

Memories Of Valor: The Hero Stones of Kurnool, Kadapa, Krishna, Guntur, And Prakasam

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Abstract

This research study examines the cultural, historical, and artistic importance of hero stones, or viragals, in the districts of Kurnool, Kadapa, Krishna, Guntur, and Prakasam in Andhra Pradesh. These ancient memorials honor warriors who sacrificed their lives in combat, offering insights into the region's socio-political and cultural contexts. The research examines and evaluates the distinctive artistic elements and stylistic differences present on these stones, concentrating on the representation of heroic death scenes and warrior imagery. In Kurnool, the hero stones frequently illustrate soldiers in vigorous combat stances, brandishing swords and shields, and occasionally on horseback. These statues highlight the combat skill and fidelity of the warriors. The deification of heroes is a prominent motif in the district's viragals, frequently depicted as the warrior being received by celestial beings. The hero stones of Kadapa exhibit intricate inscriptions and carvings of warriors using unique weapons like spears or daggers, illustrating the regional martial customs. These stones often feature depictions of deities, signifying the incorporation of religious ideas in honoring bravery. In Krishna and Guntur, the stylistic characteristics of the stones exhibit a fusion of regional artistic traditions, with figures frequently portrayed in symbolic postures, such as wielding swords and shields in a defensive manner. This iconography represents safeguarding and valor. In Prakasam, the stones emphasize the ritualistic dimensions of hero worship, featuring intricate representations of posthumous tributes bestowed upon slain warriors. The incorporation of these sculptural components and inscriptions offers insight into the values of ancestor worship and the socio-political circumstances of the era. This research provides a thorough analysis of the artistic features and inscriptions, elucidating the significance of hero stones in the historical and cultural context of Andhra Pradesh.

Keywords: Hero Stones, Viragals, Andhra Pradesh, Iconography, Cultural Heritage, Inscriptions, Commemoration

Introduction

Hero stones, or viragals, are a fundamental component of South India's cultural and historical framework, representing martial bravery and the heroism that has influenced the region's history narrative for ages. The memorial stones, established to commemorate soldiers who perished in combat, offer insights into the social, political, and religious aspects of ancient and medieval Indian communities (Vanamamalai, 1975; Raghavayya, 1963). The districts of Kurnool, Kadapa, Krishna, Guntur, and Prakasam in Andhra Pradesh are pivotal locations for the examination of these stones, featuring numerous hero stones that provide insight into the region's illustrious history of fighting and courage (Gurumurthi, 1980; Rao, 1966).

The custom of constructing memorial stones in Andhra Pradesh originates from megalithic burials, which established the basis for subsequent commemorative traditions (Raghavayya, 1963). These initial interments developed into more intricate hero stones during the Chola and Kakatiya eras, indicating a transformation in societal perceptions and veneration of its heroes (Nilakanta Sastri, 1935; Rao, 1966). The inscriptions on these stones frequently chronicled the

soldiers' exploits, the conflicts they engaged in, and the accolades bestowed upon them by monarchs or the people. This technique reflected the heroic traditions found in Tamil literature, wherein valor and sacrifice were enshrined in poetry and art (Kailasapathy, 1968).

The Kakatiya dynasty significantly contributed to the proliferation of hero stones, particularly through their temple constructions, where these stones were frequently situated (Rao, 1966). The artwork present on these stones underscores the profound relationship between religious and warrior ideals in Andhra society. Numerous stones portray warriors in combat, wielding swords and shields, while celestial entities greet them into the afterlife, thereby signifying their divine position posthumously (Vanamamalai, 1975). The incorporation of Hindu deities in the carvings emphasizes the religious importance of these stones, suggesting that the sacrifice of soldiers was regarded not just as a great social deed but also as a religious offering (Gurumurthi, 1990).

The Vijayanagara Empire significantly influenced the development of hero stones, as its temple architecture frequently incorporated these memorials into their designs (Fritz & Michell, 2001). The artistic evolution of hero stones during this era is notable, as sculptors attained a remarkable degree of intricacy in their representations of weaponry, garments, and combat scenarios. These carvings served as historical records and visual narratives of the heroes' life, illustrating their courage for future generations (Gurumurthi, 1990; Settar, 1992). The meticulous attention to detail in these stones exemplifies the sculptural progress in South Indian temple art, which had its peak during the Vijayanagara period (Fritz & Michell, 2001). Besides their religious and social importance, hero stones were essential in ancestor veneration (Vanamamalai, 1975). Communities held the belief that the hero's spirit dwelled within the stone, endowing it with protecting capabilities. This conviction is manifested in inscriptions, including one from 900 A.D., which declares, "whoever takes refuge under this stone must not be killed" (Sewell, 1884). These acts highlight the conviction that hero stones functioned as memorials and spiritual protectors of the community. They were frequently positioned at key sites, such as village gates or adjacent to temples, serving as both memorials of the hero's sacrifice and protective emblems for the living (Vanamamalai, 1975).

