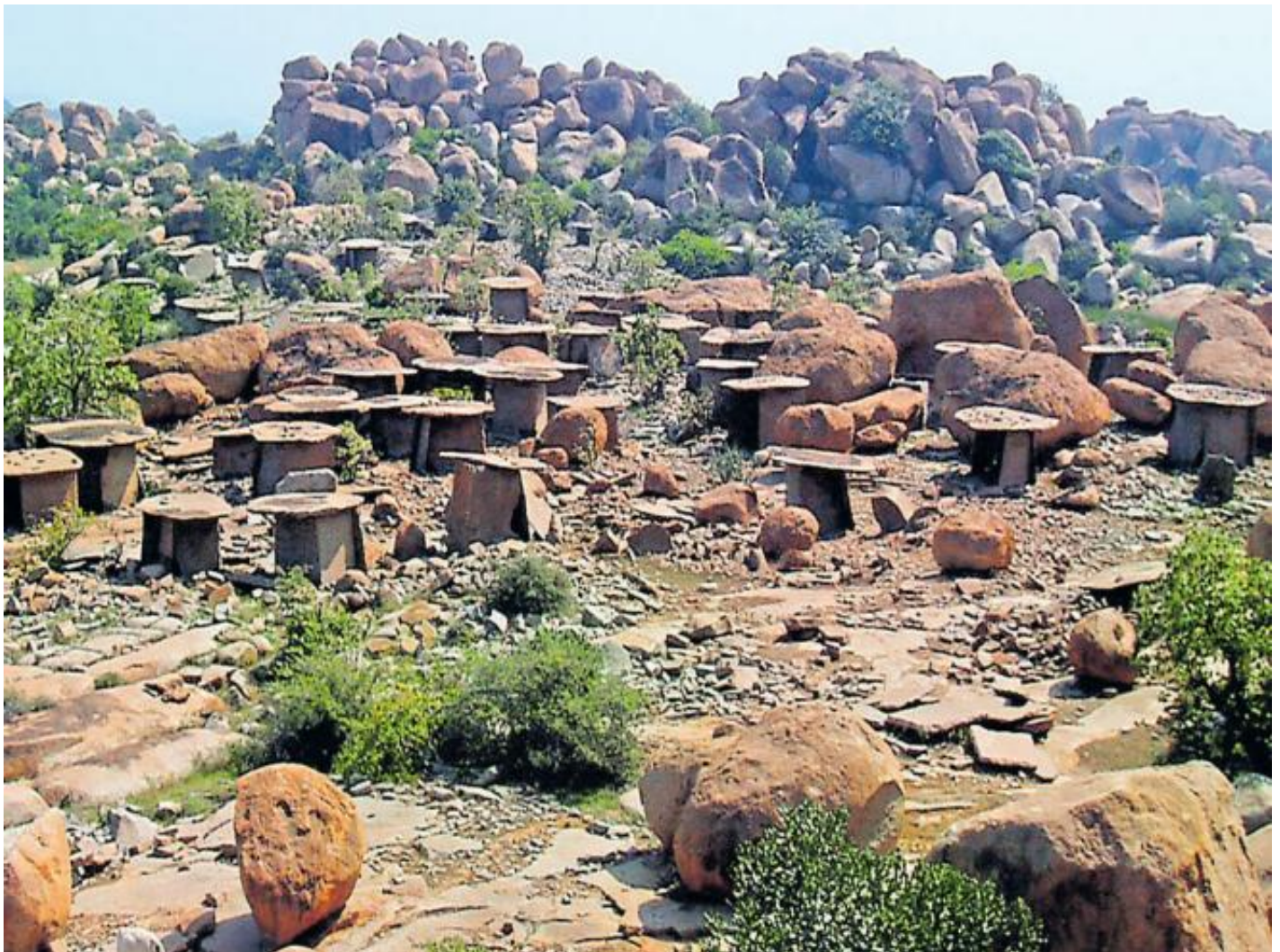


The hill of the 'dwarves'

Srikumar M Menon, May 16 2017, 0:04 IST



Large expanse: A panoramic view of the megalithic site at Hire Benakal in Koppal district.

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Sometime in the early 1800s, Rev G Keiss, a German missionary stationed at a mission in Betageri near Gadag, crossed River Tungabhadra from Beejanugger (Vijayanagara) near Anegundi and went on to Mallapur, where he enquired about the 'dwarf houses of Yemmi Gudda' that were rumoured to exist in the hills nearby. With some help from the headman of the village, he was able to locate them on the saddle of a hill north-west of Mallapur, scattered among enormous boulders that dotted the hills. In great excitement, he wrote to his friend Colonel Philip Meadows Taylor, the political superintendent at Surpur, who had shown him similar structures at Rajan Koluru, near Lingsugur.

