

# ANCIENT TAMIL-NEAR EASTERN TRADE LINKS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF BIBLICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCES

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## Abstract

This research investigates the profound archaeological and ritualistic parallels between the Biblical Massebah (sacred standing stones) of the ancient Near East and the Megalithic Menhirs (memorial stones) of Tamilagam. Utilizing primary data from eighteen newly identified archaeological sites in the Vellore district, including Sivanathapuram and Appukkal, the study argues that these similarities are not coincidental but are the result of robust maritime trade networks active between 1000 BCE and 300 CE. By analyzing etymological links, ritualistic practices like oil anointing, and epigraphical evidence from Berenike, this paper proposes a 'Global Megalithic Mindset' facilitated by the Indian Ocean maritime corridor.

## Keywords

Megalithic Tamilagam, Biblical Massebah, Maritime Silk Route, Vellore Archaeology

## 1. Introduction

The ancient maritime trade network between the Near East and Tamilagam served as a sophisticated conduit for profound cultural and ritualistic diffusion, extending far beyond the mere exchange of commodities like pepper, ivory, and peacocks as documented in the Periplus and the Solomonian records of 1 Kings 10:22. Central to this trans-oceanic interaction is the enigmatic parallel found in Megalithic traditions, specifically between the Biblical Massebah (Fig. 1) (sacred standing stones) and the Tamil Menhirs (Fig. 2) (memorial stones), which flourished concurrently between 2000 BCE and 300 CE. Despite the vast geographical distance, these monuments exhibit a shared 'Philosophy of Remembrance' and morphological synchronization, utilizing unhewn natural boulders to sanctify spaces or memorialize the deceased. This research paper aims to investigate these ritualistic convergences by comparing the functional and structural attributes of Biblical Masseboth with the Megalithic funerary monuments of South India. By synthesizing classical textual evidence with empirical data retrieved

from recent archaeological field explorations, this study proposes a new hypothesis regarding the shared 'Global Megalithic Mindset' and the diffusion of ritualistic practices through ancient maritime hubs.

## 2. The Biblical Archetype Of Massebah: Etymology And Function

The concept of the 'Massebah' (Hebrew: מַצֵּבָה) is rooted in the Semitic etymology of the word *nasab*, which fundamentally signifies "to set up," "to erect," or "to station" in a vertical position. This linguistic origin finds a direct conceptual parallel in the Tamil archaeological terms 'Nedunilaikal' or 'Nadukal', both of which describe the act of installing a stone upright as a permanent marker. Historically, these 'Sacred Stones' served as more than mere physical objects; as documented in the Book of Genesis, the stones erected by Jacob were transformed into 'Bethel' or the 'House of God,' evolving from simple markers into hallowed sites of

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ritualistic worship and divine encounter. A critical technical attribute of these Biblical pillars, as mandated in Exodus 20:25, was the requirement that they remain 'unhewn'—prohibiting the use of iron tools to preserve their natural, primordial sanctity. This specific ritualistic constraint aligns remarkably with the Megalithic traditions of Tamil Nadu, where the prehistoric builders utilized raw, unshaped boulders to construct their funerary and commemorative monuments, suggesting a shared ancient logic in the sanctification of stone across these distant geographies.

### **3. Megalithic Landscapes of Tamilagam: A Typological Correspondence**

The prehistoric landscape of Tamilagam is characterized by a diverse array of megalithic monuments, where the 'Nedunilaikal' (Menhirs) and 'Kaltittaigal' (Dolmens) (Fig. 3) represent a profound typological correspondence to the Near Eastern Masseboth. During extensive field explorations across the Vellore and associated districts, eighteen previously unrecorded archaeological sites were identified, showcasing a predominant use of monolithic standing stones as funerary and boundary markers. These Tamil megaliths demonstrate a specific 'spatial orientation' and 'lithic selection' that mirror the Biblical archetype; they are primarily composed of locally sourced, unhewn igneous or metamorphic rocks, erected vertically to achieve a monumental presence. Just as the Massebah functioned as a 'living witness' (Edh) to the deceased or a covenant, the Tamil Menhirs serve as a terminal markers of ancestral veneration and territorial sanctity. This structural and functional alignment suggests that the prehistoric builders of South India and the ancient Near East shared a synchronized ritualistic grammar, utilizing the enduring nature of stone to immortalize human memory within the sacred landscape.