The ritualistic aspects linked to hero stones are particularly evident in Prakasam area, where the stones often illustrate scenes of posthumous rites (Gurumurthi, 1980). The celebrations included offerings, prayers, and sacrifices to commemorate the dead soldiers. These acts demonstrate the profound relationship between hero veneration and funerary customs in Andhra society. The stones functioned both as a memorial for particular acts of valor and as a tool to guarantee the hero's enduring presence and safeguarding within the community. Researchers like Robert Sewell have historically acknowledged the significance of these stones, cataloging several antique relics in the Madras Presidency, including hero stones (Sewell, 1884). His first surveys established a basis for subsequent research, which has subsequently evolved to encompass a more intricate comprehension of the socio-political environment pertaining to these stones. The studies by Settar (1992) and Vanamamalai (1975) have enhanced this discipline by examining the religious and cultural importance of hero stones within the wider framework of South Indian history.

In summary, the hero stones of Andhra Pradesh present a profound and intricate account of bravery, fidelity, and sacrifice. These stones serve as both commemorative markers and cultural objects that embody the social, political, and religious values of their era. By examining inscriptions, iconography, and the overarching architectural context, we can attain a more profound comprehension of how medieval Andhra society commemorated its heroes and integrated their memory into daily life. Research on these stones consistently yields significant insights on the martial traditions and religious activities of South India, especially during the Kakatiya and Vijayanagara periods.

Origins and Evolution of Hero Stones

The beginnings and evolution of hero stones (viragals), commemorative memorials for dead warriors, date back to the megalithic period (Settar, 1982). The early markers, originally simple in design, progressively evolved into more complex and symbolically significant forms, particularly during the early historical and medieval eras. In Andhra Pradesh, these stones offer substantial insights into the socio-political and cultural values of the era, transitioning from basic tributes to warriors to intricate memorials that expressed the collective values of the communities that constructed them (Settar, 1982; Sundaram, 1979).

The practice of erecting hero stones in Andhra Pradesh became significant during the rule of the Chalukyas, Cholas, Kakatiyas, and the Vijayanagara Empire (Sontheimer, 1982). These dynasties emphasized the courage and loyalty of warriors, with hero stones functioning as historical records and symbols of religious and social duties. The hero stones from this era included intricate carvings and inscriptions that recorded the valor and sacrifice of the individuals they

honored (Sontheimer, 1982). Moreover, these memorials encompassed not just warriors but also local chieftains, ladies, and even animals that had played key parts in conflicts or mythology (Shastri, 1984).

The growth of these stones mirrors the shifting dynamics of society, as the growing social complexity is seen in the more intricate carvings and iconography of hero stones (Sontheimer, 1982). As social hierarchies became increasingly stratified, the stones evolved from representations of personal bravery to emblems of collective societal ideals, including loyalty, honor, and communal identity (Settar, 1982). Consequently, these stones transcended their role as simply memorials; they embodied the communal memory and values of entire communities.

In Kurnool and Kadapa, the iconography of hero stones evolved to feature dynamic representations of warriors in combat postures wielding weapons like swords and shields (Shastri, 1984). This creative progression is especially apparent in the carvings depicting the hero's reception by celestial entities, indicating their elevation to a divine rank. These representations illustrate a belief system in which the hero is commemorated not just for their earthly accomplishments but also esteemed as spiritually exalted, highlighting the amalgamation of religious principles with martial customs (Sontheimer, 1982; Shastri, 1984).

In places like Guntur and Prakasam, the focus was on the symbolic portrayal of the hero as a guardian of the community. The inscriptions and carvings in these areas frequently portray the warriors in more subdued, symbolic stances, highlighting their function as moral and ethical protectors of the hamlet (Sundaram, 1979). These creative decisions emphasize a more comprehensive interpretation of heroism, encompassing not only combat skill but also a profound sense of responsibility and allegiance to the community.

Often, these stones were positioned in conspicuous sites like village gates or temple courtyards, functioning as both memorials and protective shrines for the community (Settar, 1982). The conviction that the hero's essence dwelled within the stone conferred a hallowed value onto these markings, prompting the performance of gifts and rituals to venerate the hero and solicit their guardianship. The tradition of ancestor worship highlights the spiritual importance of hero stones in Andhra Pradesh, where it was believed that the deceased maintained their power on the living, especially regarding protection and the welfare of the community (Sontheimer, 1982).

