

Stones of Transcendence: Iconography and Symbolism of Heroic Commemoration in Andhra Pradesh

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Abstract

This paper examines the iconography and symbolic components of a Hero Stone (Viragal) found in Andhra Pradesh, contextualizing it within the wider South Indian tradition of commemorating monuments. The research analyzes the monument's visual narrative by examining its compositional layers, figures, movements, and motifs, uncovering a multifaceted interplay between martial courage and spiritual transcendence. The paper adopts a thematic iconography based on the methods to visualize the hero's transformation from a mortal warrior elevated to the status of a divine celestial being. The research analyses how weapons, animals, the hero's transformation as a celestial being serve as visual metaphors for dharma, tyaga (sacrifice) and collective memory. The paper examines the Viragal art historically bringing the stylistic aspects along with the historical notations across dynasties such as the Chalukyan, Kakatiya and Vijayanagara Iconography. The paper affirms that the tradition of hero stones in Andhra Pradesh serve as memorials for commemoration of the deceased warrior, but also as sacred relics connecting history and mythology.

Keywords: *Memorials, Andhra Pradesh, Sacrifice, Spiritual, Commemoration.*

Introduction

Hero stones, or Viragallu or Veerakallu in Telugu, are the best examples of a well-known style of memorial sculpture from South India. These stones are a single symbolic medium that combines artistic, religious, and historical elements. The Indian subcontinent has a strong cultural memory that is reflected in the tradition of making memorial stones to honor soldiers who died in battle or gave their lives for cattle, land, or honor. These stones are spread out all over the state of Andhra Pradesh, in fields, around villages, and in temple courtyards. They are silent but powerful proof that the hero changed from a mortal life to a heavenly one for all time. The items in question are not simply funerary memorials; they are sacred symbols that express a philosophical perspective on the principles of dharma (moral duty), tyāga (sacrifice), and moksha (liberation). These stones are the oldest and, in many cases, the only physical proof of the shared history of a number of rural communities on the Deccan plateau and in the areas around it (Sontheimer, 1982).

Evidence from inscriptions and archaeology supports arguments from literary imagination. The earliest mention of hero stones in the Andhra region is during the Chalukyan period (7th-8th century CE), where memorial slabs with battle representations and brief inscriptions were erected to celebrate soldiers that had passed (Sundara, 1975). These were typically erected in situ, i.e. where the person had died or close to a temple; this suggests the spirit of the hero remained in the human community, associated with the act of living and providing protection, often by the sword. In the Kakatiya period (12th-14th century CE), there was both a remarkable sophistication in an artistic mode of representation and a deeper spiritual expression of context. Kakatiya sculptors embodied complex representations of stories, disconnected from the slab, breaking the stone into ridges and adding mythological references to bring bigger than life interest in the story. During Vijayanagara (14th - 16th century CE), hero stones were constructed as larger narratives and temple complexes integrated an associated visual technology, represented a deified hero in heavenly form. The transition in style was a significant transition in theology, from memorializing bravery, Christian, martyrdom, and sacrifice, into a more

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visual theology of sacrifice and divine embodiment in community (Soundara Rajan, 1981; Champakalakshmi, 1996).

Hero stones in Andhra Pradesh often have a vertical tripartite shape that shows the Indian idea of cosmic elevation: earth, atmosphere, and sky. The bottom register shows the hero doing something brave: a man with a sword, spear, or bow facing enemies or dangerous animals. The jagged shapes, flowing fabric, and forward motion of this scene all show how alive it is. The middle zone is the threshold, a place where the hero's spirit begins to leave. Figures of attendants, priests, or heavenly messengers often show up here, and the presence of solar and lunar symbols makes this journey feel even more cosmic. The highest register shows apotheosis, with the hero either sitting or standing in front of Shiva, Vishnu, or a local god. Sometimes, they receive a garland or divine anointment. This iconographic composition transforms physical death into spiritual elevation. This picture shows the idea from the *Bhagavad Gītā* (2.37) that a person who dies while doing their duty goes to heaven, while the living continues to follow the same dharma (Kane, 1962).

