

ANIMAL AND VEHICLE SYMBOLISM IN INDIAN HERO STONES

A Comparative Study of Maritime, Pastoral and Warrior Traditions in Maharashtra,
Karnataka and Rajasthan

Dr. M. Lokesh

Associate Professor, Department of History, Government First Grade College, Hosadurga, Chitradurga, Karnataka, India
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Abstract

Hero stones constitute an important category of commemorative monuments through which communities preserved memories of heroic death. Their historical value extends beyond inscriptions and human figures: representations of animals and vehicles can encode information about local economies, warfare, mobility, ecology, occupations and social memory. This article comparatively examines ship imagery in the western coastal region of Maharashtra, cattle imagery associated with Turugol or Gograhana memorials in Karnataka, and horse and camel imagery in Rajasthan. The study argues that these motifs should be read as contextual historical evidence rather than as isolated decorative symbols. Ships can illuminate maritime warfare and coastal technological traditions; cattle can illuminate pastoral and agrarian wealth, cattle raiding and village defence; horses can illuminate mounted warfare and mobility; and camels can illuminate desert transport, pastoralism and regional ecological adaptation. The article combines epigraphy, archaeology, iconography, historical geography, oral traditions and proposed GIS documentation. It also stresses source criticism: an animal or vehicle cannot by itself establish the identity, status or occupation of the commemorated individual. The strongest interpretations emerge when sculpture, inscription, archaeological context, oral memory and landscape are read together. The study proposes the concept of “visual local history” to describe the capacity of memorial stones to preserve material traces of the historical worlds in which heroic events occurred.

Keywords— Hero Stones; Vīragallu; Virgal; Turugol; Gograhana; Memorial Stones; Ship Symbolism; Cattle; Horse; Camel; Maritime History; Pastoral Economy; Rajasthan; Karnataka; Maharashtra; Visual Local History.

1. Introduction

Hero stones are commemorative monuments associated with the memory of individuals who died in circumstances regarded by their communities as heroic. They occur in varied forms across the Indian subcontinent and are known by regional terms including Vīragallu or Virgal in Kannada contexts and Nadukal or related terms in Tamil contexts. Their inscriptions, sculptural panels and ritual settings make them valuable sources for reconstructing aspects of social and political history.

Most studies of hero stones emphasise the commemorated hero, the circumstances of death, the inscription and the religious meaning of the upper register. This article proposes an additional line of enquiry: the historical meaning of animals and vehicles represented on the monument. Such

motifs are frequently embedded in scenes of combat, cattle raids, hunting, travel or maritime activity. When interpreted critically, they can reveal the economic and ecological environment of the community.

The comparison of Maharashtra, Karnataka and Rajasthan is especially useful because the principal motifs considered here—ships, cattle, horses and camels—are associated with markedly different landscapes and modes of livelihood. The objective is not to construct a rigid regional typology, but to demonstrate how memorial iconography can be used to formulate historically testable questions.

2. Research Problem and Questions

The central problem is how far animal and vehicle representations on hero stones can serve as evidence for local history. The study addresses five questions: (1) What kinds of historical activities

are associated with ships, cattle, horses and camels? (2) How do these motifs relate to regional ecology and economy? (3) What additional information is supplied by inscriptions and oral traditions? (4) What are the limits of iconographic interpretation? and (5) How can such evidence be systematically recorded through GIS and digital documentation?

3. Research Objectives

- To document the historical significance of animal and vehicle motifs on selected hero stones.
- To examine maritime imagery in the Maharashtra–Konkan context.
- To analyse cattle imagery in Karnataka’s Turugol/Gograhana memorial tradition.
- To examine horse and camel representations in Rajasthan.
- To relate iconography to local economy, warfare, mobility and ecology.
- To integrate inscriptional, archaeological and oral evidence.
- To propose a GIS-ready documentation framework for comparative hero-stone research.

4. Research Scope

The study uses three regional case studies. Maharashtra is represented primarily through western coastal memorial evidence, including the well-known hero-stone group at Eksar near Mumbai and related western Indian examples. Karnataka receives particular attention because of its extensive Vīragallu corpus and the strong presence of memorials associated with cattle defence, village defence and warfare. Rajasthan is examined through selected memorial stones featuring mounted warriors and camel riders. The term “Rajasthan” is used here as a regional analytical category and does not imply uniformity across all communities or historical periods.

Chronologically, the study is concerned mainly with the medieval and early-modern continuities represented in the published case studies. Exact dating is treated as monument-specific and should be established through inscriptions, palaeography, stylistic comparison and archaeological context.

