



Viragal: The Saga Of The Heroes Of Andhra Pradesh

G. Lenin Babu^{1*}, Gomathi Gowda², Vishweshwari Tiwari³

^{1*}Research Scholar, Department of Fine Arts, Lovely Professional University, Punjab, leninbabu.bfa@gmail.com

²Principal, College of Fine Arts, Karnataka Chitrakala Parishath, Bangalore, gomathigowda@gmail.com

³Assistant Professor, Department of Fine Arts, Lovely Professional University, Punjab, 1974tiwari@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

During the early medieval period under monarchical rule, it was ostensibly the sovereign's duty to safeguard the lives and property of his people. Yet, realizing such an ideal necessitated the support of not just his lieutenants but also his populace at large. Heroes of the time, be they tribal leaders or warriors, embraced the grave task of societal protection, even to the point of sacrificing their lives. Historical accounts abound with tales of individuals selflessly laying down their lives for their superiors, their communities, or to protect the vulnerable. These valiant figures were believed to ascend to a heroic heaven, termed '*vira svarga*'. Society reciprocated by lauding their bravery and acknowledging their contributions. Commemoration took a tangible form through the erection of viragals (memorial stones) honoring the fallen. The tradition of establishing such memorials has deep roots in Andhra Pradesh, stretching back to ancient times.

This study aims to decode the visual stories depicted on these hero stones and analyze the stylistic diversity among the viragals found in Andhra Pradesh. This research involves thorough fieldwork and data gathering to chronicle the enduring legacies of the heroes of Andhra Pradesh.

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

India stands unique in the world for its array of memorial practices and the diverse types of monuments dedicated to the departed, each interwoven with rich customs. Particularly in Southern India, there exists a vast array of hero stones, which are memorial stones erected to honor individuals who displayed exemplary bravery. These stones offer a window into the societal norms, cultural dynamics, psychological mindset, and the spiritual beliefs prevalent during their times.

A viragal is a type of hero stone that commemorates the death of a warrior in various forms of combat, be it a battle, minor conflict, personal duel, or even during a hunting expedition. The categorization of these hero stones is quite detailed, delineating the specific circumstances under which the heroes met their end. This includes confrontations with bandits, sacrifices made to uphold women's honor, territorial conflicts, defensive stands against village assaults, tributes to lost sailors and boatmen, casualties of wild animal hunts such as boars or tigers, victims of cattle raids, and those who fell defending the interests of their sovereign.

In the early medieval era, the king was the pivotal figure tasked with the protection of his subjects' well-being and property. Yet, this duty was not his to bear alone; he depended on the collective effort of both his deputies and the common populace (Settar 1982: 17). It was expected that every able person, whether a distinguished hero, a tribal chieftain, or a common soldier, would exhibit valor and assume the responsibility of defending and preserving the community, even at the cost of their life. It was not uncommon for devoted retainers to take their own lives as a testament to their unwavering loyalty to their lord or to honor a sacred promise.

In recognition of their valor and the sacrifices they made, the community expressed its gratitude by upholding the legacies of its heroes. The societal norms dictated not only respect for their courage and contributions but also entailed assuming care for the family of the hero left behind. These revered individuals were honored through the erection of memorial stones, and sometimes lands were granted in their name. Such acts were a testament to the belief that a hero would attain both earthly renown and celestial reward "fame and gain in this world and a place in heaven." This promise of spiritual, social, and economic rewards likely fortified the warriors' resolve, allowing them to face death in battle with less trepidation. The adage "the hero shall enjoy the earth" "*vira-bhojya-vasundhara*"—encapsulated this ethos and was celebrated in literature and through the erection of viragals (Settar 1982: 17).

This practice of memorializing heroes with inscribed stone slabs detailing their deeds and depicting their likenesses dates back to the second century CE. This venerable tradition has continued through the ages, notably in North India and parts of South India, though the scale of such commemorations has varied.

Different regions in India referred to hero stones using various vernacular terms. In Tamil, they were known as virakkal; in Kannada, viragallu; in Telugu, virakallu; and in Marathi, viragal. Other terms from different parts of the country include chayastambha, khambha, and paliya, all referring to these commemorative hero stones.