The hero stones in Andhra Pradesh exemplify the creative accomplishments of their era. The initial stones exhibited simpler, more stylized carvings, whilst the subsequent stones got increasingly ornate, reflecting the enhanced ability and sophistication of local artists (Sundaram, 1979). The sculptural techniques utilized in these stones became increasingly sophisticated, with detailed representations of weaponry, clothes, and postures effectively illustrating the narrative of the hero's valor and sacrifice (Settar, 1982). The development of hero stones in Andhra Pradesh reflects the region's intricate social, cultural, and religious past. These stones function as memorials of personal bravery while also embodying the shared principles of the communities that constructed them, such as valor, loyalty, and civic responsibility (Shastri, 1984). The intricate iconography and inscriptions on these stones provide a significant resource for comprehending the intricate relationship between politics, religion, and social obligation in medieval Andhra Pradesh (Settar, 1982).

The Significance of Hero Stones in Andhra Pradesh

The tradition of hero stones in Andhra Pradesh is profoundly connected to the region's rich martial history. The Rayalaseema region, in particular, saw frequent battles for territorial control, making it a fertile ground for the proliferation of these memorials. These stones were erected to honor warriors who demonstrated exceptional bravery in the face of danger, serving as enduring monuments to their valor (Raghavayya, 1963; Vanamamalai, 1975). Andhra Pradesh, with its strategic importance and frequent conflicts, became a canvas for these heroic commemorations, reflecting the region's turbulent past.

Hero stones in Andhra Pradesh are not merely commemorative markers; they are vital historical records that offer deep insights into the socio-political dynamics of the time. Each stone tells a story about the relationships between rulers, warriors, and the communities they protected. The inscriptions and carvings on these stones often describe the power struggles, alliances, and territorial disputes that shaped the history of Andhra Pradesh (Vanamamalai, 1975; Sewell, 1884). These memorials thus serve as invaluable sources of historical data, providing future generations with tangible evidence of the past.

Moreover, hero stones offer significant insight into the religious practices of the period. Many of these stones are adorned with depictions of deities or religious symbols, reflecting the belief systems that influenced the martial ethos of the time (Gurumurthi, 1990). The stones often show the hero being received into the afterlife by divine beings, suggesting a fusion of martial valor and religious devotion (Vanamamalai, 1975). This religious dimension reinforces the hero's status not only as a warrior but also as a figure of spiritual importance.

Artistically, hero stones are significant for their intricate carvings and the evolution of sculptural styles. The artistic conventions followed in their creation mirror broader trends in South Indian art, including influences from dynasties such as the Chalukyas, Cholas, and Vijayanagara Empire (Fritz & Michell, 2001; Settar, 1992). The detailed depictions of battle scenes, weapons, and attire provide valuable insights into the material culture and artistic achievements of the period (Gurumurthi, 1990).

In essence, hero stones in Andhra Pradesh are more than just memorials; they are multi-dimensional artifacts that encapsulate the historical, religious, and artistic narratives of the region. These stones stand as silent witnesses to the valor and sacrifice that shaped the history of Andhra Pradesh, offering future generations a tangible link to their past (Settar, 1992; Raghavayya, 1963).

Veeragallu, or Hero Stones

Hero stones, or Veeragallu, are important commemorative monuments established in ancient India to honor those who sacrificed their lives in combat or other acts of bravery. These stones, particularly abundant in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana, possess cultural and historical significance as they embody the virtues of duty, valor, and heroism ingrained in South Indian civilization (Vanamamalai, 1975; Gurumurthi, 1990). Hero stones function as memorials and essential historical documents that illuminate the socio-political and religious aspects of their era.

The carvings and inscriptions on hero stones generally recount the valiant exploits of the individuals they honor. These actions frequently involve defending their realm, safeguarding livestock, or protecting women from assailants. Ooralivu denotes hero stones placed to commemorate persons who perished while protecting their village against enemy assaults. The inscriptions describe how villagers, particularly the youth, coordinated efforts to resist invaders, highlighting the community's collective bravery (Vanamamalai, 1975). Another form, Gadi Kalaga, commemorates persons who perished while safeguarding the geographical limits of their village. These hero stones underscore the significance of land to ancient societies, illustrating the profound bond between the populace and their territory (Gurumurthi, 1990). The inscriptions frequently illustrate episodes of territorial struggles, chronicling the valor of people who succumbed in these confrontations.

Go Grahana, sometimes referred to as Turugol, denotes hero stones commemorating persons who perished while defending or retrieving stolen animals. Cattle symbolized wealth and rank in ancient Indian communities, and these stones honor the endeavors of individuals who jeopardized their lives to safeguard this essential resource. The carvings sometimes portray events of cow raids, demonstrating the valiant efforts to reclaim stolen livestock (Raghavayya, 1963).

