

VALOR AND SACRIFICE: HEROIC DEEDS REFLECTED IN KANNADA HERO STONE INSCRIPTIONS

Dr Manjula Poyil

Assistant Professor

Department of History

Kannur University

manjulap@kannuruniv.ac.in/9495890176

Abstract

Heroes, heroism, and veneration are universal phenomena. A person dedicated his life to a noble cause. They are remembered through oral songs, folk songs, folk tales, literature, iconography, inscriptions, and different types of memorials. Karnataka, the South Western part of India, is a land of abundant Hero stones in various varieties. The Archaeological Survey of Karnataka has brought to light many hero stones, both inscribed and uninscribed. The most important among the hero-stones in Karnataka are *Viragals*. These memorial stones in Karnataka are believed to have been erected from the 5th century, during the reign of the Kadambas, to the 19th century, during the reign of the Wodeyars. This practice appears to have reached its climax during the 10th -13th Century. The present article undertakes a systematic study of Kannada hero stones (Viragal) inscriptions recorded by the Epigraphic Department of Karnataka. It also involves field verification of their present locations and conditions, and examination of their iconography, historical significance, and cultural context with local communities.

KEYWORDS: Hero Stones, Kannada, Inscriptions, Kadambas, Hoysala, Viragals

Introduction

The present study discusses the nature of heroic tradition in medieval Karnataka society, which is engraved in the form of epigraphs and icons on Hero Stones popularly known as *Viragallu* in Kannada. These hero stones in the form of granite slabs commemorate valor, sacrifice, and heroic deeds of a *vira* or hero who lost their lives for a noble deed. These heroic stoners with inscriptions reflect the socio-political, economic, cultural, and religious aspects behind the cult of hero stone erection and commemoration.

Concept

The overriding concept behind the erection of the hero stones is the spirit of loyalty in service. The hero stones are erected to honor warriors, chieftains, and ordinary folks who took the pledge to defend and protect society on the battlefield, protecting cattle wealth, women, boundaries, and sacred places or monuments, even at the cost of their lives. This sacrifice was his immense faith and loyalty towards his patron and society. Society, in turn, recognized this service and admired his valor and loyalty by erecting hero stones to commemorate his immortal service. The details of heroes, their patrons, context of heroic deeds are mentioned in most of the inscriptions found on the heroic stones.

Geographical Localities

The areas like Mysore, Gulbarga, Dharwad, Bellary, Belgaum, Bidar, Raichur, North and South Canara, Chikmangalur, Hassan, and Tumkur districts of Karnataka. Here we found a large variety of hero stones.

Chronology

The hero stones of Karnataka are believed to have been erected from the 5th CE to the 19th CE. This practice appears to have reached its climax during the 10th -13th CE.

Period of Erection

Most of the hero stones of Karnataka belong to the rule of the Kadambas, the Gangas, the Hoysalas, the Kalachuris, the Seunas,¹ and the Wodeyars.²

Ethics behind the Heroism

1. Valor
2. Loyalty
3. Fame
4. Heavenly Reward
5. Service to one's own society

Structure of the Hero Stones

Hero stones in Medieval Karnataka are generally rectangular granite slabs, with the figure of the hero engraved on their sides. Typically, hero stones consist of three parts.

1. Lesser Panel- Represents the scene of the fight.
2. Central Panel-Represents the hero being taken to heaven by a celestial being, accompanied by music.
3. The higher panel represents the hero sitting before god, which symbolizes the divine reward for bravery.

Inscription in early or medieval Kannada language is found on the sides of the hero's figure, describing his name, patron's name, donor of the location, and valorous deed of the hero.

Forms of Heroic Deeds.

On the basis of the forms of the heroic deeds, the following varieties of the heroic inscriptions are found on the Kannada hero stones.

¹ .Ruled large parts of North Karnataka and Maharashtra (850 CE-1317CE)

² Rulers of Mysore (1399 CE-1950 CE)

