



HERO-STONE INSCRIPTIONS IN PANDYA COUNTRY –A STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Hero-stones erected during ancient times in memory of a hero who martyred his life for a noble cause. They are called Hero-stones (*Nadukal* in Tamil). These Hero-stones are found in many parts of Medieval Pandya country also. The Heroes were praised and prayers were offered for the bestowal of prosperity on the village community. They are very important records that lead to an understanding of the social and cultural milieu of this period.

Key Words: Hero-stones - Sangam period onwards–planted stones – Pandya country - Hero-stones for service minded tank-guards - Hero-stones in honour of cattle lifters – Killing wild animals- reconstruct the history of past.

Hero stones were erected to commemorate some memorable event. Especially it was reserved to a person who lost their lives in a violent contest for a public cause. Hence those muscled men were honoured or remembered by raising Hero stone. The practice of erecting hero-stones (referred to as planted stone or *Nadukal* in Tamil) was started with the early historic period of the Tamil Country i.e. Sangam age.

LITERARY EVIDENCES

The Sangam period (3rd century BC to 3rd century A.D.) literature such as *Ahananuru*^[1] and *Purananuru*^[2] refers to the hero stones. They were not plain in character. Generally on the hero stones either at the top or bottom details like the name of the hero, the name of the king and the hero met with his death (his heroic exploits and philanthropic deeds) was

engraved. The upper portion of the stone hero's figure was depicted or appeared. They were mostly planted nearer to the irrigation tank or lake or outside the village. These everlasting stones were worshipped.^[3] *Tolkappiyam*,^[4] the earliest extant Tamil grammar, speaks of six stages in the ritual economies associated with the erection of hero stones. They were (1) *katchi* i.e. discovery, (2) *kalkol* i.e. invitation, (3) *Nirpatai* i.e. Bathing of the stones, (4) *Nadukal* i.e. Erection, (5) *Perumpadai* i.e. offering of food and (6) *valttu* i.e. Blessing.^[5]

EVOLUTION OF HERO STONE

The origin of erecting hero stone or hero worship evolved from the Iron age megalithic burial tradition. There were three distinctive stages in the erection of memorial stones. 1) Megalithic monuments were raised as memorials. 2) The iron age graves were raised. 3) Later graves were abandoned menhir with inscription (memorial stone) was raised. The recent discovery from Pulimankombai, Thathapatti, just a few km from Pulimankomabi (on the southern bank of river Vaigai; Dindigul district) are the earliest best example for short menhirs about one or two metres tall, with Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions.^[6]

Later the Menhirs were reduced to hero-stones. There was a difference between the memorial stone and hero stone. Memorial stone were contains funeral remains but the hero stone were erected to show respect over to a death person without his remains.

The Pandyas were one among the three crowned monarch of the Sangam age, ruled the southern part of the present Tamil Nadu State (from 6th century to 16th century A.D.). They followed this tradition as in Sangam age. This paper is attempted to enlighten those customary practices gleaned through available hero-stone inscriptional evidences.

ERECTING HERO-STONES IN HONOUR OF TANK GUARDS

The life of a tank guard had been a risky one. During rainy season, he had to repair the tank structure. As the sluice was located in the deepest part of the tank, the tank guards must swim to the sluice structure to operate it when the tank was full and fresh flow of water filled the tank the work of the tank guard became risky. At times the tank guard lost his life too when engaged in guarding the tank. Erecting hero-stones for their selfless service was a customary practice.

For instance a thirteenth century hero-stone inscription found the bund of

the tank at Manur^[7] in Tirunelveli district records the accidental death of three persons by name Kudavan Sattan Appan, Ninramal Kavidi and Palivelan in Manur big tank fed by the Chittaru. Since the hero-stone is planted near the tank bund the three persons mentioned in the hero-stone might have been the tank guards. They might have lost life in safeguarding the tank flood. For their service to the village people, the local chieftain (*Nadalkinra*) and the Mahasabha (*Perumakkal*) of Madhurantaka Chaturvedi-mangalam decided to grant 3 *ma* of tax-free land as *Uthirapatti*, (a land in lieu of blood sacrifice) to their families.

Another unusual inscribed memorial stone at Mudugudi^[8] in Virudhunagar District dating back to the thirty fourth regnal year of Kulasekhara I (1302 A.D.) mentions a tank-guard namely Periya Deva Pallan of Kudumbar community who guarded the big tank of Karunkulam. He unfortunately died while trying to plug a breach in the tank bund during heavy flood. By sacrificing his life, he protected the villagers and the seasonal crops of that year from great calamities. In memory and appreciation of his selfless sacrifice the villagers erected a hero stone and donated ½ *ma* of land as *Uthirapatti* to his daughter.