5. Materials and Methodology

The research follows an interdisciplinary approach combining epigraphy, archaeology, art history, iconography, historical geography, ethnography, oral history and digital heritage documentation. Published memorial-stone studies and archaeological documentation constitute the principal secondary evidence. Where fieldwork is undertaken, each monument should be assigned a unique identification number and recorded through location, dimensions, material, condition, inscription, script, language, sculptural registers, animal and vehicle motifs, weapons, religious symbols, associated shrine, oral tradition and photographic documentation.

The interpretive method is deliberately source-critical. A ship is not automatically evidence of commercial trade; it may depict warfare, transport or ritual imagery. A horse does not automatically prove elite status. A camel does not automatically identify a particular community. Cattle imagery may be directly connected with a cattle raid, but that conclusion becomes stronger when an inscription or local tradition confirms the event. Accordingly, the study uses a hierarchy of evidence: inscription and archaeological context first, iconography as corroboration, and oral tradition as contextual evidence subject to critical evaluation.

6. Maharashtra: Ship Imagery and the Maritime Historical Landscape

The representation of ships on western Indian hero stones is among the most distinctive examples of vehicle imagery in Indian memorial art. Published research on hero stones from the west coast has documented scenes of naval combat in which vessels, armed men and maritime equipment are represented. The Eksar memorial stones near Mumbai are particularly important for the study of maritime warfare and the visual representation of vessels.

The historical value of such images lies in their combination of vehicle and heroic narrative. The vessel is not simply shown as an object; it is placed within a conflict in which human actors die or achieve heroic status. This creates a link between maritime technology and social memory. Oars, masts, hull forms and the arrangement of armed figures can provide questions for nautical

archaeology concerning the types of craft known to coastal communities.

At the same time, the interpretation should not be restricted to naval technology. Maritime memorials can raise questions about coastal defence, political competition, fishing communities, seaborne transport and the control of coastal routes. Comparison with archaeological and historical evidence from the Konkan is therefore essential.

7. Karnataka: Cattle, Turugol and the Pastoral-Agrarian Economy

Karnataka provides a particularly strong case for interpreting animal imagery through a named heroic event. Turugol, commonly associated with Gograhana or cattle-raiding and cattle-defence episodes, occurs within the broader Vīragallu tradition. In these memorials, cattle are not incidental animals: they are part of the narrative that explains why the hero entered combat.

The economic importance of cattle provides the wider historical context. Cattle could represent wealth, livelihood, agricultural power and movable resources. Conflict over cattle therefore connected economic resources with warfare and community defence. A cattle-related hero stone can consequently contribute to economic history as well as military history.

The interpretive sequence may be expressed as: cattle resource → raid or threat → armed response → heroic death → memorialisation. Where an inscription identifies the hero and event, the sculpture provides a visual corroboration of the narrative. Where the inscription is absent or damaged, local tradition and archaeological context become important, but conclusions must remain cautious.

8. Rajasthan: Horses, Camels and Warrior Mobility

Rajasthan provides a contrasting visual environment in which mounted warriors are prominent in several memorial-stone traditions. Horse-rider imagery may be associated with armed mobility, cavalry, warrior identity and commemoration. Published documentation of memorial stones in the region includes mounted figures carrying weapons and accompanied by other symbolic elements.

The horse is historically significant because it changes the spatial and tactical possibilities of warfare. A mounted warrior can move rapidly across large distances, and horse imagery may therefore be relevant to the study of cavalry, political authority, martial identity and regional networks. Yet iconographic presence alone cannot establish whether the individual was a ruler, elite warrior, cavalryman or another participant in conflict.

Camel imagery is especially relevant to the arid and semi-arid zones of Rajasthan and adjoining western India. The camel functioned as a transport and pastoral animal and was adapted to desert mobility. Memorial representations of camel riders therefore invite investigation of pastoral communities, transport systems, long-distance mobility and ecological adaptation. Such interpretations should be tested against local inscriptions, oral traditions and settlement history.

9. Comparative Analysis

Motif	Regional case	Immediate narrative	Historical questions	Cautions
Ship	Maharashtra / western coast	Naval conflict / maritime scene	Maritime warfare, craft technology, coastal networks	Do not assume trade from ship alone
Cattle	Karnataka	Turugol / cattle defence	Pastoral wealth, agrarian economy, village defence	Confirm event through inscription/context
Horse	Rajasthan	Mounted warrior	Cavalry, mobility, martial identity	Horse does not by itself prove elite status
Camel	Rajasthan / western India	Camel rider / memorial scene	Desert transport, pastoralism, ecology	Community identity requires corroboration
Wild animals	South Indian contexts	Hunting / heroic protection	Forest ecology, hunting practices	Motif may be symbolic or narrative

10. Animal and Vehicle Motifs as Visual Local History

The comparative evidence supports the proposition that memorial iconography can function as a form of visual local history. A ship may preserve a memory of maritime conflict; cattle may preserve the economic context of a cattle raid; a horse may preserve evidence of mounted mobility; and a camel may preserve a memory embedded in an arid transport landscape. In each case, the animal or vehicle is meaningful

because it is connected with a human action and a particular environment.