Weapons and martial qualities, essential to the sculptural lexicon of the Viragal, encapsulate profound layers of significance. The elevated sword is not only a weapon of destruction, but it is also a symbol of determination and moral clarity. It is like Arjuna's bow in the *Gītā*, which was not meant to serve his own interests but to restore order. The spear, which is sometimes shown as piercing an enemy or being held high, connects the hero to heavenly figures like Skanda and Veerabhadra, who are the martial representations of cosmic protection. Shields, daggers, and clubs are not weapons of war; they are symbols of protection, discipline, and restraint. In some Andhra sculptures, the sculptor shows the hero's death in a calm way, with his eyes half-closed and his limbs relaxed. This calmness turns the violent act into *tyāga*, which is the holy giving up of life in order to find the truth. Settar (1982) and Shulman (2012) argue that the violence inscribed in these stones is transposed to an aesthetic of transcendence; the melee is recast as a ritual explication of death that glorifies, rather than laments, death and dying.

Objective and Scope of Study

1. To carry out an art historical study of the hero stones of Andhra Pradesh and to trace their development throughout the Chalukyan, Kakatiya, and Vijayanagara periods.
2. To interpret the visual narratives, analyzing the compositional structure and symbolic motifs of Andhra Pradesh's hero stones (Viragals), which are themed around heroism, sacrifice, and transcendence through the application of Panofsky's iconological method.
3. To investigate the ritual and socio-religious conditions associated with the erection of hero stones in South Indian culture and their connection to ancestor worship and valor memorialization.

Methodology

The research opts for an interdisciplinary qualitative approach that combines art history, epigraphy, and ethnography in order to examine the iconography and symbolism of hero stones (Viragals) in Andhra Pradesh. The analytical framework is based on Erwin Panofsky's iconological method allowing for a systematic interpretation of visual and symbolic meanings through three levels of analysis pre-iconographical description, iconographical identification, and iconological interpretation. The methodology directs the inquiry to formal structures, narrative composition, and the philosophical dimensions of valor and transcendence represented.

The study's primary data is from fieldwork done in the selected districts of Andhra Pradesh, such as Kurnool, Kadapa, Guntur, Krishna, and Prakasam. Each hero stone is systematically recorded using photography, sketches, and detailed notes with the emphasis on style, iconography, inscriptions, and site context. Epigraphical data from the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and local publications are used together in order to create chronological frameworks and to clarify linguistic, historical, and cultural references.

The research is also comparative in nature, which leads to the placement of Andhra Pradesh hero stones in the context of the whole South Indian tradition, making connections with the stones from Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. This process allows one to realize the regional continuity, iconographic diversity, and change in ritual practice over time. The interpretative synthesis of the research incorporates ground-level observations, iconographic deciphering and textual correlations to disclose

the hero stone as a historical artifact and also as a symbolic manifestation of moral valor, divine sanction, and collective memory.

Historical Background

The origin of the hero-stone (Viragal) tradition in southern Andhra Pradesh can be traced back to the megalithic cultures of early South India, with epigraphic and archaeological evidence demonstrating continuity into the Early Historic and Medieval periods (Settar, 1982; Gurumurthi, 1990; Sewell, 1884). Systematic studies reveal that from the 3rd century CE to the late Vijayanagara period, a multitude of monuments were erected across Andhra, especially in the districts of Rayalaseema, Guntur, Kadapa, and Kurnool (Mercy Ratna Rani, 2022; Pal, 1988; Shastri, 1984; Sontheimer, 1982).

These commemorative stones likely came from Pan-South Indian ceremonies that honored brave people who had died. This is a common theme in Tamil Sangam literature (Banerjea, 1941; Vanamamalai, 1975). Over time, the tribal and feudal chieftains of Andhra changed the stones' iconography and use, and the stones became part of the larger traditions of the Chalukyan, Kakatiya, and Vijayanagara eras (Yazdani, 1960; Burgess & Cousens, 1903; Sundaram, 1979).