1. **Inscriptions Mentions Cattle Raid**-This type of inscription is the most popular variety and is found in various parts of Karnataka, and mentions two types of heroes. The heroes lost their lives while rescuing the cattle and some others in the fight while rescuing the cattle. A hero stone of the 9th century records the death of Kaliyanna during a cattle raid.³
2. **Inscriptions mention Battle Field**-Heroes who died while fighting wars or local conflicts. A Hero stone near Isvara Temple in Satanahalliu in Hospet taluk at Bellary district records the death of Lanka Kubbila-bhatta in a fight. ⁴(Archaeological Survey of India Annual Report on Indian Epigraphy
3. **Inscriptions Mentions Animal Hunting** –Heroes died during the context of hunting wild animals or protecting their kinsfolk from the attacks of such animals. A hero stone set up at Hiramorba in Dharward District, in front of the Kallesvara Temple, records the death of a person after having killed a tiger.⁵
4. **Inscriptions Mentions Prevention of Anti-Social Elements** -Heroes who tried to prevent some anti-social activities like molestation of women, plundering and looting bands, etc. A Hero stone found at Mysore records the death of a hero named Madoja in a fight with thieves, and his son Hunasoja erected a memorial for him.⁶
5. **Inscriptions Mentions Boundary Disputes**-Heroes who peacefully settled boundary disputes, land settlements, and social service, and sometimes died from these causes, are revered by erecting memorials. An inscription found at Madakasira describes the granting of lands to two persons who repaired a public water tank named Olagere tank, and memorials were erected for them.⁷

³ .Epigraphia Carnatica, Mysore,1974, III,p.31

⁴ .Archaeological Survey of India Annual Report on Indian Epigraphy,1960-61,p.88

⁵ .Ibid.

⁶ .Epigraphia Carnatica,n.18,p.543

⁷ .South Indian Inscriptions, IX Pt.I, No.26

6. **Inscriptions Mentions Land Some** hero stone inscriptions mentioned the heroes who got land as a reward for their valor and heroism. A hero stone found at Gundlupete Taluk refers to the gift of land in Sisivantagala for commemorating the memory of Katigavunda of Eur, who died fighting in a cattle raid.⁸

Historical Significance

The hero stone inscriptions are one of the most copious and authentic sources for reconstructing the history of Medieval Karnataka from the 5th CE to the 19th CE. The significant feature of this class of inscriptions is that they perpetuate the memory of those heroes who lost their lives for noble causes, be it religious, political, or social. The hero stone inscriptions are very peculiar in nature because they highlight local people or the local heroes. Occasionally, the name of the ruling king and his dynasty are mentioned, but greater space in the inscriptions is allotted to the hero, his name, his title, cause of death, and his valor. The inscriptions hold immense historical significance for understanding the social, cultural, political, economic, religious, and linguistic history of Medieval Karnataka and South India.

Political Relevance

The medieval Karnataka political and social setup gave sufficient background for the emergence of heroism and hero-worship. It is a regional dynastic period, and the expansion of territories is the main concern of the rulers. This naturally led to frequent battles, and it became a political necessity; and this age expected chivalry from every brave and efficient individual. Thus, the hero, whether he was a chieftain or a soldier, took upon himself the responsibility of defending and protecting society even at the cost of his life. The governing principle in this act was supplied by the spirit of loyalty in service. By sacrificing himself, the

⁸ -Epigraphia Carnatica, n.16, p.35

hero is said to have discharged his duty towards his master. Society, in turn, recognized his services and admired his courage by erecting memorials for him. There is no disparity based on caste, social status, or wealth, and every hero is treated in the same way. There are innumerable cases where poor people of low birth had been revered as heroes for their acts of valor. In the political sphere, another important reason for the death of the individual occurs in the boundary disputes in the villages. The disputes between individuals over a field in a village and disputes over the boundaries between villages were common practice, and each village kept its own militia. In the reign of Virabalala, in a boundary dispute between the people of Tagare and Kusavara, a person named Kavurna died while fighting with a sword⁹. Thus, the medieval Kannada hero stone inscriptions provide information about local battles, invasions, skirmishes, local militia, feudal armies, village defense systems, rulers, chieftains, and localities, which helped historians to reconstruct the local political history of medieval Karnataka.

1. Reference About Ruling Community:

Hero stone inscriptions often mention the name of the ruling king, feudatory, or local chieftain under whose reign the hero lived or fought. This helps historians trace the extent of political control, administrative divisions, and royal lineage in medieval Karnataka.

2. Indication of Feudal System:

The medieval Karnataka society was a feudal society, and hero stone inscriptions throw light on the relation between chieftain/ruler or master and his servants, services rendered to master, land grant system, loyalty, and personal obligation of master to servants, etc.

⁹.Annual Report of Mysore Archaeological Survey,1926,No.22,p.46

3. Information on Military Service

The hero stones' inscriptions mentioned that the heroes lost their lives in wars, boundary disputes, cattle raids, and defending their society from danger. Some inscriptions contain information about the defensive weapons used by the hero.

4. Statement of Political Justice:

The hero stone inscriptions hailed and praised the valor and sacrifice of the heroes by recording their heroism on hero stone inscriptions, and this legitimizes the role of the ruler/chieftain as the protector of the society.