This approach shifts the analytical focus from the isolated monument to the historical landscape. The monument can be studied alongside settlements, rivers, grazing zones, ports, routes, temples, forts and political boundaries. Such a landscape approach is particularly appropriate for hero stones because their meanings were produced through community memory and their relationships with place.

11. Oral Tradition, Ritual and Community Memory

Memorial stones often survive within village landscapes rather than in controlled museum collections. They may be associated with local heroes, guardian deities, family traditions, annual rituals or sacred spaces. Oral narratives can therefore preserve information that is absent from the surviving inscription. At the same time, oral traditions are historically dynamic and may change across generations. The researcher should record multiple versions where possible and distinguish documented historical evidence from later interpretation.

The combination of monument, inscription, oral narrative and landscape can be represented as a four-part research model: Stone → Text → Memory → Landscape. This model allows the monument to be treated as a social object rather than merely an archaeological artefact.

12. GIS and Digital Heritage Research Scope

A comparative GIS database could classify memorial stones by location, date, dynasty, heroic event, animal motif, vehicle motif, inscription, script, language, material and conservation status. Spatial analysis could then examine relationships between memorials and historic settlements, rivers, ports, trade routes, grazing areas, forts and ecological zones.

For the present research, an Animal/Vehicle Symbol field can include controlled categories such as Ship, Boat, Cattle, Horse, Camel, Elephant, Tiger, Boar, Deer and Other. Each category should be linked to photographic evidence and, where possible, a descriptive iconographic record. This will reduce the risk of relying on subjective visual classification.

13. Research Significance

The study contributes to four areas of historical research. First, it expands the use of hero stones from political and military history into economic and environmental history. Second, it demonstrates the value of combining iconography with epigraphy. Third, it provides a comparative framework connecting maritime, pastoral and desert landscapes. Fourth, it offers a practical basis for creating a digital corpus of memorial stones.

The approach is also relevant to heritage conservation. When a memorial stone is displaced from its original setting, the loss is not limited to the sculpture itself; contextual information about routes, settlements, grazing areas or sacred landscapes may also disappear. Systematic recording is therefore important for both scholarship and heritage management.

14. Limitations

- Regional memorial traditions are internally diverse and cannot be reduced to a single type.
- Not every animal or vehicle motif has an unambiguous historical meaning.
- Weathering, damage, repainting and displacement can alter the visual evidence.
- Oral traditions may preserve valuable memories but are subject to change.
- Exact dating should not be based on iconography alone.
- Social status or occupational identity should not be inferred solely from a horse, camel, ship or other animal.
- The selected regional case studies are comparative rather than exhaustive inventories.

15. Conclusion

The comparative study of Maharashtra, Karnataka and Rajasthan demonstrates that animal and vehicle representations on hero stones can provide an important route into local history. Ships open a window onto maritime warfare and coastal technological traditions. Cattle connect memorialisation with pastoral and agrarian wealth and with the Turugol/Gograhana tradition. Horses illuminate mounted mobility and warrior representation, while camels provide a valuable entry point into desert ecology, transport and pastoral life.

The principal methodological conclusion is that motifs should never be interpreted in isolation.

Their historical meaning becomes stronger when sculpture, inscription, archaeological context, oral tradition and landscape are considered together. Hero stones can therefore be understood as regional historical archives in stone—documents in which memory, economy, warfare, ecology and community identity intersect.

Future research should build a state-wise GIS corpus of animal and vehicle motifs and compare the results with settlement archaeology, epigraphic databases and conservation records. Such a project would enable scholars to move from isolated case studies toward a systematic history of how communities represented the material worlds for which their heroes fought and died.

Notes

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2. S. Tripathi, “Ships on Hero Stones from the West Coast of India,” *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology*, 35(1), 2006, pp. 88–96.

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Author Note

Dr. M. Lokesh is Associate Professor of History at Government First Grade College, Hosadurga, Chitradurga, Karnataka, India. His academic interests include South Indian history, epigraphy, memorial stones, hero-stone traditions, iconography and regional historical landscapes.