

Origin and Evolution of Hero Stones in Karnataka – A Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Hero-stones are slabs with an image of a man, who had performed some heroic deed, carved on it to commemorate his act of valour. This hero could have participated in a war, or could have saved his village from bandits or marauding wild animals and ultimately lost his life.

The term *veeragal* means hero-stones in Kannada language. Hero-stones are slabs with an image of a man, who had performed some heroic deed, carved on it to commemorate his act of valour. This hero could have participated in a war, or could have saved his village from bandits or marauding wild animals and ultimately lost his life. Most times, there will be an inscription alongside giving details of the hero. Some of the slabs are carved into horizontal sections, depicting the actual battle scene with the figure of the hero in the midst of the action.

The tradition of commemorating with Hero Stones in India dates between the third century B.C. and the 18th century A.D. These stone steles are adorned with a variety of carvings, including Hero-stones, and often a narrative of epic battle. They were placed in the memory of monarchs, chieftains, soldiers, holy people and respected members of society, especially those who had died in specific events: during cattle raids, while protecting feminine virtue, while saving family members, in following a leader's orders, or while defending land.

The earliest record for Hero cult is noticed in the Vedic literature in India. In the Brahmanas we find references to ancient royal heroes like Janamejaya parikshita, Marutta Aiksvaka and Bharata Dausyanti. Sovereignty of the whole country, with the four seas as its boundaries, became the objective of monarchical ambition in ancient times. Specially, the Satapatha Brahmana gives interesting details regarding the fourth stage. It is worthwhile to note that the proper time prescribed for the erection of a monument should be so long after the death that the memory of the time, date month or even the year of the event should go beyond human remembrance. The directions for the selection of the site of such a monument are also specified. We find the references to the hero cult in the Epics and Puranas also. King was coronated as an emperor to the accompaniment of Vedic rites called Mahabhisheka, which was a part of the ceremony called as Rajasuyayaga.

In the Sangam literature, we find number of memorial monuments variously assigned from 3rd BC and 3rd AD. These monuments refer to an established custom of erecting a menhir in memory of the dead. Tolakapiam itself utilizes the hero-stone details and offers several interesting data on its features, as collected at the time of its composition. The significance reference to the memorial or hero stones as part of the sepulchral mounds in the early historic age. This is, however, considerable archaeological evidence relating to the memorial or hero stones.

These hero stones are found all over India. Majority of the time it is divided into three vertical panels. The lowest part represents the scene of the hero fighting against the lifters. The middle part of the stone represents the hero being taken to heaven in a vimana by celestial nymphs. On some hero stones, these ladies carry water-pitchers on their heads which is a symbol of auspiciousness. The musical accompaniment generally consists of drums, pipes and cymbals. The upper part depicts the subject worshipping a deity such as a Shiva linga, occasionally with a bull squatting in front. Sometimes, a cow with a suckling calf, and the Sun and the Moon are also shown. occasionally, some hero stones are divided into four or five panels depending on the event. Besides the conventional form, there is also exist other forms of the memorial. The single panel variety usually depicts the hero with an upraised weapon striding either left or right. In a few cases, his body is shown being pierced by arrows or fighting against the enemy, an animal, or in the midst of a battle. In the case of a hero-stone composed of two panel, the lower part carries the aforesaid depictions and the upper part either depicts a deity or the hero seated in the presence of a deity.

The hero, generally shown prominently, is represented in action, either on foot or on horseback. Where a king or general is involved, an umbrella is shown over his head. The hero generally wears a short dhoti. He also wears ornaments such as garlands, armlets, anklets, bangles, ear studs and etc. In generally, hero tied his hair in a knot on the back top or

sides of the head. He is having sword, spear and shields, bows and arrows and other different weapons. Hero stones are known in different terms in different parts of India and have been reported from Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh and other part of Central India

Hero stones in Karnataka :

Karnataka is one of the state which was geographically located on the south western part of India, Karnataka has abundant natural and human resources. It has the remains of numerous pre-historic settlements, innumerable inscriptions, memorial (Hero, mahasati and nishadhi stones and monuments of rich historical and cultural heritage. It has number of Memorial/hero stones through out the area. According to the S. Shettar a prominent historian, the largest concentration of such memorial/Hero stones is found in the Indian state of Karnataka. About three thousand hero stones, the earliest dated to the 5th century have been discovered in Karnataka.

Hero stones were classified under various sub-types based on the cause or nature of death as depicted in the sculptural register representing the theme of 'heroic death' in conjunction with the inscribed record. Thus the hero stones in this study have been classified as under viz. battle, cattle raid, skirmish, self-immolation, hunting or killed by animals and memorials for pets.