5. Administrative Set Up:

Hero stone inscriptions mention local feudatories, kings, village assemblies, the local governing system, tax collection, and decision-making processes in medieval Karnataka's feudal system.

6. Patronage and Political Loyalty:

The erection of hero stones was a mark of respect to heroes from kings, chiefs, or village leaders to honor loyal personages. This system promoted loyalty of subjects to the master and strengthened the cordial relationship between the master and subject.

7. Regional Power and Identity:

The hero stone with an inscription is widely found in almost all localities of medieval Karnataka, and this led to the spread of medieval Karnataka local identities or culture through language, iconography, and epigraphy throughout medieval Karnataka society

Social Relevance

Being an agrarian society main wealth of medieval Karnataka was cattle, and the protection of cattle wealth from molesters was the main responsibility of the hero. One hero stone with an inscription at Piriapatana, Kollegala District, mentions the death of a hero named Ankarasa after he recovered the cattle during an encounter when robbers had lifted them,

and his son, Mahadeva, erected a memorial for him. Due to the expansion of rulers' or chieftains' boundaries, their subjects migrated to forest areas or cleared forests and settled there. The wild animals were a great threat to their lives and crops, and heroes fought even at the cost of their lives. A hero stone found in Dharwar taluk, set up by the side of the Isvara Temple records that Bommyanayaka, son of Marrya Nayaka, died after killing a tiger. It belongs to the 12th century.¹⁰ One of the social responsibilities of the medieval ages in Karnataka was the protection of the honor of women, and heroes tried to protect their honor at any cost.

1. **Reflection of Social Values and Ideals:**

Hero stones commemorate not only the hero who lost his life for a noble deed, but also symbolize noble ideas like bravery, loyalty, and self-sacrifice, which were extremely cherished in medieval Kannada society.

2. **Status and Recognition in Society:**

The erection of hero stones with an inscription is the recognition given to a hero by society and his master, and these acts raised the status of a hero and his bereaved family to a great extent

3. **Role of Community and Kinship:**

Through hero stone inscriptions, we got information like family, clan, village, kinship ties, and community identity that shaped the medieval social organization.

4. **Caste and Occupational Structure:**

The hero stone mentioned various social groups of medieval Karnataka, like warriors, merchants, farmers, chiefs, etc, reveals the existence of different types of caste based on

¹⁰ .Archaeological Survey of India Annual Report on Indian Epigraphy ,no.24,p.78

profession in the social order. One of the notable elements is that there is no caste distinction or class distinction in the case of heroes and the erection of hero stones.

5. Collective Memory and Local Identity:

The hero stone represents the collective memories of a society and the virtuous deeds of heroes, which are passed from generation to generation, transmitting values and helping to shape the identity of the community.

Economic Relevance

The medieval Karnataka society was an agrarian society based on pastoralism, cattle rearing, and trade activities. The main duty of a hero is the safeguard the cattle wealth, agrarian lands, and protection of trade caravans from robbers, and medieval Kannada hero stone inscriptions mentioned all these activities while mentioning the context and cause of the death of a hero.

1. Evidence of Rural Life

Hero stone often mentions cattle wealth, a form of gift offered to the hero, exemption of tax, trade routes and trade goods, trade routes, agricultural crops, paddy fields, etc., which are the integral parts of the rural village economy of medieval Karnataka.

2. Land Ownership and Tenure:

Most of the hero stone inscriptions mentioned the granting of land to the hero or his deceased family members, and the type of tenure and authority that issued land grants are also mentioned.

3. Rewards and Economic Compensation:

Types of rewards or compensation for heroic deeds are also mentioned in hero stone inscriptions. The main types of rewards are gold ornaments, lands, and exemption from taxes, and the erection of memorials in front of public places, fields, temples, highways,

etc. All these rewards are the symbols of a war society and remind us that the protection of society is the key concern of that period.

4. **Role of Trade and Merchants:**

The medieval Karnataka is a centre of internal and external trade, and many inscriptions mention trade routes, trade caravans, robbers, molesters, and heroes who accompanied the trade caravans as protectors, and the death of a hero who fought against the plunderers and looters. From inscriptions, we got information about the trade guilds, trade goods, form of exchange, production, caravan routes, and internal and external trade that existed in the medieval period.

5. **Temple Economy and Donations:**

Some hero stone inscriptions describe the donation given by the local administrative authority or king to temples in the form of land, money, and ornaments. It also provides some glimpses of the temple administrative system, day-to-day activities, and gods and goddesses. Most of the hero stones of medieval Karnataka were erected near temple premises.

