

Memorial Stones from Gangavaram Mandal of Chittoor

District, Andhra Pradesh: A Historical Study

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ABSTRACT

Sanchi, a town in Raisen district of Madhya Pradesh, India is famous for being home to one of the oldest Buddhist monuments in the country. This site has been declared as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in Ashoka in the 3rd century BCE. This paper will take you to the very beginning of Ashoka's interest towards Buddhism and the making of the Stupa at Sanchi; it will also focus on how it evolved through the ages becoming a symbol of peace which is a widely visited place in the country today.

Keywords: *Buddha; Buddhist Sanchi; Heritage; Relics; Ashoka; Stupa.*

Introduction:

Hero stone (Viragal), sculpture of a valour erected to commemorate his death in the form a dolmen like structure found in the outskirts of a village or outside/ in the courtyard of a temple. These are called Natukal in Tamil, Viragal in Kannada and Veerasilalu in Telugu. The tradition of erecting Hero stones for the dead hero's is found mostly in south India but are found in few states of north India (Settar and Sontheimer 1982), however, are of several types such as 1. Hero fighting a wild animal, 2. Hero fighting in a battle field and 3. Hero with Sati, and in all cases sometimes hero had been depicted single with a weapon or with a single Sati or two Satis standing beside him. It seems Tamils were the first people to erect and worship hero stones since Sangam Age (C.300 B.C.) common practice, as it is mentioned in Akananuru and Purananuru and other poems traditionally classified as Sangam poems. A later text of 8th century AD, also refer to monuments erected to kings, generals and other members of the elite who fell in battle as natukal (erected stone) but there are only few references to hero stones for common soldiers who died fighting for their liege-lords and for folk heroes who were killed in clashes with marauders, cattle-lifters, invaders, and in other words, elite hero stones find more frequent than folk hero stones (Vanamamalai 1975:41). The present state of Andhra Pradesh also provided a vivid picture of this historical, traditional worship (Chandraskar 1994) and recently a rich evidence of the same has been reported from Kuppam region (Venkatasubbaiah

2011:163-180; 2015: 356-367) and the present study is the outcome of field investigations in locating hero stone sites in the Gangavaram Mandal of Palamaneru taluk region in the south-western part of Chittoor district of Andhra Pradesh as part of her research work. A total number of 8 localities have been identified and in future many more such sites are expected with variety of this sculptural representation of hero stone tradition, a significant historical tradition prevalent during the medieval period in the region.

The Area:

Gangavaram Mandal (MHQ) lies at a distance of (between 13° 12' 03" N and 78° 45"E), 49 km. west to Chittoor district (HQ) located between the Palamaneru and Peddapanjani Mandals, and its eastern part is covered with thick forest an abode for elephants and from its south it enters into Karnataka stat. Its total geographical area is 22,587 hectares as per Agricultural census of 2012-13. There is a historical temple dedicated to 'Konetirya Swamy' falling under the revenue limits of Keelapatla village. Gangavaram Mandal has a total number of 16 village Panchayats and 124 hamlets and only 8 villages in the present survey have given the evidence of 11 hero stone which are varied in nature as some of them poses a single hero, hero with a sati and in some entire family can be seen depicted on the slabs. In some of the villages these hero stones are worshipped specifically on festive occasions. Following is the description of these hero stones in historical point of view.

1. Pathakeelapatla (13°.23923' and 78°.7641' E) village is situated 5 km. From Gangavaram Mandal HQ and the hero stone has been found lying in a field belonging to a local farmer Mogilireddy and according to local informer, Eswaramma, special worship is performed to the hero stone on Vinayachavithi day. It is a hero stone (126 cm. X 113 cm. X 12 cm.) on which a hero being depicted holds a bow in his left and an arrow in his right hand, in action, with a dagger in his waist and the entire sculpture faces east (Fig. 1).
2. Melumoy (13°.2395' N; 78°.74196') village is situated 4 km. from Gangavaram (HQ) and the hero stone found lying in an agricultural field and it measures 110 cm. Length, 107 cm. width and 17 cm. thickness. It is a hero stone of a male and a female figure, both with fold hands (Fig. 2).
3. Malleru village is situated 6 km. from the Mandal HQ under the revenue division of Kallupalli village panchayat, where two hero stone slabs are found, one adjacent to a metal road between Palamaner-Madanapalli and another one at the village tank. The first one is a hero stone shrine (13°.2467' N; 78°.72638' E) in which hero has a dagger in his right hand and Sati standing right to him holds a water pot in her left hand and a

