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# Origin and Evolution of Hero Stones in Rayalaseema Region of Andhra Pradesh

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**Abstract:** A menhir (French, from Middle Breton: men, "stone" and hir, "long"), standing stone, orthostat, or lith is a large upright standing stone. Menhirs may be found singly as monoliths, or as part of a group of similar stones. Their size can vary considerably, but their shape is generally uneven and squared, often tapering towards the top. Standing stones are usually difficult to date, but pottery found underneath will help in determining the date. They were constructed during many different periods across pre-history, erected as part of a larger megalithic culture. These stones are known in various terms such as viragals, natukals, nadukkals, paliyas, govardhan stambhas, kirti stambhas and chhaya stambhas widely distributed in India. The Asokan monolithic pillar was in the nature of a memorial but associated with the personality and preaching of Buddha and the Buddhism. The origin of memorial stones of the later periods originates from here. 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 Central India. The Sangam Period (3<sup>rd</sup> century BC to 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD) literature such as Ahananuru and Purananuru refers to the hero stones. Begur Hero stone is a unique 10 century A.D. inscription which elucidates the techniques and strategies in a battle and gives details about sword fighting, spears throwing techniques. This is the best hero stone available in whole of India and is now preserved in Bangalore Museum. Detailed descriptions of Hero stones are mentioned. In the continuing sequence of parallel developments, one can simultaneously see some of the largest anthropomorphic figures such as the statue of Bahubali in Sravanabelagola, Karkala etc. The hero images eventually get replaced by the images of Gods and structures resembling modern day temples can be seen. From around the time of the rise of Buddhism, the nature of worship undergoes very profound changes.

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**Keywords:** Menhir, Hero Stone, Evolution, Rayalaseema, Andhra Pradesh, Anthropomorph, Dolmen

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## Introduction: History of Hero stones and Memorial Stones

Hero stones are erected for commemoration with basic concept to rise in memory or honor of the dead who lost their lives in a violent contest. However hero stones do not form part of the actual practice of the disposal of the dead. These upright slabs of

stone, which are mostly free standing, have horizontal bands of sculpture on their surface. These stones are known in various terms such as *viragals*, *natukals*, *nadukkals*, *paliyas*, *govardhan stambhas*, *kirti stambhas* and *chhaya stambhas* widely distributed in India. Most of them represent land fights in which relief of horses and elephants, camels were depicted along with the hero. The practice of erecting hero stones in India is very old. The Vedic texts refer to the erection of a monument for the memory of the dead person. The practice of erection of tumulus or mound with an attached post is referred in the *Satapatha Brahmana*. Further, the *Satapatha Brahmana* (9th- 8th century BC) describes in detail (selection of site, direction, location and procedure) of the erection of the monument. These are related to funeral practices. During the days of King Asoka (3rd century BC) hero stones were erected on wooden posts and subsequently stone as a more durable material probably replaced wood (Patil 1982). The Asokan monolithic pillar was in the nature of a memorial but associated with the personality and preaching of Buddha and the Buddhism. The origin of memorial stones of the later periods originates from here. The association of funeral practices with the erection of memorial stone continued for long time and is still practiced today. But this is not the case with all hero stones and during the later period only hero stones were erected without the ashes or charred bones of the dead person.

Memorial stones contain funeral remains, where as hero stones are only related to the death of a person who died in a battle, war or similar kind of activities without any funeral remains. The bands of sculptures on the hero stones not only provide artistic attainment, but also the social and cultural history of the region of that particular period. The folklore and ballads of India is full of heroic acts. 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 Central India (Settar and Sontheimer 1982).