Pendirudeyurchu, or Penbuyyall, denotes hero stones commemorating persons who perished while safeguarding women's modesty during conflict. These stones embody the societal values of honor and protection attributed to the safety of women, illustrating the defenders' need to safeguard vulnerable community members (Gurumurthi, 1990).

Hero stones not only commemorate soldiers but also portray those who perished on hunting expeditions. Bete stones, such as Handi Bete (wild boar hunting) and Huli Bete (tiger hunting), commemorate individuals who lost their lives in the perilous endeavor of hunting wild animals. Hunting served as both a prevalent sport and a symbol of valor, with these stones providing significant insights into the cultural traditions related to hunting in ancient South India (Vanamamalai, 1975).

Kedda hero stones are uncommon and commemorate individuals who perished during the capture of wild creatures, especially elephants. The inscriptions and sculptures on these stones highlight the profound esteem accorded to individuals who completed the daunting task of taming wild animals, demonstrating their courage and expertise (Raghavayya, 1963).

Masti, or Maha Sati, stones represent a distinctive style of memorial found in Karnataka. These stones honor women who opted for self-immolation following their husbands' deaths, illustrating the cultural and religious importance of the Sati ceremony (Gurumurthi, 1990). Veera Masti Kallu remembers the hero who perished in war and his wife or wives who practiced self-immolation, recognizing their sacrifices (Gurumurthi, 1990).

Hero stones like Keelgunte and Sidithale exemplify extreme ritual sacrifice, with Keelgunte denoting memorials for individuals who engaged in self-burial or accompanied their master or king in death, and Sidithale honoring those who enacted dramatic self-sacrifice, including violent decapitation (Sewell, 1884). Dharmika stones commemorate individuals who sacrificed their lives for religious beliefs, highlighting the deep relationship between spirituality and personal sacrifice in ancient South Indian societies (Vanamamalai, 1975).

Nisidi memorial stones, associated with the Jain practice of Sallekana, honor persons who intentionally terminated their life via fasting as a component of their spiritual journey. These stones embody the profound religious beliefs of individuals who practiced this asceticism (Sewell, 1884). Ultimately, ceremonies like Uri Uyyale and Gootagalamele Beeluvudu, characterized by intense and severe sacrificial devotion, are commemorated in hero stones. These stones honor persons who forfeited their lives during particular rites, frequently on favorable periods like solar eclipses, to attain spiritual virtue (Raghavayya, 1963).

Figure 1 : The Sati stone from Damagatla, a village in Nandikotkur Mandal of Kurnool District, is distinguished as a distinct and intricate representation relative to other Sati stones in the Kurnool district. This stone exhibits a dual-level representation, which is quite rare among other stones from the area. The lower panel depicts the act of Sati in progress, with the woman seated in the Padmasana posture, encircled by flames. The vivid portrayal of fire encircling her implies her self-immolation on her husband's funeral pyre, rendering this a potent and unambiguous illustration of the ritual deed. This iconography conveys both the physical sacrifice and the ritual's transcendental dimension, since the woman is depicted in a serene and meditative stance, representing her acceptance of the sacrifice (Settar, 1982).

The upper panel transitions to the spiritual or celestial domain, with the woman seated beside her husband. Both figures are depicted seated on a pedestal, a prevalent emblem of honor and elevation in Indian imagery. This positioning certainly indicates their elevation to the divine world subsequent to the ceremony. The couple is portrayed in a state of tranquility and reverence, with their hands positioned in a folded motion (Anjali Mudra), signifying respect and their acceptance into the hereafter. They are encircled by Apsaras, celestial entities typically linked to the heavens and divine ecstasy in Hindu mythology. The Apsaras are depicted venerating the couple, signifying that their sacrifice has bestowed upon them a revered status in the afterlife.

A prominent characteristic of this stone is the umbrella-like formation above the couple, which conventionally represents royal or heavenly protection. In South Indian art and iconography, the umbrella frequently symbolizes a someone of elevated position or one favored by the divine. In this perspective, it signifies the spiritual safeguarding and exalted standing of the marriage, underscoring that their sacrifice has been divinely recognized (Kramrisch, 1981).

The portrayal of the woman in Padmasana amidst flames, culminating in her serene union with her husband in the celestial world, illustrates the passage from the terrestrial to the divine. This artistic depiction reflects the notion that the Sati ceremony was not merely a corporeal act of sacrifice, but a spiritual odyssey that guaranteed the unity of the woman and her husband in the afterlife. The focus on the couple's exalted position in the spiritual realm, as evidenced by the presence of Apsaras and the umbrella, illustrates the cultural ideals of respect, devotion, and transcendence in medieval South Indian society

The poses in this depiction are meaningful. The woman's seated Padmasana pose in the lower panel embodies tranquility and acceptance, frequently observed in representations of humans attaining spiritual freedom through sacrifice. In the upper panel, both characters are positioned in a calm, somewhat regal posture, with their legs crossed and hands folded in deference. This tranquil and reverent stance, coupled with the adjacent Apsara figures, exemplifies the divine veneration bestowed upon them following their ritual performance.