flower in her hand. The village people have decorated the figures with turmeric and saffron colour dots. Whereas the other hero stone (121 cm. X 134 cm. X 16 cm. in dimension) is a slab lying (13°.24602' N; 78°.72082' E) on the ground with a male figure holding a sphere, right to him Sati figure standing followed by three children (two female and one male) depicted a little above him (Fig.3).

4. Mitturu (13°.25495' N; 78°.72454' E) village is situated 7 km. from Mandal HQ, lying within the Kallupalli panchayat jurisdiction. The hero stone (92 cm. X 188 cm. X 18 cm.) lies on the left side of the road leading from Palamaneru to Madanapalli and the place is locally called Appinapalli cross. It is a hero stone shrine in which the hero is in action of holding a bow in his left hand and an arrow in his right hand stretching to shoot and poses a dagger in his waist and arrow socket lying over his back, whereas the female figure, standing right to him, has a lamp in her left hand. Both the figures are smeared with sandal and decorated with saffron dots (Fig.4).
5. Dandapalle village is situated 8 km. from Mandal HQ and there are two hero stone slabs lying close to the road leading to this village. The first one (13°.23133' N; 78°.69371' E) is a slab (126 cm. X 135 cm. X 16 cm. in dimension) with a male figure fighting a tiger piercing a dagger into its stomach, whereas the female figure right to him has a water-pitcher in her left hand and right hand resting on left hand proper. The other slab (13°.23134' N; 78°.69352' E) is a mutilated one in which the hero is depicted riding a horse with a sword in his right hand and the female figure standing behind him has an unknown object in her right hand (Fig. 5).
6. Pasupathuru (13°.22075' N; 78°.58744' E) village is situated 20 km. from Mandal HQ. The author found a hero stone slab (133 cm. X 160 cm. X 11 cm. in dimension) on the side of the street within the village proper between the houses. The hero is depicted with a bow and arrow in action whose has apron, knotted hair style and a sword hanging from his waist. In front of the hero a purnakumbha placed on a pedestal along with a lamp stand beside it has been depicted. Above the purnakumbha are seen a seated male figure with two female attendants at his service and below the purnakumbha are seen two buffaloes or bulls which have long horns. Behind the hero is seen a horse decorated with an umbrella on its back. It all shows that the hero has been honoured with a place in heaven for his deed in the process of cattle protection as he dedicated himself for a social cause (Fig. 6).
7. Keelapalle village lies at a distance of 15 km. From the Mandal HQ. There are two hero stone being found at two places at least 2 km. apart. The first one is found buried

(13°.20752' N; 78°.62203' E) in the soil and measures about 120 cm. X 110 cm. X 21 cm. in dimension and it lies in the field belonging to a local temple dedicated to Lord Venugopalaswamy. It is a shrine without a capstone in which one slab has the depiction of a hero shown throwing a spear in his right hand and right to him shown a standing female figure, both have knotted hair dress and apron on the body(Fig.7). The other hero stone (13°.20354' N; 78°.62422' E) lies in the field belonging to a local farmer placed on the field boundary which became a centre of attraction and the hero is depicted with a bow in his left hand and an arrow in the raised right hand seems to get ready to throw and he has shown with decorated hair style. There is a sati figure standing right to him with an unidentified objects in her hands (Fig.7). A bird is depicted above the sati figure.

8. Alakuppam (13°. 19194' N; 78°.55902' E) village is situated 22 km. From Mandal HQ and belongs to Gundrajupalle village panchayat jurisdiction. The hero stone at this village seen lying on the road side leading from Chennai to Bangalore. Hero is depicted fighting a wild animal probably a lion with a pointed dagger and there is a dog figure probably the best companion to hero and the hero is well adorned with clothes, jewellery and knotted hair style. He is shown with a sword hanging from his waist. The local legend, known through an informant namely Eranna that there was a combatant called Mallanna, belonging to Valmiki caste, fought the lion, to protect the village, and dedicated his life for the social cause, hence the hero stone has been erected in memory of his valour(Fig.8).

