and sunset during the solstices, indicating their possible use in tracking celestial occurrences such as the solar cycle. This suggests that the ancient inhabitants of the region had an advanced understanding of astronomy and the movement of celestial bodies.
- **Cultural and Religious Role:** Over time, the Mudumal menhirs became deeply embedded in local folklore. One particularly notable menhir is worshipped as Goddess Yellamma, a deity who holds religious and cultural significance to the local communities. This incorporation of menhirs into religious worship reflects their importance not only as physical structures but also as symbols of power, spirituality, and connection with the divine in prehistoric societies.

4. Megaliths in India

- **Ancient Origins and Distribution:** Megaliths in India date back to the period before 3000 BC, with recent archaeological findings suggesting the presence of megalithic structures as early as 5000 BC in southern India. These megalithic structures are found across the Indian subcontinent, with notable concentrations in peninsular India, especially in states such as Maharashtra (Vidarbha), Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana. The Mudumal menhirs are part of a broader tradition of megalithic cultures that span several regions.
- **Cultural Significance:** Megalithic structures were primarily associated with burial practices, including memorials for individuals whose remains might not have been available for direct burial. The Brahmagiri site, excavated in 1975, helped establish the cultural sequence in South Indian prehistory by providing evidence of megalithic burial practices.
- **Living Megalithic Cultures:** In some regions of India, megalithic traditions persist even today. Tribes such as the Gonds of central India and the Khasis of Meghalaya continue to practice megalithic rituals, indicating the lasting cultural importance of these structures and their associated beliefs in life after death, ancestor worship, and divine protection.



5. Megalithic Culture in India

- **Preliterate Societies and the Challenge of Understanding Origins:** The megalithic societies in India were preliterate, which makes it difficult to pinpoint the exact racial or ethnic origins of these people. However, the discovery of a stone axe with inscriptions resembling the Harappan script, found in a burial chamber in Tamil Nadu, suggests that there might have been cultural contact between the Harappan civilization and the megalithic cultures. This indicates the possibility of trade, communication, or cultural exchange.
- **Agricultural Practices and Societal Structure:** The megalithic people practiced agriculture in both the rabi (winter) and kharif (monsoon) seasons, growing crops such as rice, wheat, barley, millet, and legumes. This evidence points to a settled agricultural lifestyle and the development of a surplus economy. It is believed that megaliths were built by an emerging ruling or elite class that had control over these agricultural resources.
- **Belief Systems:** The megalithic people held strong beliefs in life after death and possibly reincarnation, as evidenced by their burial practices, which often involved placing burial goods alongside the deceased. Additionally, artifacts such as banded agate beads with eye patterns, which were believed to ward off evil spirits, were found at many megalithic sites. These practices are reflected today in various cultural traditions, such as the use of amulets or nazar battus in India to protect against evil forces.

6. Types of Megalithic Structures

Megalithic structures in India and across the world take various forms, each serving different purposes:

- **Menhir:** A menhir is an upright stone that is often placed singly or in groups. In Western Europe, they are commonly referred to as “standing stones.” Menhirs are typically associated with ancient burial or ceremonial sites.
- **Monolith:** A monolith is a large, single standing stone. This term is often synonymous with “menhir” but is used more broadly for any single, upright stone from prehistoric times.
- **Capstone Style:** A capstone is a large stone placed horizontally across vertical stones to form a structure, often without additional support stones. This form is frequently used for burial chambers.
- **Stone Circles:** Stone circles, or “cromlechs,” are circular arrangements of stones. These structures may serve ceremonial or ritualistic purposes, and their most famous examples include Stonehenge in the UK.
- **Dolmen:** Dolmens are megalithic structures consisting of a large capstone placed on two or more support stones, creating a chamber. These were often used as tombs or burial chambers.
- **Cist:** A cist is a small, stone-built box or ossuary used for burials. Cists are typically completely underground and can be either single-chambered or multi-chambered, serving as burial sites in prehistoric cultures.

7. Why Do Mudumal Menhirs Deserve UNESCO Recognition?

- **Cultural and Scientific Value:** The Mudumal menhirs offer crucial insights into the scientific and cultural achievements of early human societies, particularly in the fields of astronomy, engineering, and construction. The alignment of these megaliths with celestial events suggests a highly advanced understanding of the solar system and its cycles.
- **Preservation of Ancient Practices:** The Mudumal menhirs also hold significant cultural and religious value, providing evidence of early rituals, belief systems, and the role of astronomy in prehistoric life. Recognition by UNESCO would help preserve these ancient structures and ensure that they are protected for future generations.
- **Promoting Heritage Tourism:** UNESCO recognition could promote heritage tourism, bringing attention to India's rich prehistoric past and fostering global awareness about the importance of preserving ancient sites like the Mudumal menhirs.

8. Conclusion

The Mudumal menhirs are an exceptional example of India's rich megalithic heritage. These ancient stone structures not only represent the ingenuity of early human civilizations in understanding the natural world but also reflect the cultural, religious, and social dynamics of prehistoric India. Their potential inclusion in the UNESCO World Heritage List would highlight their importance both locally and globally, ensuring that they are preserved and studied for future generations.

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