The Sati stone from Damagatla, illustrated in Fig-1, offers a unique graphic account that emphasizes the physical act of sacrifice and the subsequent spiritual blessings. This stone highlights the celestial honor bestowed to the couple, illustrating the cultural importance of the Sati ritual as a means of divine ascension. It provides significant insight into the regional beliefs and creative representations of heroism, dedication, and sacrifice in medieval Andhra Pradesh.

Figure 2: This hero stone from Nagalooty, a village in Midthur Mandal of Kurnool District, is situated at the middle of the village and showcases three warrior sculptures, each enclosed within its own distinct panel. The relief sculptures illustrate a rightward progression, implying a tale of conflict. The warrior on the left wields an axe in his right hand while gripping the severed head of an adversary with his left, signifying a triumphant act in combat. His stance, with the left leg advanced and the right leg retracted, signifies dynamic movement. The figure is adorned with basic embellishments, with two necklaces, arm bands, lower leg bands, and a lower garment, characteristic of heroic representations in memorial stones. His hair is styled in a bun, adorned with an object resembling a feather or a head ornament. This may symbolically denote a crown or leader's insignia, indicating his elevated status or leadership position in the conflict. Furthermore, he dons a sword or dagger affixed to a belt at his hip. An important element is the arrow embedded in his chest, representing the wounds incurred in combat, yet the warrior persists in battle, underscoring his leadership and valor.

The second panel illustrates a like figure, reflecting the posture and clothing of the first, yet armed with a bow and arrow. The warrior's body has discernible injuries, with two arrows lodged in his chest, indicating a fierce confrontation. His haircut, marked by long, cascading hair secured in the back, sets him apart from the initial warrior. His posture and movements imply communication or collaboration with the initial hero, potentially signifying a common objective or synchronization in the battle.

The third figure in the concluding panel mirrors the second in stance, clothing, and armament. Nonetheless, this figure's hair is styled in a bun, much to the earlier figure. Similar to others, he has apparent injuries, including an arrow embedded in his abdomen, underscoring the prevalent motif of resilience under life-threatening wounds. The uniformity in their attire, armaments, and stance indicates they were involved in a singular battle tableau, immortalized to honor their bravery and sacrifice (Sivaramamurti, 1981).

Figure 3: This hero stone from Nagatoor, a village in Nandikotkur Mandal of Kurnool District, illustrates a hero standing in a dignified position, clutching a linga, an iconic depiction of Lord Shiva, in his left hand. The inclusion of the linga indicates that this is not merely a representation of a heroic act but also a profound show of devotion to Shiva, the deity of destruction and regeneration in Hinduism. The king, via self-sacrifice by sitting on a shoola (Sharp weapon), dedicates his life to his people and his deity, underscoring the profound connection between religious devotion and martial heroism in ancient Indian warrior culture (Srinivasan, 1971).

The figure's stance—erect with the right hand elevated and the left hand grasping the linga—probably represents his steadfast devotion and a ceremonial dedication of his existence to Shiva. The linga is a highly venerated symbol in Shaivism, embodying the limitless essence of Shiva, and its depiction in the sculpture may indicate the king's appeal for heavenly favor or moksha (freedom) through his sacrifice (Michell, 1992). Such representations may also suggest that the hero monarch perceived his sacrifice not merely as an act of courage, but as a religious obligation associated with spiritual transcendence.

The hero dons a conical crown, accentuating his regal status. He is decked with basic, plain jewelry, including arm bands and necklaces, reflecting a warrior monarch who embodies dignified leadership without excessive ornamentation. The simplicity of the lower garment and absence of ostentation emphasize the spiritual importance of the scene, particularly his presentation of the linga. His right hand, positioned in a gesture of determination or command, enhances the spiritual symbolism, signifying both his identity as a warrior and as a follower of Shiva.

The act of sitting on a shoola, linked to Shiva's weapon, underscores the symbolic integration of the warrior's obligation and his divine reverence. The trident (shoola) is a potent symbol, signifying Shiva's dominion over the energies of creation, preservation, and destruction. The amalgamation of the linga and shoola in this picture implies a dual sacrifice: his existence to both the spiritual domain and his responsibilities as protector and sovereign. The linga in his hand certainly transforms this sacrifice into a ritualistic act, signifying that the hero king's death is not merely a political or martial event but also a religious submission to the divine (Sivaramamurti, 1981).

