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Herostones: A Study of Grouped Sculptures in Mopuru, and Tripuranthakam in Andhra Pradesh

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Abstract:

In the varied architectural landscape of the temples of Andhra Pradesh, one artistic phenomena appears that are the hero stones also referred as Viragals arranged into elaborate sculptures. This study examines the creative representations and sculptural characteristics of such hero stones, with a particular emphasis on two prominent temples: the Bhairaveswara temple in Mopuru and the Tripurantakeswara temple in Tripuranthakam. The article tries to identify the aesthetic principles and practices used by past artisans through a rigorous examination of their craftsmanship, design features, and iconography. The grouping patterns of these sculptures are studied in depth, with a focus on their iconography and the narratives they seek to express within their religious surroundings. This study not only provides a better knowledge of the region's distinct sculptural traditions for creating herostones, but it also emphasizes the significance of maintaining these artistic gems as silent but eloquent testaments to Andhra Pradesh's rich cultural legacy.

Keywords: Viragal, Vira Svarga, Sacrifice, Visual Narratives; Andhra Pradesh.

Introduction

Hero stones, also known as "Veeragallu" (Kannada), "Veerakkal" (Tamil), or "Veeragal/Veeragallu" (Telugu), are memorial stones placed in honor of a hero, typically a warrior, who gave their life in the line of duty, whether in battle or in another act of courage. These stones serve as a concrete reminder of their bravery and record their actions for posterity. Originating in the early centuries of the Common Era and spreading predominantly through South India. These stones are frequently embellished with complex carvings and inscriptions that bear witness to historical, sociological, and artistic stories.

Hero stones, or memorial stones honoring the courage and sacrifice of heroes, have a long history in India, particularly in the southern areas. Their history and growth provide a fascinating view into India's rich cultural, artistic, and military heritage. The practice of honoring individuals with stones or monuments dates back to the megalithic period. These early memorials were simple and solely intended to honor the deceased. As communities got more organized and complicated, the demand to recognize warriors and heroes in a unique way arose, resulting in the formation of hero stones.

The Sangam literature of ancient Tamil Nadu contains some of the oldest references to hero stones, in which acts of courage, particularly on the battlefield, were greatly praised. The literature makes reference to the habit of constructing stones in commemoration of individuals who died protecting their honor, land, or animals. The tradition of erecting hero stones was revived and popularized by numerous dynasties, including the Chalukyas, Pallavas, Hoysalas, and Cholas. Numerous hero stones were erected, particularly in modern-day Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh, and were frequently inscribed with extensive accounts of the hero's deed, the context of their sacrifice, and, on rare occasions, the benefits bestowed to the hero's family or village. The hero stones became more elaborate and rich as the custom grew. The early stones were rather plain, with few inscriptions. However, by the time of the medieval dynasties, they had become more ornate, representing the hero's deed, related deities, and even afterlife scenes. The



hero was frequently shown in a confrontational stance, sometimes riding a horse or elephant, with celestial creatures or deities watching from above.

While the main objective of hero stones was to celebrate courage, they eventually gained religious importance. Many hero stones began to show the hero's ascension to heaven, escorted by celestial beings, stressing the belief in the virtuous nature of their sacrifice and its spiritual value. They were placed at street and road intersections where there was no building or other structure above them, there was both sculpted and unsculpted chunks of stone honoring the memory of fallen warriors (Vanamamalai. N: 41:1975).

Historical Evolution of Viragal in Andhra Pradesh

The earliest reference for Viragals dates back to the megalithic period. The megalithic societies of the Iron Age built grave stones, dolmens, and menhirs, with some functioning as early versions of hero stones (Raghavayya, D.V.:1963).

The Sangam Age, particularly connected with the Tamil region, was characterized by the development of literature and cultural practices. The Sangam literature of this time period sheds light on the ancient lives, morals, and martial traditions of the Tamil people. While Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu had separate histories, their geographical proximity, shared dynastic interactions, economic activities, and some socio-cultural similarities resulted in reciprocal impacts. One such shared behavior is the tradition of constructing Veeragal, or hero stones. While focusing on Tamil traditions, the Sangam literature provides indirect insights into shared South Indian behaviors that may have also been popular in Andhra Pradesh (Kailasapathy K. 1968).

The Cholas, who ruled predominantly in Tamil Nadu, were well-known for their great architectural and sculptural works. Their influence spread to Andhra Pradesh, especially during their northern travels. The tradition of constructing Veeragal became increasingly prominent, with stones frequently bearing extensive inscriptions and fine carvings depicting the heroic deed (Nilakanta Sastri, K.A: 1935).

The Hoysalas, who originated in Karnataka, had a significant impact on sections of Andhra Pradesh. Viragal got more ornate throughout their reign, frequently representing battle scenes, the hero's bravery, and celestial figures marking the hero's ascension to heaven (Settar. S:1992).

The tradition of erecting Viragals reached its peak during the Vijayanagara period. The hero stones grew popular when the empire expanded its grip throughout southern India, especially Andhra Pradesh. They contained exquisite carvings and, on occasion, inscriptions that explained the hero's story (Fritz, J.M., Michell, G.: 2001).

