

Veeragallus of Begur: A Study of Hero stones and memorial Traditions in Karnataka

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Abstract—For centuries, people have always believed in honouring the dead and fallen warriors who sacrificed their lives for the cause of society. Practices have evolved from megalithic burial to easy funerary practices; each culture glorifies the sacrifice of their warriors in different forms. In the Indian subcontinent, especially the southern region formally called the Tamilakam region, archaeological and literary sources provide evidence of Hero stones commemorating the warriors who died in cattle raids, warfare, serving the king or while performing a ritual sacrifice. Hero stones constitute viable evidence for reconstructing the social and ritual practices of the society of the Sangam era.

I. INTRODUCTION

Hero worship has always been a practice in various cultures around the world. Despite differences in culture, ethnicity, language, and tradition, they share similar elements, such as worshipping the divine and remembering their ancestors. The tradition of commemorating Hero Stones in India dates from the third century B.C. to the 18th century A.D. During ancient times, people erected stone slabs to commemorate the dead and, with time, this practice turned to glorify the warriors who sacrificed their lives while protecting their village. In India, this practice holds great significance in the southern region of the subcontinent, formerly known as Tamilakam, which consisted of modern-day Tamil Nadu, most parts of Kerala, and the southern regions of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh.

The study of hero stones is done through various archaeological, literary, inscriptional and archival sources. The archaeological sources consist of hero stones and sculptures found in temple complexes and museums. Some of the hero stones contain inscriptions which provide information about the hero or sometimes the cause of his death. Inscriptions are inscribed in the native language, i.e., Tamil or Kannada, in most parts of the region.

Hundreds of wars have been fought in the region of Tamilakam during the Sangam age, and we find their

mentions in books like Silapathikaram, Tolkapiyyam, Ainkurunuru, Purananuru, Pattuppattu and more. Tolkapiyyam mentions the stages of erecting a memorial and raising it correctly. The mention of Hero worship and the erection of such stones can be found under the Puram theme, which elaborates on warfare, valour, public life and heroic battles. Apart from these archival records are the colonial records and documentation, along with records maintained in government museums, as found in the Government Museum of Bangalore, where Hero stones are preserved and maintained. The erection of these hero stones forms an important aspect of ritualistic culture and tradition; the establishment of these stone memorials and the stages involved in erecting and worshipping them correctly portray the belief system of the society and how bravery and valour were the major values at that time.

Hero Stones found in the Begur region.

The hero stones (Veergallu in Kannada) found in the Begur region of Karnataka form an important discovery when it comes to studying the history and cultural significance of hero stones. The language of the inscriptions on the stones is Kannada, with a generous mix of Sanskrit. These stones were erected by the grateful king, community or family. The structure of these stones has changed significantly over the period of time. However, their sculptural details are important. Sculptures depict pictorial narration and the context as to why the stone was erected. Some give detailed descriptions of a battle, for example the 'Begur Hero stone', which contains the earliest written mention of 'Bengaluru' and details a fierce cattle raid. Now housed in the Government Museum of Bengaluru.

Begur's Panchalinga Nageshwara temple complex features detailed carvings of a medieval battle with soldiers, spears and swords, marking the death of chieftain Nagattara's son and giving the city its first recorded name. Several stones display tiered carvings depicting battle scenes, celestial ascents of fallen heroes, and representations of cattle rescue. The

stones are preserved near the corner of the ancient temple complex, which is dedicated to five distinct shrines of Lord Shiva.

Types of hero stones found in the Begur region.

These Hero stones are found scattered all over the southern region of the Indian subcontinent. The majority of these stones are found divided into three panels, depicting different phases of the hero's death and his union with the divine. The lowest panel depicts the hero fighting the enemy or defending the cattle; the middle often shows the hero being taken to heaven after his death with the celestial nymphs; and the top panel depicts the hero worshipping the deity, often a Shiva linga. Besides the conventional form, other forms of the memorial also exist. 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 panels, 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 Veeragallus (hero stones) found in the Begur region, Karnataka, primarily in the Panchalinga Nageshwara temple and the Bangalore Museum, are of various types.

Three major categories of Hero stones found are:

1. With inscription only
These stones only yielded information based on inscriptions written on a stone slab and were devoid of any sculptural representation. The script found was in the Kannada language.
2. With sculptures only
These stones carry only sculptural representation and are found in quite a good number. These stones do not have any inscriptional evidence, sometimes making it difficult to decode the meaning behind these stones. However, most of the stones depict a warrior with a sword or dagger defending cattle or a community in warfare.
3. With both sculpture and inscription
These types of stones provide much information regarding the hero and under what circumstances the hero dies. The epigraphical and sculptural evidence

together form an important basis for the reconstruction of history.

These Veeragallus are further divided into types:

1. Hero stones on Attack of Forts
These stones commemorate warriors who died protecting forts and fought beside the king. These stones have fort walls etched onto them with horses and elephants.
One of the finest examples is the Begur Veeragallu, which is now housed in the Government Museum of Bengaluru. The stone is ornately sculpted and depicts soldiers on a battlefield.
2. Ooralivu, Defending Village
Hero stones of this kind are erected for people and warriors who died while protecting their village from external attack. Some of the stones found with inscriptions describe how the hero died while safeguarding his village.
3. Turugol, Defending Cattle
These stones are erected to commemorate the people who died while defending cattle from enemy territory. Cattle was considered a form of wealth, and capturing cattle from enemy territory was considered an act of pride. Hence, stones were erected in honour of these heroes.
Apart from the types found in the above-mentioned places, there are several other types found scattered all over South India, such as:
4. Pendirudeyurchu, Penbuyyall
These stones honoured those who died while protecting the modesty of women in distress.
5. Keelgunte – Self Burial
6. Sidithale
Sacrifice for the welfare of the king
7. Dharmika – Religious sacrifice
Uri Uyyale – Swing on a fire
Shoola – Sitting on sharp objects
8. Jataka
There are memorial stones of the religious persons of the Buddhist (Buddhism) sect, usually depicted as part of 'Jataka' tales.