The erosion of the sculpture, especially on the facial features, reveals its antiquity, although the essential iconographic aspects remain distinct. The linga securely grasped in his left hand, the conical crown, and the assertive posture with one leg advanced collectively convey a synthesis of regal authority, spiritual reverence, and heroic sacrifice. The sacrifice depicted in the sculpture epitomizes the fundamental principles of ancient South Indian kingship—honor, commitment, and the readiness to die for both dharma and divinity.

Figure 4: The sculpture in the Sri Bhagavan Mahaveer Government Museum in Cuddapah distinctly depicts a warrior grasping a Valari (boomerang) in his right hand, while simultaneously brandishing a spear and a curved sword in his left. This assemblage of weaponry, encapsulated in a singular image, underscores the hero's preparedness for battle and his diverse skill set, mirroring the conventional representations seen in Veeragallu or hero stones throughout southern India.

The Valari, a boomerang-like weapon, was predominantly utilized by ancient warrior tribes in South Tamil Nadu, especially within the Pandya region. It served as a deadly instrument in both hunting and combat. The Valari comprised two types: returning and non-returning. The wooden variants were utilized for hunting animals such as hares and deer, whereas the iron counterparts were frequently deployed in combat to incapacitate or eliminate adversaries with accuracy (Govtmuseumchennai.org). The incorporation of the Valari in this sculpture is notable, as it is rarely encountered in Andhra Pradesh iconography, rendering its representation culturally distinctive.

Alongside the Valari, the warrior's spear and curved sword represent his proficiency in close-quarters fighting, highlighting his adaptability in warfare. The spear was mostly utilized for thrusting, whilst the sword was crucial for slicing, indicating that this fighter has proficiency in both ranged and close-quarters combat. The amalgamation of these weapons inside a single sculpture signifies the warrior's distinguished rank, hence strengthening the narrative of the hero stones that commemorated the valor and sacrifices of local warriors.

The representation of several weapons in the sculpture signifies the hero's function in safeguarding his people and region. In ancient South India, soldiers like this one were essential for safeguarding animals, repelling predators, and participating in conflicts with adversaries. The Valari was essential in repelling predators and adversaries, as well as possessing the distinctive capability to strike targets from a distance (Govtmuseumchennai.org). The sculpture exemplifies the cultural importance of the Valari and other weapons in South Indian martial traditions, connecting the hero's physical strength with his function as a guardian. The depiction of a hero with a Valari in this hero stone underscores the significance of such weapons in combat and the safeguarding of cattle, which were esteemed commodities in ancient South Indian civilization. The stone signifies a link between the Pandya and Andhra regions, where these cultural aspects may have converged. This sculpture provides a unique insight into the martial culture of Cuddapah, highlighting the prevalent use of these tools and their significance in hero stone imagery. The depiction of multiple weapons, especially the Valari, underscores the hero's extraordinary status and acts as a historical testament to his bravery and the cultural significance of these arms.

Figure 5. The hero stone at the Mopuru Bhairaveswara Temple in Cuddapah illustrates a scene of valiant self-sacrifice including the Ganda-Kattera, a ceremonial weapon intricately linked to ritualistic beheading in South Indian customs. The Ganda-Kattera originates from the Telugu term for huge shears or sacrificial blade, and it possesses considerable significance in the context of ritual self-sacrifice, especially within Shaiva worship traditions (Somasekhara Sarma, 1948). The hero illustrated on the stone presumably employed this weapon for self-decapitation as a religious offering, a practice historically linked to veneration of deities like Bhairava and Kali.

This depiction illustrates the hero grasping his severed head in one hand and the Ganda-Kattera in the other, indicating the apex of his final sacrifice (Goparaju, 1984). Such representations highlight the profound dedication of the hero, who is prepared to sacrifice his life to the divine in a ritual act of self-immolation. This action exemplifies the convergence of martial customs with religious commitment, wherein safeguarding cattle, community, and sacred sites was regarded as a hallowed obligation in South India (Elgood, 2004). The inclusion of two cows in the scene underscores the importance of cattle protection as a crucial aspect of the hero's sacrifice.

The Ganda-Kattera's application in Shaiva rites exemplifies that these weapons were not merely tools of warfare but were integral to religious ceremonies and acts of self-sacrifice. Ritual armament, particularly the Ganda-Kattera, is a fundamental aspect of hero stones, highlighting the hero's function as a guardian and dedicated follower of his deity (Somasekhara Sarma, 1948). In Andhra Pradesh, where hero stones are prevalent, the interplay of battle and religious symbolism is significant, illustrating the hero's dual obligation to safeguard both his society and sacred sites.