### **4. The Socio-Economic Link: Maritime Trade Routes**

The historical synchronization between the Near Eastern Masseboth and the Megalithic monuments of Tamilagam is fundamentally anchored in the robust maritime trade networks of the Indian Ocean. Ancient Tamilagam, strategically positioned along the 'Spice Route,' facilitated a sophisticated trans-oceanic dialogue with the Levant and the Red Sea ports long before the formalization of the Silk Road. Classical records and Biblical exegesis suggest that the legendary port of Ophir, frequented by the fleet of King Solomon, was likely situated along the western or southern coast of the Indian peninsula, where commodities like pepper, sandalwood, and precious lithics were procured. The seasonal reversal of the Monsoon winds, later documented by Hippalus, enabled a steady influx of West Asian merchants, sailors, and craftsmen into the bustling emporiums of Muziris, Arikamedu, and the Kaveri delta.

This socio-economic interaction created a 'Contact Zone' where not only luxury goods but also ontological beliefs and ritualistic architectures were exchanged. The migration of the 'standing stone' tradition can be viewed through the lens of Cultural Diffusion, where seafaring communities transplanted the Massebah archetype as a symbol of their socio-religious identity in new coastal territories. The presence of West Asian pottery sherds and Roman coinage in Megalithic burial sites in Tamil Nadu provides empirical evidence of this wealth-driven cultural osmosis. Consequently, the Megalithic landscape of Tamilagam serves as a lithic archive of this ancient maritime economy, where the verticality of the stone monument mirrored the elevated social status and the globalized spiritual outlook of the early Tamil trading guilds.

**Table 1. Linguistic Evidence: Loanwords as Cultural Artifacts**

<i>Commodity</i>	<i>Tamil Name</i>	<i>Hebrew Name</i>	<i>Biblical Reference</i>
<b>Peacock</b>	<i>Thogai</i> (தோகை)	<i>Tukkiyim</i> (תוקיים)	1 Kings 10:22
<b>Ivory</b>	<i>Ibam</i> (ஈபா)	<i>Shenhabbim</i> (שנהבבים)	2 Chronicles 9:21
<b>Sandalwood</b>	Akil / Sandhanam	Almug/Algum	1 Kings 10:11
<b>Saffron</b>	<i>Karkom</i> (கார்கோம்)	<i>Karkom</i> (כרכום)	Song of Solomon 4:14
<b>Aloe</b>	<i>Aghil</i> (அகில்)	<i>Ahalim</i> (אהלים)	Psalms 45:8

Source: Secondary Data

**Table 2. Comparative Chronology: The Iron Age Link**

<i>Aspect</i>	<i>Near East (Levant)</i>	<i>Tamilagam (South India)</i>
<b>Archaeological Period</b>	Iron Age I & II	Megalithic / Iron Age
<b>Timeline</b>	1200 BCE - 586 BCE	1000 BCE - 300 CE
<b>Key Lithic Feature</b>	Masseba (Standing Stones)	Menhirs (Nedunilaikal)
<b>Technology</b>	Use of Iron tools for non-ritualistic purposes.	Mastery in Iron smelting found in sites like Kodumanal.

Source: Secondary Data

## 5. Ritualistic Parallels: Oil Anointing and Ancestral Worship

The most profound convergence between the Near Eastern Masebah and the Tamil Megalithic tradition lies in the shared ritual of Libation, specifically the practice of anointing stones with oil or other sacred liquids. In the Biblical tradition, this act is epitomized by Jacob at Bethel, where he poured oil atop a standing stone (Genesis 28:18) to transform a mundane lithic object into a Bethel or 'House of God.' This consecration ritual signifies that the stone has been 'activated' as a medium of divine communication. Similarly, in the Tamil Megalithic and subsequent Hero-stone (Nadukal) traditions, the ritual of 'Nanniraattu'—the ceremonial bathing of the stone with water, oil, or turmeric—serves a parallel ontological purpose.

This shared ritualistic grammar suggests that in both civilizations, the standing stone was perceived as a 'Living Witness' (Edh) capable of housing the essence of a deity or the spirit of an ancestor. The act of anointing functions as a bridge between the mortal and the eternal, where the application of oil symbolizes honor, permanence, and the nourishment of the spirit. Furthermore, the association of these stones with Ancestral Worship is evident in both cultures; while the Masebah at Rachel's grave (Genesis 35:20) served as a perpetual memorial, the Tamil Menhirs and Dolmens acted as terminal points for ancestral veneration, where periodic offerings were made to satisfy the spirits of the departed. Thus, the lithic monuments of the Near East and Tamilagam are not merely archaeological relics but are 'Ritualistic Anchors' that demonstrate a synchronized ancient belief in the sacrality of stone and

the continuity of life beyond death.