Religious and cultural significance

The practice of setting up memorial stones to commemorate warriors in the Sangam era can be traced back to the funerary practices of the megalithic period. This practice is often mentioned in the Sangam anthologies. This tradition serves as a vital window into the social history, regional warfare, and spiritual beliefs of the ordinary people living in the society. The hero stones also constitute a significant part of material evidence to reconstruct the socio-political norms of the society in the Tamilakam region. Heroism is a quality which is much revered and valued by any society. Stories of heroes and warriors arouse the feeling of bravery, valour and sacrifice for the greater good, in this case the protection of the village and cattle. Warriors, after their death, are believed to have received a similar status as gods, and hence some of the hero stones have images depicting the warrior being escorted to heaven along with angels and being seated beside the god.

This funerary practice in peninsular India was to commemorate and glorify individuals killed in battle, cattle raids, skirmishes and self-immolatory practices since the early medieval period. Such modes of death, aimed towards the protection and promotion of the interests of the society, constituted an integral element of one's dharma. The erection of these stone memorials also emphasised the political authority of the region and qualities of the ruling elite. The majority of the Veergullu inscriptions, although brief and fragmentary, mention the ruling elite at the time of the death of the hero commemorated by the memorial.

Society and literature glorified sacrifice in the battlefield, which ensured the warrior's fame and a place in heaven. Assurance of spiritual, social and economic gains appears to have emboldened soldiers so much as to lead them to embrace death on the battlefield without anxiety. Some hero stones of Jain monks commemorate sacred deaths, particularly through the ritual vow of 'sallekhana' (fasting unto

death); these stones signify spiritual liberation rather than martial valour.

II. CONCLUSION

The study of Veeragullus goes beyond the commemoration of individual warriors. These hero stones constitute a significant source of understanding the social, political, cultural and religious aspects of the society of the Tamilakam region. Interpretation of these hero stones reveals that the centuries-old tradition of bravery, sacrifice, valour and protection of the community was one of the highly respected virtues reflected in the society. Apart from this, literary evidence mentions the proper procedure of erecting Veeragallus, showing how sacred they were considered.

Hero stones found in the Begur region are a valuable source for inscriptional and sculptural evidence. Stones found in the Panchalingeshwara temple complex are varied, depicting visuals of warfare, cattle raids, and warriors getting pierced by arrows, along with stone slabs containing only inscriptions. The stone slabs, including three panels, show the phases of a warrior's death and his unification with the lord; this depiction is important to understand the ritualistic practices and their belief in the afterlife. At the same time, memorials associated with self-sacrifice, religious death and Jain 'sallekhana' reveal that the concept of a significant or sacred death extended beyond warfare.

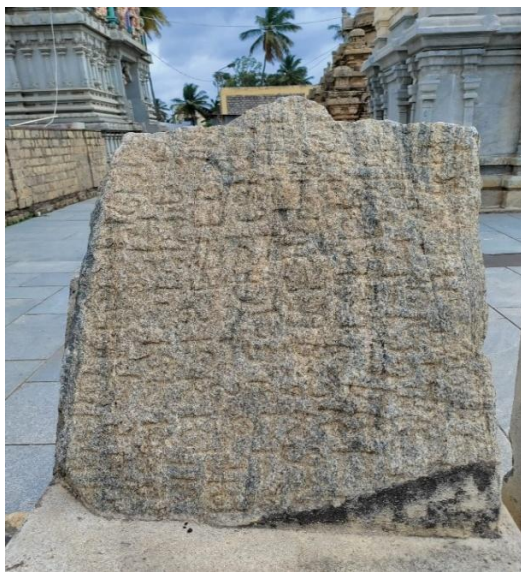
Most importantly, hero stones provide a valuable connection between material culture and literary traditions. When studied alongside Sangam literature, inscriptions, archaeological remains and archival records, they help reconstruct aspects of everyday life that are often absent from royal historical narratives. They reveal the importance of warfare, cattle, village communities, political authority, religious beliefs and social ideals in early and medieval South Indian society.



Warrior holding a sword and a shield in a battle.



A three-panel hero stone.



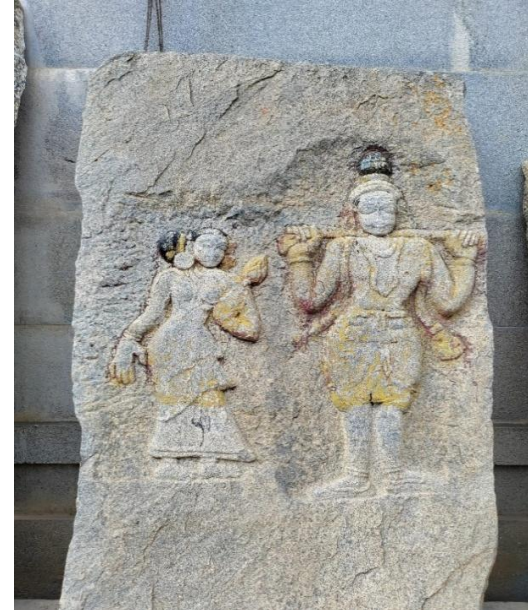
Hero stone with inscription only.



Hero stone depicting a Jain monk in a meditative position.



Hero stone of a warrior shown pierced through many arrows.



Hero stone depicting God and goddess, generally Shiva and Parvati or Vishnu and Laxmi.

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