The stone's symbolism, featuring two cows, underscores the hero's function as a protector of animals, deemed an essential responsibility in South India's agrarian civilization. The safeguarding of animals was frequently linked to religious convictions, and heroes who undertook these deeds were commemorated on stones such as this, where their sacrifices were acknowledged and revered by the community (Goparaju, 1984). This hero stone from Mopuru Bhairaveswara Temple exemplifies the amalgamation of martial bravery with sacred ceremony in South Indian culture. The Ganda-Kattera signifies both the sacrificial sword and the emblem of the hero's profound commitment, whereas the portrayal of cattle illustrates the hero's holy obligation to safeguard his community and its resources (Elgood, 2004).

Figure 6: Hero stone from the Kondapalli Museum. This weathered hero stone, sculpted from sandstone, illustrates a vigorous tableau of a warrior against a tiger. Sandstone, a prevalent material in South Asian art for its malleability and resilience, has been utilized here; yet, erosion over time has obscured certain intricate elements (Singh, 2008). The sculpture emphasizes a heroic story, depicting the warrior in a dynamic position, with one leg advanced, signifying motion and preparedness for battle. The warrior brandishes a javelin, emblematic of courage and protection, while his poised stance indicates imminent confrontation with the tiger (Srinivasan, 2010).

The tiger, despite being smaller than the warrior, exhibits hostility by its stance. This artistic decision—representing the animal as smaller than the human—highlights the hero's moral and physical superiority, a prevalent stylistic feature in

Indian art intended to exalt human virtues above the perils of nature (Verghese, 2000). The warrior's garb, characterized by a belt and flowing drapery, enhances the impression of movement, while his hair, illustrated in motion, amplifies the scene's urgency and intensity. Despite the erosion of face features, the posture and arrangement of the figures convey a moment of impending confrontation, embodying the hero's valor and fortitude (Srinivasan, 2010).

Hero stones of this nature were customarily constructed to commemorate warriors who perished in the protection of their village or livestock (Verghese, 2000). They frequently functioned as monuments for the deceased and as inspirational symbols for the living. In several instances, they designated sacred sites, potentially the locations of the heroic actions themselves (Singh, 2008). The crude and unrefined quality of this stone indicates a tradition particular to a certain location or era that favored narrative clarity over artistic sophistication. Although lacking in intricate information, the narrative effectively emphasizes the hero's courage and preparedness to confront the tiger (Srinivasan, 2010).

This hero stone exemplifies how South Indian art commemorates individual deeds of valor within a wider socio-cultural framework. The coarse style may indicate its origin in a rural locale or from a culture that prioritized moral narratives over execution precision, a trait evident in early medieval hero stones throughout Andhra Pradesh and South India (Verghese, 2000).

Figure 7: This sculpture from Korukonda village, Guntur, although originally a hero stone, is venerated by the local populace as the deity Gangamma. The sculpture, depicted in a dynamic dance posture, represents a vigorous, animated figure with cascading hair and attire that implies motion. Although it is a hero stone, the villagers' reverence has altered its value to that of a guardian deity, illustrating the evolution of cultural and religious meanings over time. The portrayal of movement, illustrated through the figure's hair and garments appearing as if in motion, amplifies the perception of divine intervention, signifying the continuous safeguarding provided by Gangamma to the hamlet (Sivaramamurti, 1981).

The figure wields a dagger in the right hand, a conventional emblem of protection and combat skill, while the left hand grasps a fruit, potentially representing fertility, sustenance, or a tribute to the divine. The dual symbolism of the dagger and fruit indicates that the figure represents both fierce protection and nurturing qualities, a trait commonly observed in South Indian village deities revered for their capacity to defend and to bestow abundance and prosperity upon the community (Kramrisch, 1981; Sastri, 1984).

This stone, initially designed to honor a hero, illustrates the adaptation of heroism-related objects into local religious customs. In South India, hero stones were traditionally employed to commemorate those who perished in acts of bravery, frequently in the protection of the community. In Korukonda, this stone has been recontextualized as a central object of veneration for Gangamma, a village deity, exemplifying the malleability of religious identity in rural customs (Settar, 1982; Sontheimer, 1982). The connection to Gangamma, a nurturing and safeguarding entity, enhances the stone's importance, rendering it both a historical and spiritual item.

The movement illustrated in the sculpture exemplifies the prevalent South Indian creative method of crafting realistic figures that seem to be captured in the throes of action. The billowing clothes and hair indicate that the deity is engaged in a ritual dance, a characteristic especially pertinent to local festivals and processions, when dance serves as a significant expression of devotion. The villagers' designation of this hero stone as Gangamma illustrates the adaptive character of worship in rural South Indian societies, where historical artifacts are frequently integrated into contemporary religious practices (Verghese, 2000).