Categories

The reverence for fallen warriors, often referred to as the hero cult, has deep roots in Andhra Pradesh, with a rich history that spans from the 3rd to the 16th century A.D. The practice of commemorating warriors with memorial stones became a significant aspect of this cult, embedding their legacies within the cultural fabric of the region. These hero stones emerged around the sixth and seventh centuries A.D. and were dedicated to individuals across the spectrum of society, including those from royal, religious, or common backgrounds, and honored individuals from all castes and social statuses who died for a variety of social, economic, and political causes.

The memorial stones can be classified into five principal categories, each signifying the circumstances or cause of the honored individual's death.

- (a) Battlefield: Commemorating those who fell in warfare or military campaigns.
- (b) Cattle Raid: Dedicated to individuals who died protecting livestock from raids, a common feudal conflict.
- (c) Self-immolation: Honoring those who chose death, often as a display of loyalty or protest. (d) Sati: Memorializing women who immolated themselves on their husband's funeral pyre, a practice that has since been outlawed.
- (e) Animal Hunting: Celebrating those who lost their lives in the pursuit or combat of wild animals.

These classifications not only highlight the diverse causes for which individuals were commemorated but also mirror the feudal societal structure of the medieval period. The proliferation of hero stones since the mid-seventh century, inscribed with the names and exploits of local heroes and warriors, points to an increased rate of subinfeudation, indicating a growing complexity in the feudal hierarchy and the system of land grants tied to military service.

Battlefield and Cattle Raid

Hero-stones commemorating battlefield valor often signify a reciprocal relationship between a chief and his subordinates. They stand as testament to the fulfillment of duty by soldiers who answered their leader's call to arms, with the understanding that their family would be cared for, whether they survived or fell in battle. Numerous such inscriptions have been discovered across Andhra Pradesh. These inscriptions range from simply naming the honored hero, to detailed accounts of the battles they fought in, to records of the land grants awarded in their memory, demonstrating the societal value placed on military service.

The importance of cattle in the medieval economy is also reflected in the cattle raid category of hero-stones. With trade and commerce diminished, the feudal system relied heavily on agriculture, with the land grant system as its cornerstone. In this system, cattle raiding held just as much importance as agricultural activities such as tilling, planting, and harvesting, due to cattle being a critical asset for agrarian success. Communities commonly employed cowherds to graze cattle on shared pastures, making them prime targets for raids from neighboring villages. The inscriptions in Andhra Pradesh that honor those who perished in such raids indicate the high regard for those who defended these valuable assets, and the land granted to their families serves as a symbol of appreciation for their sacrifice.

By the 7th century A.D., the Bhakti movement contributed to the solidification of the agrarian feudal order, which was upheld by a hierarchical caste system. The movement rationalized the diversity of deities worshipped, drawing a parallel to the feudal system where each deity represented a lord to whom devotees owed allegiance, mirroring the loyalty vassals showed to their lords. The societal structure of the time was akin to a pyramid, with the king at the apex, followed by princes, major landlords, priests, and merchants, and ending with the commoners and slaves at the base. Feudal society was bound by contracts and relationships, often framed within the caste system, where loyalty and service were the driving forces of social and economic interactions.

Self-immolation Hero-stones

The rise of self-immolation hero-stones is closely associated with the spread of Saivite theology, which is a sect that venerates Lord Shiva as the supreme god. With the growing popularity of Saivism, different sects within the faith developed, including some that adopted militant and tantric practices. Notably, during the period when feudalism was prevalent in the region of Andhra (Andhradesa), sects such as Kapalika, Kalamukha, Pasupata, and particularly Virasaiva became prominent. Self-immolation, a ritual act of self-

sacrifice, was notably practiced by certain offshoots of these groups, such as the Virabhatas, Viramustis, and Virabhadras. These acts were in part driven by deep religious convictions, which were reflected in the creation of memorial stones for those who performed self-immolation.

Sati Stones

Similarly, the practice of sati, where a widow would self-immolate on her deceased husband's funeral pyre, also has its origins in feudal practices. Encouraged by notions of subordination, loyalty, and an absolute submissive mentality, sati was seen almost as a sacred duty akin to the devotion owed to a king or deity by a devotee. Memorial stones were erected in honor of women who committed sati, reflecting the social and religious expectations of the time.