He described the various structures he saw there. Most eye-catching were what they called 'cromlechs' and 'kistvaens' – box-like structures made of tall, square stone slabs set on end; roofed over with large

horizontal capstones. There were hundreds of them scattered among the boulders and Keiss made a rough plan of the site and sent it off to Meadows Taylor. Keiss urged the latter to abandon his notion that these structures were graves of ancient inhabitants of the land. He proposed the idea that the site, which he said was halfway between Mallapur and Yemmi Gudda (the Hill of the Buffaloes), was an abandoned settlement and that the stone structures were houses. But Meadows Taylor, who had recovered ash and pieces of human bone from similar structures at Rajan Koluru, stuck to his hypothesis that these were indeed graves, in his paper published in the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society in 1852, though he did record Keiss's suggestion too.

Whatever these early antiquarians might have made of these remains, the local residents of villages in the Benakal Forest had their own version to account for these strange structures. Benakal Forest was how the land north of Hampi across River Tungabhadra, with its landscape of low, boulder-strewn granitic hills rising above the extensive plains, was referred to in early accounts. The natives believed that these stone huts were made by an extinct race of dwarves, called Moriyas, endowed with supernatural strength, who could heft around the heavy stone slabs with ease.

Not just dolmens

The large group of these Moriyara Mane (Moriya houses) that Keiss encountered is near the modern village of Hire Benakal, which is approached via a road leading to the south off the highway connecting Gangavati to Koppal. Any of the villagers can guide a visitor to Moriyara Gudda (the hill of the Moriyas), which is a moderate trek of about an hour from the village through starkly beautiful landscapes of tumbled boulders and low hills. No place called Yemmi Gudda exists today, but a small hillock called Hema Gudda exists roughly in the location indicated by Keiss.

One sees the Nagaari Gund before one sees the stone huts. This is a kettle drum hewn out of stone that sits poised on a high boulder like a sentinel watching over the site. Then one sees them, haphazardly scattered around – the various stone structures that inspired the tales of mighty dwarves.

Most prominent among these are large structures called dolmens — squarish arrangements of stone slabs that are more than two metres high.

Wandering among these structures, one gets the feeling of walking through an abandoned town and it is easy to understand why Keiss and the local residents favoured the idea that these were houses. Several of the dolmens have circular or semi-circular portholes in one of the erect slabs. In spite of the large size of the dolmens, the portholes are less than 40 cm across, probably the rationale behind the legend of the dwarves!

Modern archaeologists dispel the romantic vision by attributing these structures to the Iron Age inhabitants of this land and propose a wide age bracket of roughly 3200-2500 years ago for them. They

are believed to be sepulchral and memorial structures commemorating unknown ancestors of ours.

But dolmens are not the only structures found at this site. In the western part of the site, other smaller structures are more numerous. There is a smaller, lower version of the port-holed dolmen, partially buried in the soil, and termed as 'dolmenoid cist' by archaeologists. There are also similar structures, much smaller, and totally sunk into the soil, called 'cists', which are believed to be burials.

Another type is a low, squat structure consisting of just a horizontal flat slab raised on a few small rocks, with the gaps between the rocks plugged using flat stone cobbles stacked one upon the other. Professor A Sundara, who studied this site in the 1970s, terms them as "irregular polygonal chambers." The simplest of the structures at the site are what he called "rock-shelter chambers," consisting of natural rock overhangs, with their sides plugged using cobbles to create a chamber within.

All these structures are called 'megaliths' by archaeologists, common throughout (but not confined to) peninsular India and believed to be burial and memorial monuments from the Iron Age. All these structures seem to be conceived with an aim to create a chamber — either a regular one employing quarried slabs trimmed into shape, like the dolmens, dolmenoid cists and cists or by means of improvisation to create simpler monuments like the irregular polygonal chambers or the rock-shelter chambers.

Enigmatic structures

Did these chambers once hold urns containing the remains of the dead, or were they merely structures dedicated to the memory of the departed? The large dolmens at Moriyara Gudda are devoid of interred human remains and may be commemorative in nature. These dwarf houses of Yemmi Gudda seem to have been empty even when Keiss visited in the 1800s, but we cannot rule out looting and pilferage even prior to that. Every single monument at Hire Benakal stands disturbed by the attentions of treasure seekers and looters and the desecration continues even today, despite the site enjoying protected status. Systematic excavations will reveal if there are human remains interred in the cists and dolmenoid cists.

A natural water reservoir south of the cluster of dolmens, bearing signs of being deliberately enlarged by the megalith builders and the imposing Nagaari Gund overlooking the megaliths hint that water and sound must have played prominent roles in the rituals that this long-abandoned site must have seen. This remote hilltop with its enigmatic structures that have survived millennia must have once been a bustling ritual centre where stonecutters and masons rubbed shoulders with shamans and priests and the bereaved, but the stone structures of Moriyara Gudda remain stoically silent about those ancient human dramas that would have played out in this windswept amphitheatre of rock and sky.