

## Submitted Abstract

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<b>Title</b>	Megalithic Tombs As Ritual Community Monuments On The Nilgiri Mountains Of South India.
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## Abstract

The Nilgiri Mountains is a region of montane subtropical forests with peaks over 2500 m forming part of the Western Ghats mountain range in the northeastern corner of the state of Tamil Nadu in southern India. Limited palaeoecological evidence suggests that the forests of the Western Ghats were first occupied in the early centuries CE, when the demand for forest products such as spices, ivory, and gemstones increased due to thriving Indo-Roman trade. The tops and ridges of the Nilgiri Mountains are dotted with megalithic tombs, which were excavated in the 19th century by British colonial officers. The earliest megalithic tombs in South India date to the Southern Neolithic (before 1500 BCE) but the monuments were often used and re-used until the half of the second millennium CE. On the Nilgiri Mountains, the megalithic tombs were built over a burial pit containing a single or multiple ceramic urns along with grave goods including bronze, iron, gold, and stone artefacts, which date between the 1st and the 6th century CE and the 12th and the 16th century CE. The urns usually contain soil and the ashes and bones of the deceased (presumably); however, some of the urns contain neither ashes nor bones, but metal tools and ornaments or only soil. Terracotta figurines representing humans, wild animals, and plants and trees are usually found embedded in a layer of charcoal resting on the stone slabs covering the burial pit. These terracotta figurines are often unearthed in a fragmentary condition and it is likely that they were broken deliberately prior to deposition, probably for ritualistic purposes. The numerous potsherds with burn marks recovered in the proximity of the tombs seem to indicate that feasting might have occurred at the sites, similarly to what happened at other megalithic sites in southern India. It appears that throughout their long history, the Nilgiri megalithic tombs were not merely grave markers but they were also important ritual community monuments. This paper intends to present the preliminary results of the first year of the Nilgiri Archaeological Project (2021-2026), an interdisciplinary research project based at Ghent University and funded by the Flemish Research Council.