During the Chalukya period (6th–12th century), the integration of mytho-historical themes, highly developed sculpting techniques, and polished temple decor made hero-stones progressively intricate (Settar, 1982; Sastri, 1955). The Kakatiya dynasty (12th–14th centuries) elevated the significance of these stones in both formal and informal religious contexts, thus enabling the formalization of hero worship (Gopal, 1981; Rao, 2017). Under the Vijayanagara Empire (14th–16th centuries), the number and variety of hero stones grew vastly. This era was marked by heightened ritualization, more elaborate inscriptions, and enhanced narrative organization (Pal, 1988; Verghese, 1995).

Hero-stone sites often coincide with trade routes, tank bunds, and settlement boundaries; their spatial distribution suggests both commemorative and defensive purposes (Nair, 2002; Champakalakshmi, 2011). Recent studies, frequently utilizing digital photography and archaeological GIS, uncover "clusters" or "landscapes" of memory where decades or centuries of commemorations strengthen collective identity (Kumar, 2021; Satyanarayana, 2013).

The appearance of the hero-stone traditions in southern Andhra Pradesh can be seen as a blend of native memorial practices and common South Indian memorial art, which has its roots in the megalithic and Early Historic periods (Settar, 1982; Burgess & Cousens, 1903; Sewell, 1884). Archaeological surveys, inscriptions, and temple records indicate that hero-stones have been a prominent feature of the Andhra landscape since the third century CE. Their presence was most widespread during the Chalukya, Kakatiya, and Vijayanagara periods (Gurumurthi, 1990; Mercy Ratna Rani, 2022; Sundaram, 1979). The function and aesthetics of hero-stone sculpture were affected by the changing political loyalties, tribal alliances, and frequent disputes for agricultural resources, which were the characteristics of these times (Gopal, 1981; Yazdani, 1960).

The hero-stone tradition of Andhra was essentially a cultural mélange that incorporated various elements such as ancient megalithic commemorative practices, classical temple aesthetics, dynastic patronage, local rituals, trans-regional influences, and regional specificity (Settar, 1982; Sontheimer, 1982; Mercy Ratna Rani, 2022).

Literary Antecedents

The first references to memorial stones are in Sangam literature (2nd century BCE – 3rd century CE), which describes nadukal set up for warriors who "sacrificed their lives on the battlefield and were commemorated with garlands and song" (Puranānūru, verse 234; Hart, 1975). These rhymes, which are often associated with bardic traditions, show how poetry, performance, and memorial activities may all work together.

In Andhra Pradesh, inscriptions from the early Chalukyan period (7th century CE) document contributions for viragallu installations (Sundara, 1975). Subsequently, Kakatiya and Vijayanagara documents from the 12th to 16th century CE associate the practice with royal military campaigns and the safeguarding of villages (Settar, 1982).

The *Mahābhārata* and *Śivapurāṇa* present legendary figures of heavenly heroes who achieve liberation via virtuous dying, foreshadowing the metaphysical interpretation of hero stones. The *Bhagavad Gītā* (2.37) asserts: "If slain, you reach heaven; if victorious, you relish the earth." This ethical dichotomy equating combat with salvation constitutes the visual syntax of Andhra's hero stones.

There are a lot of Viragal stones in the Rayalaseema, Kadapa, Kurnool, and Krishna districts. In Andhra Pradesh alone, there are around 400 verified stones (Pal, 1988; Satyanarayana, 2013). The monuments vary from simple, unadorned slabs to intricate narrative reliefs with several figures and detailed inscriptions, showing that they were adapted to the area and became more formal over time (Settar, 1982; Sundaram, 1979).

Previous Scholarships and Gaps

Prior investigations of hero stones have primarily focused on typology and epigraphy (Settar, 1982; Soundara Rajan, 1981), but the more intricate iconographic and symbolic frameworks remain underexplored. This study endeavors to bridge that gap by examining Andhra hero stones through a thematic iconographic framework, revealing compositional rules that delineate the hero's development from terrestrial conflict to divine apotheosis.

The study also connects these forms to classical literary works, especially the Tamil Sangam poems *Puranānūru* and *Akanānūru*, which praise warrior death (*tīral*) as a way to become immortal (Zvelebil, 1973). The hero stones of Andhra also show a visual theology of *viramārga*, which signifies that bravery can help you reach a higher level.