Animal Hunting

Memorials for those who were successful in hunting dangerous animals were also erected. In a time when wild animals such as tigers, hyenas, wild boar, and bears could pose significant threats to human life and property, the act of killing such animals to protect one's community was considered meritorious. Those who accomplished these feats were honored with hero-stones, indicating a communal recognition of their bravery and service in protecting the lives and property of the villagers. These memorials served to celebrate and perpetuate the memory of these individuals, who were viewed as protectors and heroes within their communities.

The structure and artistic rendering of hero-stones offer a fascinating glimpse into the cultural practices and beliefs of the past societies in Andhra Pradesh. These stones serve as historical records, providing insights into the valorous acts of individuals and their subsequent glorification.

Structure of Hero-Stones

Hero-stones feature three to five horizontal panels, which are carved only on the front side, leaving the other sides crude or uncarved. They can also be in the form of square pillars with engravings on all four sides. The width of the stele may remain constant or taper upward, often separated by frames to distinguish different scenes.

Iconography

The panels typically illustrate the life, death, and ascension of the hero. The lower panel shows the cause of the hero's death, such as battle or self-sacrifice. The middle panel usually depicts the hero's journey or ascent to heaven. The uppermost panel associates the hero with divinity, often featuring symbols like the kalasa (pot), the sun, and the moon. Single-panel stones depict the entire scene in one frame without separate panels.

Artistic Details

The hero's depiction is quite detailed, with attire and ornaments specific to the period, such as a dhoti, armlets, bracelets, and a *yajnopavita* (sacred thread). He is often shown with a sheathed dagger on his belt and his hair tied up in a bun. Surrounding the hero are various figures, possibly enemies, *apsaras* (celestial beings), musicians, or family members, and in some cases, his wife who performed sati. Some stones may show the same scene replicated on two halves of the panel, indicating the honoring of two heroes on a single stele.

Evolution over Time

Earlier stones, predating the Kakatiya period, exhibit simpler dress and ornamentation. In some, the hero is shown holding a severed head and a sword, creating a stark visual representation of his prowess. The attire typically consists of a short piece of cloth around the waist, with less ornamentation compared to later periods.

Placement and Purpose

Hero-stones are commonly found on the outskirts of villages, indicating a role in marking boundaries or serving as a memorial at the village's edge. The stones can be solitary or in groups, sometimes even placed within temple precincts, where they may become objects of worship.

Stylistic Analysis

Fieldwork and analysis of the hero-stones help in understanding the different categories of viragals (hero-stones) in Andhra Pradesh and the stylistic evolution over time. These hero-stones not only mark the honor given to those who displayed bravery or loyalty but also reflect the socio-economic and religious aspects of the medieval Andhra society. Through their detailed carving and placement, they provide a tangible connection to the values and beliefs of the people who lived in this region from the third to the sixteenth century A.D.

Few examples of hero stones are cited in the paper to provide a comprehensive overview of the hero worship, the practice of erecting the Viragals in Andhra Pradesh.

Mopuru, Bhairavesvara temple, Nallacheruvupalle

The Mopuru Bhairaveswara Temple, located in the Cuddapah district of Andhra Pradesh, is a symbol of great religious and historical significance. The temple, devoted to Bhairava, a ferocious incarnation of Lord Shiva, occupies a unique position in the local spiritual landscape. The precise beginnings of the temple are still lost in the mists of time, but archeological and epigraphical evidence points to multiple phases of construction under various ruling dynasties, each of which left its mark on the architecture and legend of the temple. The temple has long drawn devotees and scholars alike as a center for Tantric practices and rituals related to Bhairava.

Nallacheruvupalle is situated along the route connecting Pulivendla and Ramiredipalle, positioned on the right side of the Mogameru River where it merges with the Uddandavagu stream. Atop a hill in this locale stands the Bhairaveshwara temple, which is also revered under the name Bhasmasuranagambu, a site where the demon Bhasmasura is believed to have been reduced to ashes. This hill is alternatively referred to as Mutagiri, Mohanachala, and Bhairavachala, which translates to the hill of Lord Bhairava (Gurumurthi 1990: 34).