This hero stone from Korukonda, currently venerated as Gangamma, exemplifies the evolution of local traditions and the transformation of sacred artifacts' meanings throughout time. The stone, originally established to commemorate a heroic individual, has evolved into a fundamental element of community life, symbolizing both safeguarding and fecundity. The sculpture effectively illustrates motion and employs symbolic elements like the dagger and fruit, fulfilling a twofold function of linking historical context with contemporary worship (Sastri, 1984; Sontheimer, 1982).

Figure 8 : Hero Stone Sculpture from Tripuranthakam Temple, Prakasam District
This hero stone, located in Tripuranthakam Temple in Prakasam district, illustrates a striking and emblematic display of profound devotion. The illustration depicts a hero severing his tongue and handing it to a deity, symbolizing self-sacrifice and religious devotion. In South Indian traditions, such representations frequently signify the hero's commitment and readiness to undergo personal suffering to exhibit faith or to attain divine favor (Sontheimer, 1982).

The hero is sculpted in a frontal position, with meticulous attention to his posture as he performs the act of offering.

The hero's hands are directed towards his mouth, grasping his severed tongue, while his torso is embellished with modest yet emblematic adornments, including a belt and flowing lower clothes. The carving is uncomplicated yet powerfully communicates the significance of the situation. The act of severing one's tongue may symbolize the sacrifice of speech, silence, or personal anguish to the deities as an expression of devotion (Settar, 1982).

The hero's look is serene, akin to previous South Indian heroic portrayals, emphasizing not the anguish but the individual's will to surpass bodily suffering for spiritual purposes. This tranquility further underscores the hero's total acceptance of his destiny and the spiritual importance of the act. The portrayal of such profound self-sacrifice underscores the notion that heroes were not merely fighters but individuals exhibiting steadfast dedication to the deities (Kailasapathy, 1968).

Hero stones, such as Fig-8 , functioned as memorials and educational instruments for communities. They honored persons who performed remarkable acts of bravery or dedication and imparted moral and spiritual lessons to all who encountered them. This stone presumably served as a reminder of the significance of dedication and the efforts one may do to appease the divine (Verghese, 2000). In conclusion, Fig- 8 illustrates the profound devotion and spiritual commitment evident in South Indian hero stones. The stone, via its portrayal of self-inflicted suffering and personal sacrifice, not only commemorates the hero but also symbolizes the virtues of commitment, sacrifice, and religious faith inherent in the region.

Figure 9 : Hero Stone Sculpture from the Tripuranthakam Temple, Prakasam District This sculpture, located at Tripuranthakam Temple in Prakasam district, Andhra Pradesh, exemplifies a hero stone (viragal), a commemorative monument honoring persons who made the ultimate sacrifice. The individual illustrated is performing ritual self-sacrifice, employing various weapons to inflict injuries upon himself. Acts of sacrifice were frequently executed to exemplify courage, commitment, and loyalty, virtues esteemed in South Indian warrior cultures (Sontheimer, 1982; Settar, 1982).

The hero is depicted in a frontal position, characteristic of South Indian sculptures, with one leg forward and a sword in his left hand, which is embedded in his left leg. The utilization of many weapons, including a sword penetrating his heart and another through his head, underscores the severity of his self-imposed sacrifice. This demonstration of physical resilience and valor underscores the hero's readiness to withstand hardship for a greater purpose, frequently to attain spiritual merit or save his community (Settar, 1982; Vanamamalai, 1975).

The embellishments on the figure, such as leg bands, a belt, and layered clothes, signify the hero's elevated rank, either as a warrior or nobleman. The intricate depiction of the clothing and adornments underscores his importance within the culture that constructed this stone. Hero stones of this nature served both memorial and symbolic purposes, embodying the values of heroism and self-sacrifice esteemed in South Indian culture (Fritz & Michell, 2001; Gurumurthi, 1990).

The hero's serene face expression is especially striking, since it juxtaposes the horrific act of self-harm. This indicates the hero's acquiescence to his destiny and underscores the spiritual aspect of his sacrifice. In South Indian tradition, such utterances frequently convey moral fortitude and transcendence, so bolstering the hero's position as a moral and spiritual exemplar (Kailasapathy, 1968; Sastri, 1984).

Fig- 9 is a significant artifact that elucidates the cultural values of bravery and sacrifice in Andhra Pradesh. The sculpture depicts a hero through the utilization of weaponry, dynamic stance, and a composed expression, illustrating a self-inflicted death that serves as both a personal act of devotion and a public demonstration of honor. Hero stones such as this were crucial in commemorating particular acts of valor while also functioning as instructive and inspirational emblems for subsequent generations (Verghese, 2000; Sontheimer, 1982).

Photos



Fig- 1



Fig- 2



Fig- 3



Fig- 4



Fig- 5



Fig- 6



Fig- 7



Fig- 8



Fig- 9

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