Sewell's original cataloguing work (1884) and the comparative analysis by Settar (1982) and Sontheimer (1982) have established crucial typologies and regional distributions for hero-stones. Subsequent studies (Vanamamalai, 1975; Nair, 2002; Mercy Ratna Rani, 2022) have yielded more intricate local case analyses, employing digital methods for recordkeeping. However, deficiencies persist in the research regarding the social applications of hero-stones in post-medieval societies, the impact of gender and marginalized groups on commemorative iconography, and the evolution of ritual functions across time and geography (Satyanarayana, 2013; Kumar, 2021).

Stylistic Analysis

The changes in the art of Andhra hero stones show larger changes in South Indian carving. Early Chalukyan examples show restraint, linearity, and clear storytelling, with a focus on the brave act itself. Works from the Kakatiya period, on the other hand, are more flexible and ornate, with mythological characters and divine audiences. Sculptures from the Vijayanagara period are very grand and have intricate borders and depth of composition. The hero stone is often used in building grounds during this time. From the field to the shrine, this change in location represents a basic shift: the hero is now not only remembered, but also praised. In a lively religious setting, the Viragal changes from a civilian landmark to a holy object (Soundara Rajan, 1981). Champakalakshmi (1996) says that the elevating of the heroic ideal shows how royal ideas and local loyalty came together in the Middle Ages, when religion based on temples included military ideals in its religious framework.

The distinguishing feature of Andhra hero stones, in contrast to those in Karnataka or Tamil Nadu, is their amalgamation of narrative vigor and spiritual transcendence. Karnataka's *viragallu* exhibit dynamic activity but are less predisposed to celestial metamorphosis; Tamil Nadu's *nadukal* prioritize poetic minimalism, embodying bardic remembrance rather than sculptural storytelling (Settar, 1982; Zvelebil, 1973). The examples from Andhra connect both forms by illustrating the hero's struggle while concurrently elevating him to a status of heavenly fellowship. In this manner, they encapsulate the quintessence of South Indian spirituality, wherein the distinctions between the human and the divine are permeable, and artistic expression serves as a means of philosophical revelation.

The hero stone tradition has a gendered dimension that is often overlooked. While most memorials commemorate male soldiers, certain examples from the Rayalaseema region acknowledge women who demonstrated valor or selflessness. Stones symbolizing *veeranganas* courageous women portray them in tranquil, upright postures, sometimes with hands joined or holding a torch, expressing *patnivratā dharma* (Ramabrahmam, 2016). These tributes expand the moral dimensions of heroism from physical combat to moral fortitude, portraying feminine virtue as a comparably potent avenue to transcendence. In this context, Andhra's memorial culture exemplifies a broader social theology: heroism transcends the battlefield to encompass dedication, fidelity, and self-sacrifice in diverse forms.

The Tripartite Framework

Most Andhra hero stones are set up vertically in three registers, which show both story and cosmic order (Ramabrahmam, 2016; Lenin Babu et al., 2025). A single panel depicts a simple and profound idea. Two panels depict a conflict and spirituality. Three panels depict battle, climbing higher ranks, and

being recognized by gods. This creates an outline from the past to the legend (Murthy, 1975; Rajasekhara, 1982).

1. Lower Register The Battle Zone:

Shows the hero's dangerous encounter. People are shown in active poses, holding a sword or stick. The sculptural rhythm shows energy and passion.

2. Middle register change or rise:

It means that the hero's spirit has left the body or is being led by celestial beings. There is a place between humans and gods called the antarikña that this zone represents.

3. Upper Register: Receiving celestial sounds

The godly hero is shown either sitting or standing in front of Shiva, Vishnu, or a local god, getting praise from the gods.

This three-part pattern is based on how ancient Indians saw the universe: earth (bhū-loka), the gap between worlds (antarikṣa-loka), and heaven (svarga-loka). George Michell, a scholar, dubbed these stones a "miniature visual cosmology," which means they are a comprehensive image of the world carved into stone.