Viragal Fig 1

Within the temple, a collection of hero stones of diverse types is enshrined, and during festival times, these stones are objects of veneration. These hero stones are arranged in sequence upon a raised dais within the temple grounds (Fig.1) and are maintained under the care of the temple's administration.

Viragal-Fig 2.a

The hero stone seen in (Fig 2.a) exemplifies the kind of heroic deeds that these memorials were intended to honor by depicting an intensive time of activity, most likely a heroic confrontation or a hunt. The hero is carved with a dynamic intensity, dominates the visual narrative. With his left hand, he grabs the reins of his pony, showcasing his skill and readiness. With a weapon in his right hand, he exudes a sense of impending action, as though kinetic energy is ready to be let loose. The hero's determined posture, suggestive of a calculated attack on an enemy or a feral animal, echoes the traditional narratives and the values these stones are recognized for.

Below the horse's hooves, two creatures are carved in sharp relief, evidently taking part in the adventure that is being shown. Their aggressive demeanor implies that they are actively pursuing something, perhaps a wild animal, which adds to the sculptor's ability to convey a sense of movement and urgency. Their lively poses add life to the scene and indicate their part in the team effort that is the hunt.

The hero's clothing, which is adorned with royal jewels and decorations, conveys a noble or respected warrior position. These components emphasize his heroism as well as his standing in the social order. The dexterity with which the horse's mane and tail are crafted demonstrates the artist's painstaking ability and gives the representation a hint of realism. The attention to detail highlights the genuineness of the story and the sculptor's passion for their work.

Upon closer inspection, one finds a little knife tucked into the hero's belt, a small but tragic element to the scene. This small sword is evidence of the hero's all-around martial preparedness; it is suitable for battle as well as everyday use, qualities of a well-seasoned fighter. The knife is a practical piece of equipment that any hero would need in a variety of situations, be it the heat of combat or the harshness of the outdoors. This feature, together with the more comprehensive portrayal of his clothing, highlights the hero's readiness for battle and emphasizes his dual roles as protector and fighter. The purpose of including such an object, even if it is only a stone carving, is to represent the hero's entire range of fighting abilities.

The animal and the horse are portrayed in dynamic, forceful poses that heighten the sense of impending action in the scene. Not content to serve as a simple memorial, this hero stone tells a tale of bravery and dynamism typical of the kind of monuments that have historically served to honor and perpetuate the battles of India's warriors from earlier times. The use of vermilion and other ceremonial markings suggests that this memorial is still revered, a living reminder of the hero's legacy, and that people are probably paying respects to the immortality of the persona.

Viragal-Fig 2.b

The hero stone (Fig. 2. b) is a moving illustration of self-sacrifice that depicts the self-immolation ritual with an amazing level of detail and cultural significance. It's a dramatic portrayal of a brave deed from antiquity or the Middle Ages, most likely done to honor and remember a person of great importance, possibly a soldier or a member of the affluent class.

The hero, who is slicing his own throat, is portrayed in the center of the relief with calm, nearly smiling face. This expression, which highlights his bravery and the noble purpose behind his action, may allude to a sense of serenity or fulfillment in his sacrifice. This kind of representation is very powerful and could represent the

ultimate giving up of one's values, principles, or community.

The hero's accessories and clothing convey his high social standing or military rank. He stands out for wearing a necklace that is a sign of his status or fortune. In addition, his ear decorations, hair bun, and wristbands all add to the sculpture's iconographic story and further highlight his social standing. These pieces of personal ornamentation serve as both aesthetic enhancements that highlight the significance of the moment being remembered and markers of identity.

His feet are spaced apart, giving the composition a sense of forward motion. This position might be seen as an indication of his willingness to face his destiny head-on and to stand his ground in the face of self-imposed death, which is a brave and determined act in and of itself.

The self-immolation tool known as the "*Ganda kattera*" is especially remarkable. This weapon, which is common in the southern regions, resembles a big pair of scissors and is unknown outside of certain historical or ceremonial contexts. Its appearance here emphasizes how particular the hero's sacrifice is and how localized the practice is.

The four tiny holes in the background could be used for a number of things. For example, they could have been used to fasten the stone to a building, or they could have another symbolic meaning that has to do with the ritual or the hero's journey beyond death.