Few of the hero stones from South Karnataka do indicate the existence of this practice in the in this region as early as the early Common Era. However, Karnataka region provides us with the maximum number of such hero stones stones though evidences for this cult and rituals start occurring in Karnataka as late as 6th century AD. The first hero stone in this region is from Tamatakallu dated to c. 500 AD. Early hero stones are mostly reported from the southwestern and southern Karnataka region which was under the sway of the Kadambas of Badami and Gangas of Talakadu.

We have found few number of Hero-stones belonging to Kadamabas of Banavasi and their contemporary dynasties in the western part of Karnataka. A hero stone found at Tamburu(932 AD), mentions the Rashtrakuta monarch, Govinda IV and his feudatory, Kanniah maharaja and records the death of Anniga of Tamburu in battle; the other of the same family, found at Kiravatti(984 AD), mentions that when the maharaja was ruling the country of the Palasige-12000, a certain hero died in a scuffle arising out of a cattle-raid. Various hero stones are found at Tamburu, Sangameswara(Kalaghatagi), Janaga(Halyal), Bailandur(Yellapura), Nandighatta(Mundagod), and other places of Karnataka. In this period black hard stone was used for erecting the hero stones by the contemporary artists. The surfaces of most of the hero-stones belonging to this period are undressed and the figures on them are carved in low relief.

From about 10th century onwards a large number of hero-stones begin to occur in the Uttara Kannada region and many of them belong to the reiyn-periods of the Pandyas of

Sisugali and the Kadambas of Chandavara. At the beginning hero-pillars were erected in the honour of the dead heroes, while after 12th century carved hero-stone slabs of the usual type were set up. The heroes seem to have died in small family feuds which were so frequent between the rulers of the region below the ghats. This feature continued even after the advent of Vijayanayara and there were good nuber of encounters between the Chiefs of Haduvalli and Gerusoppe in particular.

The Gangas appears to have started their rule in c. 350 from Kolar and later their capital seems to have shifted to Talakad. Until the advent of the Badami Chalukyas, they were almost a sovereign power. Many Ganga princes were not only scholars and writers, but also great patrons of scholarship. Later they continued to rule over Gangavadi (which comprised major parts of South Karnataka and parts of Tamilnadu) uptill the close of 10th century, as subordinates of the Badami Chalukyas and the Rashtrakutas.

The hero-stones, which are belonging to this period are very unique in character. A total of morethan 200 veeragals datable to this period were documented. Most hero-stones of the Ganga period are inscribed. The hero-stones of the Ganga period are carved out of huge slabs of granite, in most cases measuring about 2m in height and 1m in width. The surfaces of most of the hero-stones belonging to this period are undressed and the figures on them are carved in low relief. The hero-stones are essentially composed of three panels depicting the conventional themes. In the lower part an emphasis is placed in the depiction of the deceased hero, where a quarter of the available space is used to depict the hero in battle. Instances of other causes of death such as death during cattle-raids and skirmishes were also observed. The hero in the lower part is usually in alindasana posture, sometimes with his body being pierced with arrows. The middle panel depicts the deceased hero being carried to heaven by apsaras by securing him by his elbows. A second variety is also seen wherein the deceased hero is shown seated on a pedestal or in a few cases, a palanquin which is being carried by the apsaras. The top panel in most cases contains the depiction of the deceased hero seated on an elevated platform inside a mantapa-like structure and in a few others he is depicted being seated in the presence of a shivalinga. Besides the above mentioned varieties, a single registered variety is also reported by meny schollers in this region.

Around fifteen hero stones which are belonging to Ganga period found at Mallarayanakatte of Gadag district. Most of all are in same in character. Each of these is divided in to three panels. The lower part of the stone has the relief of the hero in combat, the middle panel reveals the ascent of the dead warrior to Heaven and in the top panel, the hero is shown sitting in Heaven. A larg number of hero stones were noticed throughout the southern part of Karnataka which are belonging to the period of Ganga dynasty.

The Chalukyas of Badami brought the whole of Karnataka under a single rule. They have become immortal due to their contributions in the field of art and architecture.

Their monuments are concentrated at Badami, Nagara, Aihole, B.N. Jalinal, Pattadakal, Old and new Mahakuta in Karnataka and at Alampur, Gadwal, Satyavolal and Bichavolu in Andhra Pradesh. They are both rock-cut and structural, with wonderful sculptures wrought in hard red sandstone. In 753, Dantidurga, a feudatory chieftain of Rashtrakuta origin overthrew the Chalukyan king Kirthivarman II, and his family inherited the fortunes of the Chalukyas. With the establishment of Rashtrakuta rule over the deccan, the practice of erecting memorials to warriors appears to have gained prominence in Karnataka. An interesting variety and large number of hero stones which are belonging to the both dynasties are noticed at Dharwad, Gadag, Haveri, Chitradurga, Bellary, Tumkur, Kolar and other districts in Karnataka. These were also unique in character.