The tradition of erecting Viragal began to decline after the collapse of the Vijayanagara Empire. Nonetheless, local chieftains and kings perpetuated the practice in certain areas of Andhra Pradesh.

The grouped hero stones at Mopuru, and Tripuranthakam in Andhra Pradesh

Mopuru Bhairaveswara Temple, in Andhra Pradesh's Cuddapah district, is a major religious and historical landmark. The temple, devoted to Bhairava, a fiery manifestation of Lord Shiva, is a vital aspect of the area's spiritual landscape. While the temple's exact origins are lost in the mists of time, archeological and epigraphical evidence suggests that it was built in numerous phases by various reigning dynasties, each stamping its architectural and mythology.

The temple has long drawn devotees and researchers alike as a center for Tantric activities and rituals related to Bhairava. Hero stones within the vicinity of the temple add to the temple's significance by suggesting that it plays a part in commemorating local heroes and incorporating their stories into the temple's elaborate tapestry.

Sculpted primarily from granite, these vertical slabs range in size, with some larger than others. They showcase intricate carvings, some of which, despite the ravages of time, remain astoundingly detailed.

Hero stones with like motifs or engravings are frequently found grouped together, indicating that they may record connected incidents or members of the same tribe or society. Many hero stones depict scenes of battles and combat, capturing moments of bravery, sacrifice, and heroism. They serve as eternal memorials for those who laid down their lives, their stories immortalized in stone. Few Herostones are described bringing out its artistic content.



Mopuru, Bhairaveshwara Temple

The Cuddapah district has multiple locations where one can observe the hero stones. A few of them date back to the 13th century A.D. Within the Mopuru Bhairavesvara temple's courtyard are numerous exquisitely sculpted hero stones. Ahubalanatha was a hero who had gone on an expedition to the Marjavadi nation and died at Dharatirtha. His death is documented in an inscription on a hero stone dated in S. 1233 (A.D. 1311). Numerous heroes are beautifully portrayed in stone. One hero is seen galloping ahead on a horse while clutching a javelin in his right hand. A few heroes are seen standing with swords in their hands. The sculptor was successful in creating figurines of heroes wearing various outfits (Gurumurthi A: 1990).

Figure 1

This hero stone, which represents the ritual of self-immolation with incredible detail and cultural importance, is an inspiring example of self-sacrifice. It's a dramatic depiction of a heroic deed from antiquity or the Middle Ages, most likely done to honor and commemorate a person of great importance—perhaps a soldier or a member of the affluent class.

The hero, cutting his own throat, is shown in the center of the relief with a serene, somewhat smiling expression. This sentence, which highlights his bravery and the great objective that motivated his acts, can be interpreted as a show of satisfaction or calm in his sacrifice. This type of representation is very strong and may reflect the final abandonment of one's principles, convictions, or community.

His feet are far apart, giving the composition a sense of forward movement. This attitude could be interpreted as an indicator of his readiness to confront his destiny full on and stand firm in the face of self-imposed death, which is a brave and decisive act in and of itself.

The "ganda kattera" self-immolation instrument is particularly impressive. This weapon, popular in the southern areas, resembles a large pair of scissors and is rarely seen outside of historical or ceremonial settings. Its presence here underlines the hero's specific sacrifice and the ritual's limitations.

The hero's clothes, and the parts of it that are visible, not only underline his significance, but also contribute to the impression that he was a prominent member of his society. Along with the other elements, the exquisite depiction of the clothing makes this sculpture an important resource for learning about the social mores and symbols of the time.

Every detail of this hero stone, including the weapon, dress, and posture, has been meticulously chosen to communicate a story of bravery, honor, and the virtue of selflessness within the context of the time's societal norms. The sculpture serves as a conduit for present spectators to interact with and consider past values, perpetuating the person's legacy that is forever preserved in stone.

Figure 2

The warrior is positioned to depict a fight, holding an aggressive stance. He has a collected expression on his face, which is a sign of courage and bravery. The foot facing forward and the arm raised suggest movement and preparedness for combat.

The hero's possession of a diverse array of weapons indicates their expertise as a highly competent fighter who is proficient in all types of arms. The sword held in the right hand, featuring a subtle V-shaped curvature, could perhaps indicate a distinct sword type commonly employed in the area or a distinctive combat technique. The larger, more elegant sword held in the left hand may symbolize the hero's main weapon, which is emphasized in his posture. The third weapon attached to his belt, characterized as decorative, may represent the state of being constantly prepared for combat, indicating a warrior's everlasting readiness to draw their weapon at any given moment.

The hero's embellishments, including earrings, a necklace, and arm bands, as well as the sacred thread (Yajnopavita) draped across his chest, indicate his significant status, maybe belonging to the warrior caste in the Hindu social hierarchy. The Yajnopavita also signifies that the person is a member of the twice-born caste, which grants them the privilege to engage in the study of the Vedas and the performance of ceremonies. The presence of a bun in his hairstyle could indicate either a regional warrior's style or a hierarchical status. The absence of footwear is customary for the time period and may represent a warrior's affiliation with the ground.