These stones mainly dealt with either land fights or for some other societal purposes like *sati* (self immolation) where as hero stones depicting naval battles have come to lime light only from Archaeological Museum, Old Goa and Eksar in Mumbai. Extensive research on hero stones has not been carried out in India. Although memorial stones exists in many parts of India but the Saurashtra region of Gujarat seems contain more in number because of frequent internal and external wars (Doshi 1982). The Sangam Period (3<sup>rd</sup> century BC to 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD) literature such as *Ahananuru* and *Purananuru* refers to the hero stones (Nagaswamy 1974). In the peninsular India Karnataka (930) has more hero stones followed by Andhra Pradesh (476), Kerala and Tamil Nadu (317). In recent years innumerable hero stones have been discovered in Tamil Nadu (Rajan 2000). The earliest *chhaya stambhas* of India is reported from Andhau in the district of Kutch, Gujarat datable to the 1st century AD, which is the memorial of a Ksatrapa king (Ghosh 1989). In fact memorial stones of south India datable to the 3rd century AD are found in Nagarjunakonda in Andhra Pradesh in which names of the warriors are mentioned and are carved elaborately (Patil 1982). There used to be folk variation and regional variation in erecting the hero

stones and the geographical distribution of the hero stones is also significant (Sila Tripathi 2006).

### **History of Hero Stones and Memorial Stones in South India**

Begur Hero stone is a unique 10 century A.D, inscription which elucidates the techniques and strategies in a battle and gives details about sword fighting, spears throwing techniques. This is the best hero stone available in whole of India and is now preserved in Bangalore Museum (Fig. 1).



**Figure 1: Hero Stone at Begur, Bangalore**

Begur hero stone is has two portions; the lower portion depicts actual war scenes in detail. In this portion, the hero warrior of this stone is seated on a fully decorated horse, holding a sword in one hand and controlling the horse in other hand and marching towards the enemy who is on the left side of the stone. The enemy is seated on a decorated elephant with an umbrella held over his head, indicating that he is king or an important royal dignitary. Behind this person is the depiction of 'Rana Bhairavi' (Victory Goddess) , who is standing nude, holding a skull in left the hand and Dhamaru (drum) in the right hand. Opposite to Rana Bhairavi, there is a lineup of



musicians behind the hero warrior. Also there is a depiction of three horse riders, indicating that they too sacrificed their life in the war. The enemy is on the opposite side, seated on the elephant marching towards the hero warrior. The elephant has been stuck with arrows in its head and forehead. On its path elephant is bouncing one of soldiers from its trunk. Behind the elephant a curious image is sculpted, wounded soldiers lying on the ground in agony. The two mysterious creatures Shakini and Dhakini (devils) have come to feast on the wounded and dead soldiers.



Figure 2: Hero Stone from Nellore Distirct, A.P.



At the bottom or the lower portion is the representation of the battle ground, fox, crows, vultures and other animals scavenging for flesh from dead bodies. The upper portion depicts, the hero, after sacrificing his life, is taken to heaven; there he is seated on a throne and 'Apsaras' (heavenly girls) dancing in front of him (Devarakonda Reddy 2017).



Figure 3: Memorial Stone from Kambaduru, Anantapur Distirct, A.P.



Hero stones (called *Viragal* in Tamil), 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.



Figure 4: Nagakkal from Bellary, Karnataka

## History of Hero stones and Memorial Stones in Rayalaseema Region of Andhra Pradesh

One of the several hero stones in the Museum is a slightly damaged 7th Century C.E. carving from Nellore District, Andhra Pradesh, and (Fig. 2) which shows the hero holding a sword in his right hand. There are inscriptions etched around him on three sides of the stone in early Telugu script.



Figure 5: Sati stone, Chandragiri Museum, A.P.

Sati stones, on the other hand, are similar slabs which commemorate women who performed *sati* on the death of their husbands. Similar categories of images are the Memorial stones erected and worshipped to commemorate the glory of ancestors or royalty. A particularly eye-catching image of the 10th Century C.E. from Kambaduru, Anantapur District, Andhra Pradesh, shows a Chola ruler and his queen who repaired a temple in Kambaduru. They are shown in a standing pose, in royal attire. Above their heads is a carving of a Siva Linga with Nandi opposite and also the sun and the moon to indicate that their glory would live forever (Fig. 3).