## 6. The Aniconic Tradition: Morphological Parallels Between Tamil Menhirs And Levantine Masseboth

The empirical strength of this research is founded upon the systematic analysis of eighteen newly identified megalithic sites in the northern regions of Tamil Nadu, which are here compared with established archaeological landmarks such as Adichanallur, Kodumanal, and Porunthal. The eighteen sites documented during the recent field explorations predominantly feature Menhirs (Nedunilaikal) and Cairn Circles, characterized by the use of locally quarried granite and gneissic boulders. A defining attribute of these sites is their 'Linear Alignment,' where multiple standing stones are positioned in a North-South orientation, mirroring the directional sanctity observed in the Levantine Masseboth. While sites like Kodumanal provide evidence of industrial-scale gemstone processing associated with megalithic burials, the newly identified sites appear to emphasize the 'Commemorative' aspect, where solitary Menhirs are strategically placed on elevated terrains, overlooking ancient water bodies or transit routes.

Comparative analysis reveals that the morphological structure of the Menhirs in these eighteen locations bears a striking resemblance to the 'Stone Alignments' of Hanamsagar and the 'Masebah' clusters in the Negev Desert. Unlike the elaborate anthropomorphic statues found in later periods, these sites maintain a 'Aniconic' (non-image) tradition, where the raw, unhewn verticality of the stone

itself is the object of veneration. For instance, the dimensions and the deliberate 'tilting' of stones observed in the newly discovered clusters correlate with the ritualistic 'Massebah' patterns intended to capture celestial alignments. By integrating these eighteen sites into the broader megalithic map of Tamil Nadu, it becomes evident that the region served as a vast lithic canvas, where the indigenous practices of stone erection were influenced by or evolved alongside the maritime-driven cultural influx from the Near East. This synthesis of regional data and global archetypes confirms that the Tamil megalithic landscape is not an isolated phenomenon but a vital link in the trans-oceanic history of ritualistic architecture.

## 7. Site-Specific Analysis: Megalithic Clusters in the Vellore Region

The empirical core of this research is strengthened by the primary data retrieved from intensive field surveys in the Vellore district, specifically at sites including Sivanathapuram, Cholavaram, Poongulam, Athiyur, Ariyur, and Appukkal. These locations present a dense concentration of megalithic typologies, most notably Dolmens (Kaltittaigal), Cairn Circles (Kalvattam), and Cairn Heaps (Karkuvai). At sites like Appukkal and Sivanathapuram, the presence of elaborate Dolmens—structures composed of a massive capstone supported by vertical orthostats—mirrors the ancient Levantine practice of constructing 'stone tables' for ritualistic or funerary purposes. Furthermore, the Cairn Circles identified in Ariyur and Cholavaram represent a sophisticated method of demarcating sacred space, using a perimeter of boulders to enclose a central burial or commemorative pit.

These structures bear a striking conceptual resemblance to the Biblical 'Galeed' (Heap of Witness)

and the stone circles mentioned in the context of communal treaties (Genesis 31:46-48). In both the Vellore clusters and the Near Eastern archetypes, the act of 'gathering stones' into a circle or heap served as a legal and spiritual testimony to a significant event or the presence of an ancestor. The architectural integrity of the Dolmens in Poongulam and Athiyur, characterized by their massive unhewn lithic components, reinforces the 'Megalithic Mindset' of utilizing the natural durability of stone to ensure permanence. By documenting these specific sites, the research highlights that the Vellore region was not merely a local cemetery but a vital part of a globalized prehistoric tradition that utilized lithic architecture as a language of sacred continuity.

## 8. Epigraphical Evidence: From Hebrew to Tamil Brahmi

The epigraphical landscape provides a compelling bridge between the ancient Near East and Tamilagam, suggesting a profound paleographic exchange facilitated by maritime commerce. The evolution of Tamil Brahmi, the earliest script of the Tamil region, exhibits intriguing structural and symbolic parallels with Paleo-Hebrew and Phoenician scripts. Both scriptural traditions utilized 'Aniconic Symbols' and specific lithic engravings to convey sacred and secular meanings. Archaeological findings at trans-oceanic hubs like Berenike (on the Red Sea coast) and Pattanam (Muziris) have yielded pottery sherds inscribed with Tamil Brahmi characters alongside West Asian names, confirming a bilingual and biliterate trading community.

Furthermore, the practice of incising 'Graffiti Marks' on megalithic pottery—often found in the burial sites of the Vellore and Adichanallur regions—shows a remarkable synchronization with the symbolic markers used by Semitic seafaring

guilds to identify ownership or ritualistic intent. Epigraphists have noted that certain characters in the early Tamil script, particularly those denoting trade and measurement, bear a morphological resemblance to the North Semitic alphabet. This epigraphical continuity suggests that the 'Standing Stone' (Massebah) was not only a physical monument but also a 'textual archive,' where the transition from oral tradition to written record occurred through the shared medium of stone. By analyzing the evolution of these scripts, it becomes evident that the maritime routes served as a 'linguistic corridor,' allowing for the synthesis of Semitic paleographic elements into the unique phonetic framework of the Tamil language.