Honoring Families and Heroes

Many hero stones depict the warrior along with his family, such as the wife, children, and at times even the parents. This conveys to us that the people of Kurnool and Rayalaseema had a different perception of bravery. They didn't associate heroism to be a solitary act of one individual. Rather, courage was a household virtue that was spoken of by everyone in the community. If you examine these stones, you will find the hero together with his family and friends. It instills in everyone the idea that it is the duty of every one of us to protect others and not only a warrior's job (Martin, 1914; Vanamamalai, 1975).

Sun and Moon

The moon, and the sun, which are either above or beside the hero, are symbols of eternity and universal harmony. The sun is a symbol of the heroism that lasts forever and the moon is a symbol of tranquility and the soul's transition to the other world. As a united front, they signify that the hero is a protector in both worlds. Their inclusion makes the hero stone a memorial that can last through the different cosmic cycles, which reflects a ceremonial desire for eternal remembrance (Pal, 1988; Settar, 1982).

Kalasa (Water Pot)

The carved water containers, known as kalashas, represent enlightenment, wealth, and purity. Symbolic of purification and the hero's quest for enlightenment, the kalasha ensures that the community will continue to reap the benefits of the hero's sacrifice long after he or she has passed on (Martin, 1914; Sontheimer, 1982).

Umbrella (Chatra)

The umbrella is a status symbol that also represents protection from the heavens. Incorporating this into memorial stones, especially for chieftains or royal warriors, gives the hero a sense of both earthly and heavenly power, confirming that heroic acts performed in the name of dharma are approved of by the heavens (Martin, 1914).

Apsaras (Celestial Beings)

Figures of apsaras, or celestial dancers, frequently depict the celebration or guidance of the hero's ascension to the sky. Their participation in dance or feast indicates the hero's transition from earthly battle to celestial reward, graphically expressing the concept that righteous sacrifice merits a place among divine creatures (Martin, 1914; Sundaram, 1979).

Simha Lalata (Lion Emblem)

Lion symbols, referred to as simha lalata, signify courage, tenacity, and royal or cosmic endorsement. By associating heroism with the characteristics of the lion, these sculptures affirm that

the hero's deeds are sanctioned and safeguarded by superior forces, both secular and divine (Settar, 1982; Champakalakshmi, 2011).

Positions for Standing and Sitting

The hero's stance is important, whether they are standing or seated. In general, standing up straight shows that you are ready and paying attention, which shows that you care about public safety. Seated positions, which represent reflection, spiritual authority, or divinization (Pal, 1988), show the difference between being a warrior in this world and being a beloved protector in the next.

Mudras, or gestures

The anjali mudra (hands folded in reverence) is an example of a hand gesture that keeps coming up. It shows that the hero accepts their fate and obeys heavenly authority. These calm gestures, which are often shown in situations of sacrifice, are a representation of the willingness to die for a higher cause (Martin, 1914).

Ornamental Adornments and Coiffures

When we look at hero stones, we often see figures with bold hairstyles and shiny jewelry, like necklaces and armbands. These decorations weren't just for looks; they showed the hero's bravery, reputation, and role as a defender. The way a hero wore their hair whether loose or neatly arranged could show their importance, maybe even suggest they were from a royal family or had divine support (Vanamamalai, 1975).

Weapons

Armaments that included swords, arrows, spears, daggers, and bows signified that the person was proficient in battle and was not afraid to engage in a fight. Any of these weapons, whether they were utilized or merely displayed, were taken as the embodiment of different aspects of warfare. To illustrate, a sword was a symbol of fight at close quarters, a bow was a sign of attack from a distance, and a shield was a token of defense. All these conveyed that the hero was versatile and capable (Majumdar, 1944; Thurston, 1909).

Ganda Kattera

The ganda katta is a tool that looks like a pair of scissors.

It represents ritual self-sacrifice. It is often shown in hero stones from the south, especially those that describe beheadings. This shows the strongest kind of commitment and bravery, which ensures the good of the community and follows the path of dharma (Martin, 1914).

Valari

Valari is a distinctive L-shaped weapon.