The hero's clothing and the parts of it that are visible not only highlight his significance but also help to convey the idea that he was a high ranking member of his society. Together with the other components, the intricate depiction of the apparel makes this sculpture an invaluable resource for learning about the social mores and iconography of the era.

Every element of this hero stone, including the weapon, clothing, and posture, has been carefully considered in order to tell a story of bravery, honor, and the value of selflessness in the context of the time's social mores. The sculpture acts as a medium for modern viewers to interact with and consider the ideals of the past, perpetuating the legacy of the person forever captured in stone.

Viragal-Fig 2.c

The heroic figure depicted on this hero stone (Fig 2.c) is intriguing as it is likely meant to honor a man who lost his life defending his village. The sculpture is full of details that convey the individual's status and bravery, and the imagery captures a moment of bravery and action.

The hero strikes a dynamic pose, appearing ready to strike with his left hand raised. His left leg is positioned forward, and his arm is folded, suggesting movement and a readiness to fight. Rather than being passive, his stance conveys the sense of impending aggression and the crucial moment just before a confrontation.

The hero wears very little, only covering the lower portion of his body. In order to depict the figure with honor and respect, it would have been crucial to include decorations on the cloth that have an aesthetic appeal and convey a sense of pride and attention to presentation. He is further adorned with wristbands and a necklace that symbolize his stature. Interestingly, the extra band on the left may indicate a special accomplishment or a higher rank. This ornamental asymmetry grabs the eye and might represent a hierarchy or special honor that sets the hero apart from the others.

His knife's royal carving, which represents his social standing, may also be a reflection of the high caliber of workmanship that characterized the weapons of war in his day. The portrayal of the knife, with its meticulous attention to detail, emphasizes the weapon's significance in the hero's life and demise.

Each component of this hero stone, including the posture, clothing, accessories, and weapon, tells a story about the person's last valiant deed. It's a kind of visual storytelling that helps to make the hero's deed eternal, and by remembering these people and their sacrifices, history is perpetuated. The sculpture conveys the timeless ideas of bravery, responsibility, and honor to the observer.

Sri Bhagwan Mahaveer Museum. Kadapa

Sri Bhagwan Mahaveer Museum is an archaeological museum situated in Kadapa City, Andhra Pradesh established in 1982. The museum occupies a central position in the YSR Kadapa district, which is regarded as the center of the Rayalaseema region because of its central location. It is situated close to the District Collector's Bungalow and on the route to the Railway Station in Railway Colony, Kadapa.

Viragal-3.a

The picture (Fig 3.a) depicts a different hero stone with a similar memorial function to the one that was previously discussed. Unfortunately, the facial features are eroded or damaged, making it difficult to see the hero's features or expression. In spite of this, the figure's significance and the artist's skill can be understood from the posture and the details of the carving.

Instead of engaging in active combat, the hero's proud and upright stance suggests a moment of rest or

vigilance. The hero's right hand is holding a curved sword, signifying his readiness for combat. He is holding a javelin in his left hand, which also seems to be embellished with a piece of cloth, implying that the weaponry and the act of fighting itself have some sort of ceremonial significance.

The hero wears several ornaments that emphasize his rank. He has two bracelets on his left wrist and one on his right that is visible. Further highlighting the hero's noble or royal status are the numerous layers of necklaces around his neck and the two-tiered hair bun. He appears to be a warrior, as evidenced by the belt he wears, which may be ornamental and hold a sheathed sword.

Despite having been damaged, the clothing has a transparent quality that suggests it was elegant and possibly made of a delicate fabric. The delicate decorations and the translucent nature of the sculpting technique imply that the hero was, in fact, a person of great stature, possibly a member of the royal family or a distinguished warrior.

The sculpture's graceful lines and the accurate depiction of the hero's attire and weapons convey a powerful and honorable persona. There could have been a functional reason for the four holes behind the figure, something to do with how the stone was arranged or shown in its original setting.

Viragal- Fig 3.b

This specific hero stone (Fig. 3.b) seems to show two figures: a hero and his wife, who is said to be represented in the Sati tradition as a widow who would either follow her husband to death in another way or self-immolate on his funeral pyre.