6. **Local Administration and Revenue Systems:**

The inscriptions give elaborate data related to local administration, local rulers, Kings, land grant issuing authority, contributors of gifts, and types of taxes, etc

7. **Indicators of Economic Hierarchy:**

Hero stone inscriptions contain information about donors, recipients, and witnesses—king, feudal lord, village head, and merchants, which reflects the economic and social hierarchy of the medieval Karnataka society.

Cultural Relevance

The hero stones in medieval Karnataka symbolise the artistic and aesthetic sense of the sculptors of that period. The exquisite carvings on the hero stone throw light on the artistic contribution of medieval Karnataka to Indian art and craft.

1. Expression of Art and Aesthetics:

The sculptural representation on hero stones depicts physical appearance, attire, offensive and defensive weapons, ornaments, celestial characters, gods, goddesses, fauna and flora, and the facial expression of the hero. The vivid and realistic carvings on the hero stone provide a glimpse into the cultural history of medieval Karnataka society.

2. Language and Literature:

The hero stone inscriptions are engraved on granite slabs in old or medieval Kannada, in the form of verses or narratives. They preserve phonological formulas, phrases, and vocabularies that help to trace out the evolution of the Kannada language and literature.

3. Heroic and Folk Traditions:

The heroic deeds personified in the hero stone inscriptions later became the theme of folk songs, folktales, folk dance, etc., and this oral literature became a part of the Folk traditions of Karnataka

4. Religious and Ritual Culture:

The heroes who are the theme of hero stone inscriptions were often sanctified and venerated during village commemorations, festivals, and ceremonial occasions, showing the blending of devotion amalgamated with indigenous folk identity.

5. Reflection of Social and Moral Values:

Hero stones are the symbols of valor, loyalty, honor, and self-sacrifice, and these values are embedded in the traditional consciousness of the medieval Karnataka society

7. Regional Identity and Memory:

The hero stone with inscriptions encouraged fostering the collective memory and regional identity of the medieval Karnataka society. They stand as traditional milestones relating the present Karnataka society to the medieval Karnataka society, consolidating a sense of pride and belonging.

Religious Relevance

The hero and hero stone are revered as divine personalities and worshipped as gods, and remembered in all ceremonial occasions and temple festive occasions.

1. Reflection of Religious Beliefs and Practices:

Hero stones are a symbol of divinity, and heroes who died for a noble cause are venerated as gods along with major gods. Most of the hero stones are erected in temple premises, sacred ground, sacred tanks, and sacred groves. The heroes are part and parcel of the Kannada religion later.

2. Concept of Martyrdom and Afterlife:

The sculptural representations in many hero stone inscriptions depict the celestial nymph carrying the hero to heaven, which symbolises the martyrdom of the hero is considered a divine act and existence of the belief in after afterlife.

3. Association with Hindu Deities:

The sculptural representation in hero stones depicts gods like Siva, Vishnu, Brahma, and the hero is standing/kneeling near the gods or sitting in the laps of the god. This signifies how the hero is upgraded to the level of deities due to his noble deeds.

4. Rituals and Commemoration:

The erection of hero stones is accompanied by many rituals and ceremonies, and after erection, they are revered in various ceremonial occasions, and they become part of ancestor worship and hero cult.

5. **Temple Economy and Endowments:**

Some inscriptions mentioned endowments given to the heroes in the name of temples in the forms of lands and ornaments, and the everyday administrative activities of the temple.

This establishes the economic and spiritual association among temples and society, underlining the temple's role as a religious, social, and economic institution.

6. **Moral and Ethical Dimensions of Religion:**

The hero stones and inscriptions delight qualities such as courage, fidelity, safeguard of dharma, and martyrdom for righteousness, which are the key aspects of Hindu ethical and moral philosophy. These inscriptions thus strengthened virtuous and spiritual ideals among the people.

Conclusion

The medieval Karnataka hero inscriptions are primary sources for reconstructing the regional history of medieval Karnataka. They depict the feudal society, economy, and culture of medieval Karnataka. They provide vital historical facts and the evolution of medieval Karnataka society. It also highlights certain feudal values like bravery, loyalty, and sacrifice. They also give a glance at the Kannada language, local governing system, warfare, folk tradition, iconography, epigraphy, and aesthetic sense of the medieval craftsmen.

Notes & References

- ¹. Ruled large parts of North Karnataka and Maharashtra (850 CE-1317CE)
2. Rulers of Mysore (1399 CE-1950 CE)
3. Epigraphia Carnatic, III, Institute of Kannada Studies, University of Mysore, Mysore, 1974, p.31
- ⁴. Archaeological Survey of India Annual Report on Indian Epigraphy,1960-61,The Director Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi,1964p.88
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