Hero-stones belonging to Rashtrakuta period are mostly found in the Karnataka region. More especially in the districts of Mysore, Kolar, Hassan, Tumkur, Shimoga, Davanagere and Chitradurga. These hero-stones commemorate heroes fallen in engagements related to cattle raids and cattle retrieving. There are about hundreds of hero-stones belonging to this period. Most of them are concerned with cattle raids. Some glorify those fallen in other battles or fighting wild animals. Some of these record grants of land to a relative of the fallen hero.

A considerable number of hero-stones of the Chalukyas of Kalyana and Hoysala have been found throughout Karnataka. These hero-stones are of medium height, about 5' x 2.5'; but some are about 7'x3' or more. The number of panels in which the conventional scenes of action is depicted also varies according to the size and circumstances in which the hero-stone was established.

The hero-stones of the Hoysala period are primarily carved out of chloritic-schist, (soapstone) commonly available in the region. It is close grained stone, congenial to work and even durable. The adoption of this stone for constructing monuments facilitated the art of decorative carving for which the Hoysala architectural tradition is specially known. The use of this stone allowed the artists in the depiction of finer details. The stone was carefully dressed before carving and have a curvilinear apex. Hundreds of hero-stones datable to the Hoysala period were noticed. They are essentially composed of three panels, although a few hero-stones of four, five and six panels were also observed. The three panels represent the conventional themes of the hero-stones found in the region, although they vary in their sculptural representations from the hero-stones datable to the other periods. The lower panel depicts the deceased hero in midst of combat as seen in the hero-stone datable to the Ganga period. The middle register depicts the deceased hero being transported to heavens in a vimana carried by the apsaras. The vimana forms depicted on the hero-stone are similar in style to the vimanas built during the Hoysala period. In a few cases, the apsaras are also depicted transporting the deceased hero by lifting him by his waist. The upper panel depicts the hero seated in the presence of a deity, usually a shivalinga. In a few hero-stones,

Shiva is also represented in Bhairava and Uma-maheshwara forms.

The hero-stones, of the Vijayanagara and the Nayaka periods here are grouped together, as although the region passed under the control of the Vijayanagara rulers after the fall of the Hoysalas, Paleyagars continued to rule even after the fall of the Vijayanagara Empire until they were eventually overthrown by Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan. The hero-stones datable to this period were caused to be made on undressed granite slabs. In a very few cases, the use of chloritic-schist has also been observed as a continuation of the preceding tradition. Certain practices which evolved during the earlier periods can be seen in the last phase of the hero-stones, tradition in the region such as depiction of sun and moon and kirtimukha which evolved during the Hoysala period. The hero-stones, datable to the Vijayanagara and the Nayaka periods are of three types, viz. single registered, two registered, and three or more registers. They are comparatively smaller in size, usually measuring not more than a meter in height. The hero-stones datable to this period in the region are mostly non-inscribed. Apart from the variations in size, raw material used in their making and the absence of inscriptions on them, a marked difference is observable in their sculptural art from hero-stones of earlier periods. For instance, the hero-stones of the earlier periods depict the deceased hero in the lower register in alindasna posture, but in the Vijayanagar and the Nayaka period, this practice is discontinued. The hero is generally shown striding to the right or left carrying his weapons. The apsaras and other women depicted on the hero-stones datable to the Vijayanagara and the Nayaka periods are shown wearing a long lower garment and an upper garment in a few cases, in comparison to the short lower garment from earlier periods.

The hero-stones in the Karnataka are datable between 5th and 18th century AD and were chronologically classified under the Kadambas of Banavasi, the Gangas of Talkad, the Chalukyas of Badami, the Rashtrakutas of Malakheda, the Chalukyas of Kalyana, the Hoysala, the Vijayanagara and the Paleyagars. The aforementioned system of chronologically classifying hero-stones involved the formulation of methodological parameters resting upon a premise established by S. Settar, asserts that the artists responsible in fashioning of the hero-stones were trained in the prevailing art traditions in the region of the period. Thus, being trained in a specific art tradition, they fashioned the memorial in a similar convention that was used to fashion to sculptural embellishments adorning major architectural edifices. The above premise was later elaborated by Sesha Sastry, K.V.Sounda Rajan, K.Rajan, A Sundara, M.Chidananda murthy, R.N.Gurav, R.M. Shadaksharaiah and other scholars to chronologically classify hero-stones based on a comparative analysis of the inscribed and non-inscribed hero-stones in conjunction with the sculptures adorning monumental edifices of the period. Through their analysis, we pointed out several parameters to determine the chronology of the hero-stones in modern Karnataka region based on the size, raw material used in their making, presence or absence of inscribed record and the form of the memorial.

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