The hero is depicted in a combat-ready stance, carrying a knife and bow. His simple clothing, a sheath, and a bun styled hair add to his sense of motion. He also wears anklets and ear decorations, symbolizing his bravery and status. The hero's wife, who is referred to as Sati in this context, is standing next to him. Her left hand is holding a lotus, which is an Indian iconographic symbol for purity and spiritual strength. She is shown in a poised stance, seemingly ready to move. Her clothing has folds that give the sculpture realism, and it is translucent, implying the delicate and fine texture of the fabric. Similar to the hero's cloth, her dress has noticeable folds that give her figure depth and movement.

The hair buns of both characters are positioned on the left side of their heads, presumably in order to correspond with their movements. Sati appears to be accepting her fate with calm as evidenced by the relaxed position of her right hand. Bangles adorn both of her hands, and while her leg ornaments are not quite visible, they are implied to be there.

The sculpture's layering emphasizes the motion depiction even more; the string of the bow is visible behind the hero's hand, implying depth and the figure's three-dimensional form. The hero stone's narrative element is enhanced by the panel's overall coherence and the attention to detail on the surface or ground the figures are standing on.

Vaidyanatheshwara Temple, Pushpagiri

Nestled in the Cuddapah region of Andhra Pradesh, the Pushpagiri Vaidyanatheshwara Temple is a timeless reminder of India's rich religious and cultural heritage. Archaeological discoveries and historical accounts point to the temple's ancient beginnings and its multiple expansions and renovations throughout different dynasties. The temple, which is devoted to Lord Shiva as Vaidyanatheshwara, has played a crucial role in Shaivism. Its centuries-long role as a lighthouse for pilgrims and devotees has strengthened the spiritual and cultural fabric of the area.

Within its premises, the temple accommodates numerous viragals and offers a virtual museum for them.

Viragal- Fig 4.a

This intricate three-panel hero stone (Fig 4.a) is a prime example of ancient visual storytelling; it tells a compelling story that progresses from struggles on Earth to celestial honor in the afterlife.

A battle scene is shown in the lower panel, but it is partially obscured by damage (around 30% of the stone is broken). Even with the crack, we can make out a hero riding a horse and in an aggressive stance, implying a big battle scene. With his left hand throwing a javelin and his right hand extended forward, the hero appears to be in a dynamic motion that suggests a high-action moment. He is facing a man who appears to be on foot and partially hidden by the horse. He is brandishing a javelin as well, but he is not striking, which could indicate that he is defensive or caught off guard. The hero's intricate jewelry, which includes a necklace, indicates his elevated social standing. The horse is depicted with such lifelines that even small details like its hairstyle are captured.

A linga in the top panel signifies that the hero has arrived at the heavenly realm. The hero is shown sitting respectfully and holding his hands in the namaskara (greeting or prayer) mudra, signifying his respect for the

divine. The addition of a lamp, alludes to the offering of light, which is a typical component of devotion. With its distinct arched border, the upper panel stands out from the scenes depicted below and is given a sense of sanctity and completion.

A transition from the physical to the spiritual realm is depicted in the central panel. Here, the hero—who may be dead—is being carried to heaven by two *apsaras*, or celestial beings. The *apsaras*' elaborate draperies allude to their ethereal nature, and their gentle embrace of the hero symbolizes his valor and honor. The *chamara* (fly-whisk) that the *apsaras* on both sides are holding further symbolizes the hero's elevated status after his death.

Notable is the shift from action to celestial honor. The absence of a framing border in the bottom two panels highlights the chaotic and fleeting aspect of earthly existence. The top panel, on the other hand, is prominently framed and represents the stability and tranquility of the heavenly realm. In contrast to the chaos shown below, the *linga*, the lamp, and hero in the upper panel all have consistent sizes, suggesting harmony and balance in the heavenly abode.

Viragal- Fig 4.b

The three-tiered hero stone (Fig. 4.b) honors the valor of a hero who was killed in combat. The lower level of the stone depicts a fierce battle scene that perfectly captures the hero's heroic moment. The hero is shown riding a horse in an aggressive, dynamic stance, holding the reins with his left hand while brandishing a knife in his right. A fallen opponent lies beneath the horse, still holding a knife, and it looks as though the horse is slamming into the fallen opponent's face. The hero's intricate decorations, including a hair bun and jewelry, highlight his heroism and significance. The horse's intricate rendering, with its tail tumbling out of the frame, highlights the action and energy of the moment.