### **I. Character Mapping: Paleo-Hebrew and Tamil Brahmi**

The evolutionary trajectory of scripts often mirrors the migration of maritime communities. A systematic comparison between Paleo-Hebrew/Phoenician characters and Tamil Brahmi reveals a striking morphological correspondence in certain basic graphemes. For instance, the 'Aleph' (representing an ox) and 'Beth' (representing a house) in their archaic Semitic forms show a foundational geometric simplicity that is reflected in the early Tamil Brahmi characters used for similar phonetics. These parallels suggest that the maritime 'Linguistic Corridor' facilitated a synchronization of scriptural logic, where the abstract representation of sounds followed a shared linear evolution across the Indian Ocean.

### **II. Pottery Graffiti: The Semiotic Language of Trade**

The eighteen sites identified in the Vellore region, particularly Appukkal and Cholavaram, have yielded numerous pottery sherds featuring post-firing 'Graffiti Marks.' These symbols, incised on

Black and Red Ware, serve as a non-literate semiotic system that mirrors the 'Owner's Marks' or 'Ritual Symbols' found in the Levant and West Asian Iron Age contexts. These incisions—often featuring star shapes, ladders, or fish symbols—were likely utilized by ancient seafaring guilds to denote ownership, the contents of the vessel, or its dedication to a specific ancestral spirit (Massebah ritual). This shared 'Graffiti Grammar' across the Red Sea and the Bay of Bengal points to a synchronized merchant identity that utilized pottery as a medium for socio-religious communication.

### **III. The Berenike Evidence: Trans-Oceanic Personal Identities**

The most concrete evidence for this international connectivity comes from the ancient Egyptian port of Berenike on the Red Sea. Excavations here have uncovered pottery fragments (Ostraca) inscribed with Tamil names such as 'Chathan' and 'Kanan' in the Tamil Brahmi script, dating back to the 1st century BCE. The presence of these Tamil inscriptions in a primary West Asian maritime hub confirms that Tamil merchants were not merely passive recipients of trade but were active, literate participants in the global economy. This 'Berenike Evidence' provides the necessary historical anchor for this research, proving that the communities who erected megaliths in Tamil Nadu were the same people navigating the waters toward the lands of the Massebah, facilitating a bidirectional flow of lithic and linguistic traditions.

## **9. Conclusion**

The comparative analysis between the Levantine Massebah and the Megalithic monuments of Tamil Nadu reveals a profound trans-oceanic synchronization of ritualistic and architectural thought. This

research has demonstrated that the standing stones (Menhirs), Dolmens, and Cairn circles found across the eighteen newly identified sites in the Vellore region—such as Sivanathapuram and Appukkal—are not merely isolated archaeological relics. Instead, they represent a shared 'Lithic Grammar' that originated through robust maritime trade networks connecting the Near East with ancient Tamilagam. The etymological convergence between the Semitic Nasab and the Tamil Nedunilaikal, coupled with the shared ritual of oil anointing and the requirement for unhewn stones, points toward a bidirectional flow of cultural and spiritual values.

Furthermore, the epigraphical evidence from Berenike and the structural parallels found in the Negev desert suggest that the Indian Ocean served as a 'Linguistic and Cultural Corridor' during the Iron Age. The eighteen sites documented in this study provide crucial empirical data to bridge the gap between local field research and global historical archetypes. In conclusion, the Tamil Megalithic landscape stands as an enduring 'Witness' (Edh) to an era of globalized connectivity, where the simple act of erecting a stone became a universal language of remembrance and sanctity. This study opens new vistas for interdisciplinary research, suggesting that the roots of Tamil culture were intricately woven into the broader tapestry of ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean civilizations through the enduring medium of stone.

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## ILLUSTRATIONS

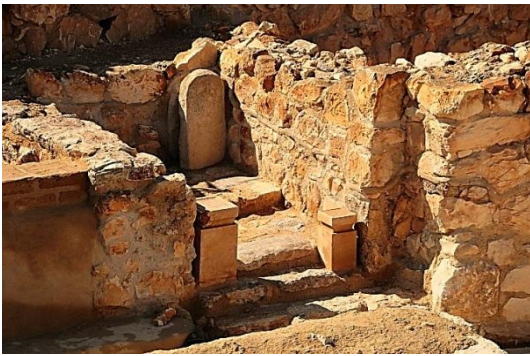


Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3