The most common depictions of the tool involve the hero using it in various ways. As the instrument of a hunt and a fight, it is usually seen along with a sword and a shield. This brings out the mixture of different cultural influences and the local fighting traditions are emphasized (Thurston, 1909).

A special feature of hero stones in southern Andhra Pradesh is the relationship between the text and the images.

The base of the stone often has ancient Telugu or Kannada writing that gives the hero's name, family, achievements, and sometimes the person who commissioned the stone (Settar, 1982; Satyanarayana, 2013). These writings place the act of bravery in a moral and social setting, connecting the hero's sacrifice to the community's beliefs and well-being (Sontheimer, 1982).

Yet, often the visual narrative on the rock is more than what the text recounts

The inscriptions bring more context, deeper feeling, and symbolic significance that language alone cannot communicate. Just take the instance, the text saying, "Mallikharjuna died defending cows," would be the pictures depicting the fight against many enemies, the arrival of gods, and the spiritual rise of the hero (Mercy Ratna Rani, 2022; Kumar, 2021). The sculptures revise or enhance the written account, making a single incident a legend (Nair, 2002).

There are also times when the images and text are not completely the same. Sometimes, figures in the picture, like family members or other characters, are not mentioned in the text. Also, certain rituals like the sacred thread, flowers, or symbols of the divine may be more emphasized in the images than in the text (Vanamamalai, 1975; Yegul, 2002). Often the stone serves as a palimpsest, revealing dialogues about local memories, worship claims, and shared identity.

The correlation between the texts and the pictures is significant for dating the stones through paleographic studies as well as understanding the evolution of memorials over time. Studies by Satyanarayana (2013) and Kumar (2021) indicate that the act of repairing worn inscriptions and adding new carvings or painting is a portrayal of an ongoing process of changing the meaning and continuation of rituals. Ultimately, the manner in which text and images interrelate on Andhra hero stones is like a conversation, rather than a lesson. This, in turn, aids in the formation of a narrative that not only considers the individual's past but also the shared myths and the gradual change of the community's rites (Settar, 1982; Pal, 1988; Sontheimer, 1982).

Function, Symbolism, and Ritual Significance

Hero-stones in the southern part of Andhra Pradesh tell the story of the valiant dead but these stones have become integral to the religious and social life of the people over time. They are at the core of the annual festivals, rituals such as offering food, making promises, and, most importantly, remembering the past (Settar, 1982; Nair, 2002; Mercy Ratna Rani, 2022). To these stones, the heroes are not only the ones who are remembered they are considered to be the guardians, the messengers, and the vital elements of the spiritual and social equilibrium of the village.

These stones convey a complicated set of symbols.

At the bottom, weapons like swords, bows, and shields show the idea of fighting for the good of the group and dying for others (Sontheimer, 1982; Champakalakshmi, 2011). Animal symbols, like horses, cows, and sometimes tigers or lions, show strength, status, and the role of animals in the village economy. They also remind people about

the past, when attacks on livestock and defending borders were important (Sundaram, 1979; Pal, 1988).

The figures of divine attendants, like dancers, musicians, or spiritual leaders, have deeper meanings.

They guide the hero to the sky, showing that his death was important and that he became a part of the bigger spiritual order (Settar, 1982; Vanamamalai, 1975). The presence of symbols like the linga on top of the stone shows that these are places where people keep doing rituals, especially during special times like harvest or when there is a problem (Nair, 2002; Kumar, 2021).

These stones are usually placed at borders, intersections, around water tanks, or on the edges of villages places that are in between order and chaos (Mercy Ratna Rani, 2022; Nair, 2002; Kumar, 2021). Such a location enables them to establish the connection between place, identity and also recognize them as significant elements of the community's collective memory. One can consider the act of cleaning the stones and mending any kind of damage, such as repainting or fixing the broken parts, as a means of giving a silent yet clear message that they are still there, and hence, still important.

Among the caretakers of the stones are older people, relatives, and religious experts who, together, take the responsibility of ensuring that the stones remain firm, the stories flowing, and the people being spiritually connected (Satyanarayana, 2013; Vanamamalai, 1975).