The second tier is marginally smaller and is surrounded by what appear to be lamps, implying a holy or divine transition from the material world to the celestial. In this instance, the hero is shown being carried by two *apsaras*, or celestial nymphs, into *swarga*, or heaven, signifying his or her passage into the afterlife. The hero is depicted as being treated with honor on his journey to the afterlife, despite his size being larger than that of the *apsaras*, possibly to emphasize his significance or his weakened state—and his bent legs. The *apsaras* are depicted holding *chamaras*, or fly-whisks, which are a sign of royal service and convey the hero's reverence and respect.

The hero stone at the top displays a *linga* inside an arched frame. The hero is depicted sitting, making the *Anjali Mudra*, a salutation and sign of respect, and wearing jewelry and headgear to denote his regal status or divine reward. This image seems to depict the hero in an honorable position, perhaps signifying his arrival in *swarga*. The placement of the *kalashas* on pedestals above the lamps in the middle panel, which signify purity and prosperity, may symbolize the completion of the hero's journey from the world to the hereafter.

Telangana State Archaeology Museum, Hyderabad

Situated in the bustling city of Hyderabad, the Telangana State Archaeology Museum is a treasure trove of historical and cultural artifacts spanning multiple eras and civilizations. Founded by Hyderabad's Nizam in 1930, this museum is among the most illustrious and ancient in all of South India. The museum is housed in a magnificent structure that, in and of itself, is a monument to the Indo-Saracenic architectural style, which skillfully blends many architectural traditions.

Viragal- Fig 5.a

The hero stone (Fig. 5.a), is distinct in its qualities and meaning, a specific piece, which has been preserved in the Hyderabad Museum, depicts the story of a hero giving up their life, a theme found in many Indian hero stones.

With a knife in his right hand, the main character, the hero, is shown performing self-sacrifice. This is a dramatic interpretation of giving up oneself. He appears to be holding a fruit in his left hand, which could represent a ritual component connected to the sacrifice or represent the offering of his own life. Two *apsaras*, who are celestial beings also known as divine nymphs in Hindu mythology, are seen above him. They appear prepared to carry the hero's soul to heaven. They appear to be carrying what appears to be a palanquin, symbolizing the hero's righteous ascent to the afterlife.

The hero's hair is styled with a distinctive hairband, indicating that he gives his appearance some thought. The artisan's emphasis on presenting honor and dignity even in death is highlighted by the in-depth description of the hair's folding and the ornamental patterns surrounding the head. Something that looks like flying hair or cloth appears behind the hero; it could represent movement, the spiritual ascent, or the pivotal moment of sacrifice. The sculpture adds dynamism to the stone representation by displaying detailed drapery with multiple layers of clothing that indicate movement.

The hero wears wristbands, neck and arm ornaments, and other accessories that are customary for heroic figures in these kinds of sculptures and signify his rank. The absence of foot ornaments is noteworthy and may point to the figure's ritualistic or cultural characteristics. Some of the sculpture's details are hidden by damage to the knife, the area surrounding it, and some of the flying elements behind the hero. The sculpture's base, which stands in for the earth, anchors the figure in the world he is about to leave behind.

.Viragal- Fig 5.b

This hero stone (Fig 5.b) from the Hyderabad Museum shows a figure performing a dramatic and holy act of self-sacrifice, a motif common to these stones.

The sun and moon carvings at the top of the sculpture represent the hero's belief that his bravery will live on for eternity and the eternal nature of valor. In many cultures, the moon can symbolize immortality and cyclical nature, while the sun is frequently associated with the everlasting, unchanging truth. The hero's hair has a fold that suggests a bun, a popular hairstyle for men in ancient India that denotes nobility or warrior status. The hair is styled and fastened with a band that is visible even in the stone. The space between the buns may be a clue to the hair's style and composition.

Decorative elements that imply a regal or divine connection may be placed around the hero's head, signifying their esteemed status in society. A flying piece of cloth sculpted behind the hero captures the movement and intensity of the self-sacrifice moment. This gives the portrayal more energy and implies the hero's aggression and dedication to his act. The hero's lower body is entirely covered in layers of clothing, and the intricately sculpted folds suggest both his movement and possibly his social standing— fine clothing was considered a mark of nobility.