The inscriptions on the hero-stone provide information about the social responsibility of the village in the Pandya country towards those who sacrificed their life for the safety of the villagers.

Usually the hero-stones were raised to commemorate the brave warriors who fell in battlefield while defending the country from the hands of the enemy. In the Pandya country, the practice of erecting hero-stones for service minded tank-guards reveals that they were considered as real heroes in the society like a chivalrous warrior.^[9] People were well aware of the importance of tank guards. Even though caste was compartmentalized and strictly observed during this period, on account of their service to the agricultural sector, the guards were held in high position. Raising a hero-stone to them was not a barrier to other section of the population.

SETTING UP OF HERO-STONES IN HONOUR OF CATTLE LIFTERS

Cattle raiding campaign was not a new thing, it was existed right from Sangam age onwards. Whenever a cow or bull captured by the enemy country, it was considered as matter of insult. Usually an attempt was made to bring back their lost cattle. If the hero was died accidentally, in order to perpetuate their memory people of the village erected a hero-stone. It could

be evidenced from a hero-stone inscription from Pulianmarathukkottai in Dindugal District (7th century A.D.) mentions that in course of retrieving the captured cattle two persons namely Nakkankatan and Srikotan were killed by shower of arrow by enemy.^[10] Next to agriculture, livestock were the important source of wealth in Pandya country. This shows how the villagers of those days were concerned about their cattle.

PLANTING HERO-STONES IN HONOUR OF VALIANT MEN KILLED BY WILD ANIMALS

Hero-stones were erected those who bravely fight with the wild ferocious animals in order to save the villagers and womenfolk. One of the earliest hero-stones of Pandya country datable to eighth century A.D. has been recently found in a village called Vellalankottai in Tudukkudi District mentions a tiger which had been living here. It had threatened the cattle and civilians who had grown up there. Two heroes, Senthann Kannan and his son Kannan Kovan, residents of Peruraali village, killed that tiger.^[11] The society thus honoured those who fell in protecting their interests with the setting up of *Nadukal*.

Inscriptions on the hero-stones described that, adventurous youngsters mobilized with arms, faced such attacks and died while safeguarding the village.

One such instance inscription of Kulasekara Pandya found in the open field of a small village called Siddarkal Nattam^[12] (Madurai District) depicted a hero with a conical head gear trying to kill a tiger (*perungkaduvai puli*) which is fiercely attacking him. Further an inscription engraved on the stone revealed that the big tiger which was biting the passengers by in the high way called Cholakulantakan Peruvali. A merchant class person named Virakotiyar of Poruntal alias Teventiravallavapuram (son of Kunratan belonging to warrior group) fell dead after killing the tiger single handedly. In memory of Tevap-p-perumal the village trader community raised a hero-stone and donated *Ima* of land as *Uthirapatti* to his descendants. Apart their trading activities, the merchant class people did some heroic deeds and also had the spirit to protect the village community.

ERECTING HERO-STONE IN HONOUR OF GREAT WARRIOR IN BATTLEFIELD

Tamil Nadu was famous for its heroic dead. There are references as to have heroes fought in the battle field. People worshiped hero's cult. It described how the heroes fought in the battle field and how they loyal and dedicated to their chieftains. Two hero stones with inscriptions belong to 11th to 12th century

A.D. in Vellimalai (Madurai) portrayed of typical warriors of ancient period. The first hero stone mentions the name of the hero who died in the battle field of Vadakkil mangalam. The hero stone was installed by a person, Arryan son of Adiyar. The hero is sculptured in a standing position and holding a long sword. While in the second hero stone depicts the hero is shown in standing position holding bow in his left hand while a long sword in his right hand. The inscription mentions the name of the hero as Velliyan.^[13]

CONCLUSION

The study revealed the practice of setting up of the hero-stone was closely associated with the socio-political life of the people in Pandya country and forms an integral element of them. Though scanty references are available, it gives us much historical information. Heroes' death was marked by installation of hero stones. Hero-stones were erected not only to those who fell in the battle field, but also those who defending the village people from any destruction. Grants were lavishly provided to the dependent of the deceased person by local village authorities. People were allowed to take part in whatever profession they liked. There was belief among the local populace that those who sacrificed their life for good cause, will go to paradise and they got name and fame after their death. It induced

them to sacrificed their life for own community people. Thus, it is the important piece to reconstruct the history of local people.

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