Discussion:

The survey undertaken in the present region, as part of her research work, yielded 8 hero stone sites in a fairly well preserved condition except at Dandapalle and all are of memorial type erected to commemorate individuals killed in battle, cattle raids, etc., depicted along with female figures being considered as Sati figures, probably the hero's wife, and other family members. The aforementioned modes or instances of hero depictions on stone slab denotes death of hero deem 'heroic' during the period by the society which glorified and commemorated individuals who sacrificed themselves in fulfilment of a socially desirable cause without hesitation. These hero stones (veeragals) in the form of dolmen type 'shrine' at some places and 'single slabs' in the region consist a stone which carry sculptural detailing in three registers depicting the themes of 'heroic death', 'transitional journey to heaven and

‘transient rewards in heaven’(at Pasupathuru). They also register in representing hero fighting in different modes of protecting probably the people or cattle in midst of battle or distinct registers depiction of receiving his mental ability towards social causes of his own orders distinguish it from other unnatural death. The hero stone depicted at Pasupathuru clearly represents hero transported to heavens by the celestial damsels accompanied by heavenly bodies (female attendants) or garland bearers reveal the manner in which the society responsible for setting up such situation a memorial expressed their concern towards the individual who met with heroic death. Furthermore, the representation of theme of transient rewards in heaven in the sculpture register was intended to serve as an assurance of social and economic gains to embolden individuals to accept death without hesitation. It may not be wrong to suggest that through such depictions, the death of the individual besides being glorified, preserved the memory of the deceased from possible discriminations or alienations that took place during a change of power. This perhaps motivated the human instinct amongst the heroes to proceed towards certain death without hesitation which is viewed as ‘respectful’ through its legitimization by polity. Since there are no inscriptional hero stones that give a clue for dating them but mostly these belong to medieval period as this tradition had its zenith mostly from the beginning of Vijayanagara period. They were certainly, in a general sense, erected or dedicated by the people belonging to 1. Family members of the hero (wife to husband in memory of him), Relatives of the deceased and 3.Society to propagate their regard, admiration and gratitude to the dead person (Venkatasubbaiah 2015: 357). However, the female figures depicted along with the hero on the same slab signify that they were erected by the wife in memory of his valour, but while doing so, was she alive and if she was alive why she agreed to get depicted along with her husband or else that the family members accepted to this endeavour. If not, definitely the family members erected these hero stones in memory of the Hero and Sati in the same slab after both being departed from earth.

Unfortunately, these memorial stones lie either in the village outskirts in the cultivated fields or on the bank of local water tanks or in the courtyards of ruined temples, hence did not get the attention or sometimes notice of local village population as most of them do not know the historical importance even though they are being worshipped on festive occasions and this is perhaps out of fear or faith that would protect their village wealth. At certain places these hero stone slabs are lying on road side or in a corner of villages where all kinds of litter are thrown. It is necessary to protect them otherwise this tradition would certainly get vanished, hence the department of Archaeology at national level and state level should record them properly and save them before getting vanished. In this regard the Government of Andhra Pradesh should

restore them in museums so as to help scholars who would like to take up research work related to Hero stones (Veeragals) so as to reconstruct the local history of the region in Medieval times.

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Fig.1



Fig.2



Fig.3a



Fig.3b



Fig.4



Fig.5a



Fig.5b



Fig.6



Fig.7a



Fig.7b

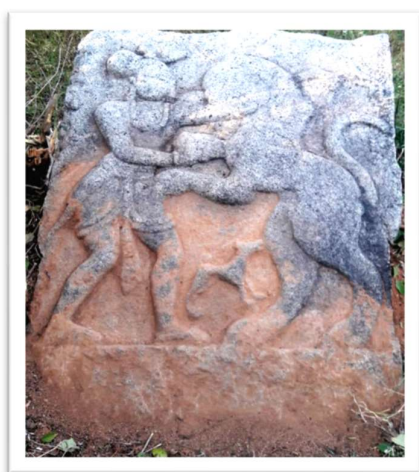


Fig.8

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