The bottom garment fastened with a rope symbolizes the uncomplicated yet practical nature of a warrior's clothing, specifically designed to avoid hindering movement during combat. Not wearing



shoes during this time period is a common practice, which represents a strong connection with the ground and may also indicate the warrior's preparedness and nimbleness.

Tripuranthakam Tripurantakeswara Temple, Kurnool

The Tripuranthakam Tripurantakeswara Temple, which is situated in the center of Kurnool, Andhra Pradesh, is a symbol of the area's rich religious and cultural legacy. The temple is devoted to Lord Shiva and takes its name from his role as 'Tripurantaka,' the asura's destruction of the three towns. The temple has a long history, as evidenced by the numerous inscriptions and architectural features that date back to its early days. Its extension and refurbishment over the ages have been attributed to several dynasties, resulting in various architectural styles and cultural influences (Rao Rama M :1966).

Typically carved from granite, these vertical slabs depict scenes of heroism and sacrifice. Despite the wear and tear of time, the detailed artistry on many of these stones remains evident. Apart from showcasing scenes of combat, some hero stones uniquely depict rituals performed post the hero's demise, possibly hinting at the temple's own rites and customs. Some stones intriguingly connect the hero's tale with the legend of Lord Tripurantaka. This synthesis of myth and history emphasizes the spiritual importance of the hero's act, portraying it as divinely ordained or inspired. The carvings on these stones exhibit a blend of various artistic styles, reflecting the temple's diverse historical influences. This amalgamation sets them apart from the more homogeneous designs found in other regions.

Figure 3

The figure 1 shows a detailed representation of a sculpture that seems to be a hero stone from the Tripurantakam temple. The dynamic action position of the figure cut into the stone suggests a time of tremendous drama, maybe involving self-immolation, a ritualistic act of sacrifice. The figure's attire, elaborate jewelry, and haircut, among other characteristics in the carving, suggest that it is descended from a noble or upper class family.

The hero is depicted with a blade that looks to be embedded in his body and emerges from his left chest, suggesting a deep wound. In addition, a sword is inserted into the left leg using the left hand, causing the leg to step forward. It is implied that he will carry out his act of bravery or sacrifice

until the day of his death by the depiction of another blade being pushed into the back of his head. The sculpture's story is enhanced by the sword's left-to-right position in his head.

Next to the main character is a depiction of an apsara, a celestial nymph, clutching a chamara, which is a fan or fly-whisk. This indicates that the hero is being rewarded for his bravery and will be taken to paradise. The sculpture gains a spiritual element from the apsara's presence, which connects selflessness with heavenly recompense.

The sculpture's visual appeal is further enhanced by the hero's assortment of jewelry, which not only serve as symbols of his social standing but also as decorative accents. In addition to several layers of leg decorations, he wears shoulder pieces, armlets, wristbands, earrings, necklaces, and hip ornaments, all of which add to his regal and noble appearance.

Even though the figure's clothing has worn away, it still contains evidence of ornate borders and rich texture, which highlights the hero's elevated rank. The sculpture's overall design and level of craftsmanship evoke a sense of movement and story, preserving the hero's deed for future generations and capturing a moment of epic significance.

Figure 4

The presence of a knife, known as a "ganda kattera" in this instance, suggests that the figure in the hero stone is engaged in an act of self-sacrifice. This selfless deed was occasionally carried out to show bravery and loyalty, or to ask for the gods' favor or favors. The knife in the figure's belt hints that he may be a high-ranking individual, either connected to the warrior class or monarchy. This is deduced from the historical background, in which carrying a weapon was typically associated with someone who played a protective or military function in society and was seen as a symbol of power.

The hero is portrayed as wearing straightforward, semi-ornate apparel. This could allude to a position that is noteworthy but not necessarily associated with the greatest levels of nobility; for example, it could refer to a renowned warrior or a noble who is not at the top of the social scale. The belt is an intriguing element because it shows his social standing and level of preparedness in addition to holding the sacrificial knife.

Considering that the sculpture may have come from the area surrounding Mopuru, it may have been made during a period when local traditions and artistic trends were prevalent. Hero stones' iconography and artistic components can provide important insights into the social and religious customs of the time, such as the idea of sacrifice for a higher good or the divine and the veneration of valor.

Hero stones like this one are important historical relics, and studying them can shed light on the ideals and worldviews of earlier cultures. They would be erected in conspicuous places to honor the memory of the heroes, and the fact that they are frequently found in groups suggests that the practice of creating such memorials was widespread in some localities. Many ancient cultures engaged in the practice of hero worship and the production of hero stones; India had a particularly strong legacy in this regard, with some stones going as far back as the early Middle Ages.

Photos

The hero stones at Mopuru, Bhairaveshwara in Andhra Pradesh



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

The hero stones at Tripuranthakam in Andhra Pradesh



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

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