Overall, hero-stones act as a bridge between the past and the spiritual world. They help people remember and feel connected to their community, which has been shaped by challenges, sacrifices, and a desire to go beyond the ordinary (Settar, 1982; Sontheimer, 1982; Mercy Ratna Rani, 2022).

The sustained vitality of the hero stone practice in Andhra Pradesh can be attributed to the stone's artistic-historical significance, and to the ritual ongoing practice. Villagers empirically demonstrate they continue to worship historic Viragals by decorating the stone with flowers, vermillion, and oil lamps, during annual festivities (Lenin Babu, Gowda, & Tiwari, 2025). People sing anthems in honor of the hero, who continues to protect them, collectively reaffirming memory of the historic figure. At these 'worship' moments, the stone is no longer seen as an object, but instead, the stone becomes a part of the moral and spiritual economy of the community. We can view placing decorations on a stone, lighting

a lamp, or placing food as transforming memory into ritual. This ritual event is consistent with Pierre Nora's idea of the "embodied archive" of memory: a cultural process by which memory is constantly renewed through a sensory and ceremonial experience (Nora, 1989). These ritual performances re-enact the hero's demise as a collective reaffirmation of dharma and continuity.

Discussions

When viewed in this sense, the Viragal of Andhra Pradesh is not merely a historic artifact, but a text with an active philosophical current. The art depicts the shift from the karma-mārga (route of action) to the moksha-mārga (path of liberation), collapsing ethical duty/obligation with the ambition to transcend. The sculptor, often an anonymous craftsman from a local craft guild, is engaged in this theology of form, translating spiritual truths into a material presence. The valorous deed of the hero, which often forms the content of the sculptural moment, is now the heart of it. The stone, which once lay lifeless, now has awareness it becomes a śilā, carving knowledge (chaitanya). The performance of the hero stone in the village landscape now makes the land sacred geography. The distribution of monuments creates both a temporal map and a mandala of meaning, a process of commemorating valor in time with ongoing religious significance.

From an interpretive standpoint, these stones also challenge current disciplinary boundaries. They are archaeological objects, artworks, epigraphic records, and ritual spaces of anthropological concern. Shulman (2012) argues South Indian art has always acted as a "theatre of imagination," with the physical world infused with metaphysical significance. The Viragal illustrates this: it is, and it is not, an object and an event, an image and an action. If we recognize only its capacity as sculpture, we miss the performance; if we only feel it as ritual, we dismiss the complexity of its artistry. True understanding resides in the gaps points where creative form enables spiritual revelation.

Conclusions

The ethical message behind these stones is everlasting. Each Viragal asks you to consider what sacrifice and duty means. The upraised sword of the hero signals not victory but submission the loss of the self on the path to selflessness. The hero dies, but rather than defeat, he transforms; his memory is rebirth rather than nostalgia. The hero stone attests to the philosophical proposition of the Gītā: acting selflessly and not for gain, as liberation is derived in acts of service, without attachment. The visual and spiritual conversation of the Andhra hero stone corresponds to the wider Indic cosmology as a continual manifestation of one unending principle: life, death, and transcendence.

To put it briefly, hero stones from Andhra Pradesh communicate the sacrifice that a society made with great eloquence. Essentially, they are the reunion of art and religion, past and myth, heroism of one and the memory of the community. Through their portrayals, they stand for the never-ending journey of a human being from the war to the sky. Their writings show love; their present respect keeps a moral order founded on dharma and tyāga.

On top of that, hero stones are not only memorials; they transcend and mediate between the seen and unseen, human and immortal. The sculptor's tool, the soldier's weapon, and the devotee's worship become one action, thereby, highlighting the lasting understanding that art, when used for sacrifice, is a way to the divine.

Photographs:



Hero Stone, Mortha Village, East Godavari District, AP



Hero Stone, Dhamagatala, AP



Hero Stone, Pedda Dornala,
Prakasam District,



Hero Stone, Pushpagiri, Kadapa
District, AP



Hero Stone, Pushpagiri, Kadapa
District, AP

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