Beautifully carved *nagakkal*, or snake stones, from Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Chengalpattu in Tamil Nadu are also among the important items in the Museum. One marvelous carving from Bellary District (erstwhile district of Rayalaseema Region) depicts a 7 hooded serpent intertwined and coiled in a square pattern in the form of



four quarters (Fig. 4). There are also some Naga stones which have a half-human and a half-snake form. Other stones depict female snakes or Naginis. The worship of these Naga stones is still in vogue in many temples in India, especially in the villages, and the amazingly well-sculpted images on display were once actively worshipped. These carved stone slabs were set up in temples by childless couples who believed the cause of this was their killing of a snake in this or in a previous birth (Chitra Madhavan 2013).



Figure 6: Hero stone, Chandragiri Museum, A.P



Figure 7: Memorial Stone, Chandragiri Museum, A.P.





**Figure 8: Anthropomorphic figure and hero stone, Tamil Nadu**



**Figure 9: Hero stone inside a dolmen, Tamil Nadu**

Archaeological museum, Chandragiri (Figs. 5-7) displays Memorial stones, Sati stones and Hero stones, recently in the Renigunta Mandal of Karakambadi village near to the Karakambadi tank a Hero stone was noticed by the present authors.

## **Conclusion**

The Begur inscription highlights the most significant form of type so far in south india, the next preference goes to Tamil nadu throws much light on Hero stones having

number of types and themes. Coming to Andhra Pradesh here limited number of hero stones are available most cases in Rayalaseema region of A.P. noticed with Hero stones inside the dolmens. Hero stone from Nellore district with an inscription noticed in a memorial stone from Kambadur in Anantapur district carved in a black stone; nagakkal from Ballary shows significant features in a theoretical manner.

There were five stages in the evolution of the megalithic burials, said Rajan. They were (1) megalithic cairn circles, (2) cairn circles with tall menhirs, (3) tall menhirs with Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions on them, (4) short menhirs, about one or two metres tall, with Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions, and (5) the culmination of shortened menhirs into hero-stones with Tamil Vatteluttu inscriptions of the fifth and sixth century ACE.

In the last and fifth stage, the menhirs were reduced to hero-stones, each with the engraving of the hero who was killed in a cattle raid. Such hero-stones, during the transformation period of Tamil-Brahmi into Tamil Vatteluttu script, belong to the fourth century ACE. They have Tamil Vatteluttu inscriptions, and are found in the Chengam area of present-day Tiruvannamalai district, and in Dharmapuri district (Rajan 2000).

The advent of iron not only gave humans a power to make strong instruments but it also made it possible to chisel shapes into hard rock. Unlike rock art and rock etchings, these carved stones are far more long lasting. The first widespread use of this new method of expression seems to have been in making anthropomorphic figures and hero-stones (Fig. 8)

*Anthropomorphic figure and hero stone:* In the continuing sequence of parallel developments, one can simultaneously see some of the largest anthropomorphic figures such as the statue of Bahubali in Sravanabelagola, Karkala etc. At the same time, a lot of cave art in the early period of the present era, exquisitely carved caves can be seen with detailed description of mythological stories and mythological imageries and they often coexist with rock paintings that can be far more intricate and permit a different type of human expression.

*Hero stone inside a dolmen:* We would in fact like to take this similarity of growth further and discuss the temples of India. It is, for example, possible to see hero stones surrounded by large stone plates in the style of Dolmens and the idol inside being worshipped (Fig. 9). The hero images eventually get replaced by the images of Gods and structures resembling modern day temples can be seen. From around the time of the rise of Buddhism, the nature of worship undergoes very profound changes. Initially the Stupas are built to worship the mortal remains of Buddha including his hair which is buried in the centre of a structure which is sealed and worshipers essentially circumambulate the stupa. From this, a gradual transformation with the image of Buddha in the centre of the structure arises as early as 2nd century BC (Vahia 2010).



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