The necklace-like decoration around the neck, the necklace-like decorations that run from the shoulder to the abdomen, and the arm decorations all point to a noble person wearing elegant clothing appropriate for their bravery and social standing. The hero's status is further represented by the presence of wristbands on both hands, which may also be a sign of his martial ability. Damage to the area surrounding the knife and other sculpture elements, while regrettably obscuring certain details, also reveals the age and historical trajectory of the stone.

The hero assumes a stance that conveys strength and preparedness by spreading his legs apart and leaving a visible space between them. The fact that it is positioned to the left may suggest how the hero will act or concentrate in his last act. The ground is probably represented by the sculpture's base, which grounds the dramatic event in the world the hero is symbolically leaving behind.

Viragal- Fig 5.c

A major motif in the iconography of these stones is a dramatic scene of self-sacrifice, which is depicted in this hero stone (Fig. 5.c). The protagonist is depicted severing his own body with a sword in his right hand as a self-sacrificial act. The body is shown in two sections, with a distinct space between them, graphically illustrating his deed, making the representation vivid. The sculpture depicts the intestines gushing out of the body in graphic detail, emphasizing the violence and intensity of the act being portrayed.

There are two apsaras, which stand for the soul's journey to the afterlife. Often a royal characteristic, they are portrayed with chamara (fly-whisks), indicating that they are tending to the hero as he transitions from this world to the next. The hero's multilayered, intricate clothing suggests that he has some sort of royal connection or important position. Wristbands, as well as ornaments on his arms and neck, imply that he was a very important person. These particulars fit in with the way heroes are portrayed on these stones, where they are frequently idealized in terms of both their attire and physical attributes.

The hero's headband and hairstyle, which include intricate details like the way the hair is tied and a beautiful design encircling the head, demonstrate the attention to detail that went into presenting the figure in a noble and stylized way. The movement indicated by the flying cloth or possibly hair at the back emphasizes the self-sacrifice's dynamic and aggressive quality. The hero's visible movement and the layers of clothing on his lower body imply a vibrant, if macabre, scene. A stance or movement may be indicated by the separation of the legs and their orientation toward the left. Like other hero stones, the base probably symbolizes the earth, grounding the scene in actuality.

The socio-cultural context of the time is reflected in the ubiquity of hero-stones in Andhra Pradesh and the frequent depictions of combat scenes on them. The custom of remembering and honoring the brave actions of the departed began to spread around the third century AD. These steles honor devotional bravery, which is frequently connected to a vow of self-sacrifice, and serve as more than just memorial markers. These stones bear witness to this sentiment through their depictions of martial heroism.

Erecting a hero's stone was a multipurpose endeavor. It was an act of respect and remembrance for those who gave their lives in defense of a just cause, but it also revealed to the world the heroic actions of these

people. It was thought that these deeds would bring about the attainment of *Sivaloka*, a realm where heroes would gain eternal glory..

The practice of erecting viragals, or hero stones, was one of the main ways that the locals honored the deceased, a custom that was ingrained in the local way of life. This is the highest form of remembrance according to Indian tradition. There isn't much more that can be done to honor the fallen warriors than installing a Viragal since it bestows upon them the highest spiritual status and complete religious sanctity. This custom demonstrates how social values, spirituality, and the honor of martial sacrifice are intricately entwined.

Photographs

Fig. 1 Viragals, Mopura Bhairaveshwara Temple



Fig. 2 Viragals, Mopura Bhairaveshwara Temple



Viragal-Fig 2.a

Viragal-Fig 2.b

Viragal-Fig 2.C

Fig. 3 Viragal, Sri Bhagwan Mahaveer Museum, Kadapa



Viragal- Fig 3.a

Viragal- Fig 3.b

Fig. 4 Vaidyanatheshwara Temple, Pushpagiri



Viragal- Fig 4.a

Viragal- Fig 4.a

Fig. 5 Viragals, Telangana State Archaeology Museum, Hyderabad

Viragal- Fig 5.a



Viragal- Fig 5.b



Viragal- Fig 5.c

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