

Hero Stones in Khelaur of Puri, Odisha

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Abstract

Hero stones (Vira Shilas) are memorials honoring fallen warriors, symbolizing bravery and devotion. Hero Stones represent an important yet underexplored aspect of Odisha's historical and cultural heritage. This paper examines Hero Stones in Khelaur village, Puri district, focusing on their artistic, religious, and socio-military significance. Five Hero Stones discovered near the Khillesvar temple, dating to the 11th–12th century AD, are analyzed based on their unique sculptural features and religious symbolism. These memorial stones, primarily carved on sandstone, depict heroic figures in alidha poses and showcase martial traditions, including the use of swords and shields. Additionally, the study highlights their association with Shaivism and pre-battle rituals. The analysis delves into Khelaur's historical connections to trade, commerce, and military activities, referencing its ties to the Somavamśī and Ganga dynasties. This research contributes to the broader understanding of Odisha's Hero Stones, emphasizing their role as sepulchral monuments and their cultural significance in ancient Indian society.

Keywords: Hero Stones, Odisha, Shaivism, Khelaur, Martial Traditions, Memorial Stones

Introduction

A stone by itself is simply a stone. But when a memory is etched onto it, it transforms into a memorial stone, capturing the essence of remembrance. One recurring motif often seen on these stones is the sculpted right arm, raised in blessing—this symbolizes the revered status of a sati stone. In contrast, a Hero Stone (known as Vira Shila in Odia) serves as a memorial honoring a hero's noble death, typically in battle. Hero stones, a type of memorial stones, are commemorative monuments widely found across India. These intricately carved slabs or stones honor warriors who lost their lives in battle, often while protecting their community, land, or livestock. These commemorative stones are recognized by diverse names such as natukals, vīrāgals, nadukkals, paliyās, stambhās, kīrtistambhās, gōvardhan, chhāyastambhās are distributed across various regions in India. While funeral rituals and burial customs differ across human societies, their practices, traditions, and underlying beliefs have evolved over time. In South India, the tradition of erecting memorial stones can be traced back to the megalithic culture, eventually transforming into the hero cult, as reflected in Sangam literature. Vedic texts, such as the *Satapatha Brahmana* (9th–8th century BCE), provide detailed accounts of monuments built in memory of the deceased. Although South India is known for having the largest concentration of such monuments, the state of Odisha also boasts a significant collection of Vira Shila (hero stones). Notable regions in Odisha with these memorials include Puri, Khordha, Jajpur, Koraput, Kalahandi,

Balasore, Jagatsinghpur, Cuttack, Rayagada, Ganjam etc. Hero stones are typically classified into three distinct categories based on their sculptural and epigraphic features: (1) Hero Stone Sculptures with Inscriptions (2) Hero Stone Sculptures without Inscriptions (3) Inscriptions without Hero Stone Sculptures. Among these, the most commonly encountered are Hero Stone Sculptures without Inscriptions, whereas standalone inscriptions without accompanying sculptures are exceptionally rare in Odisha. This study narrows its focus to the second category—Hero Stone Sculptures without Inscriptions—highlighting their significance and unique features. The study of memorial stones in Odisha has largely remained underexplored, even though the state is home to numerous stone pillars of historical significance.

In Odisha, warrior figures are commonly depicted on temple walls, often standing with a sword and shield in hand. In some instances, these warriors are shown accompanied by female figures, as seen in the temples of Rajarani in Bhubaneswar and Konark¹. However, the most iconic depictions of warriors are found on monolithic shafts, where they are portrayed in the *alidha* pose—holding a raised sword in their right hand and a shield extended in their left whereas, some are depicted in votive temple structure like pillars with lingam worship scenes. This paper focuses on the hero stones discovered in Khelaur village (coordinates: 20.0625720, 85.7911685), situated along the Pipili-Delanga road in the Delanga block of Puri district.

Review of Literature

The study of Hero Stones in Odisha has received minimal attention compared to their extensive research in southern India. The presence of Hero Stones at Khelaur was first documented in Dr. Anam Behera's Ph.D. thesis². Although Hero Stones are not a new phenomenon in Odisha, they represent a largely overlooked aspect of the region's history. This paper seeks to revisit and highlight the historical context of these Hero Stones, shedding light on their significance and contributing to a deeper understanding of Odisha's glorious past.

Methodology

This research employs a historical methodology, drawing primarily on archaeological remains and excavated stones as key sources. The study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the cultural and social significance of these hero stones. Data collection involves a combination of primary sources, including fieldwork, interviews with local communities, experts, and scholars, along with visual documentation of hero stones. Secondary sources, such as scholarly publications, archival materials, and government reports, complement the primary data to provide a comprehensive understanding of these cultural artifacts.

Hero Stone 1

This votive temple-like structure measures 30" × 20" and features an amalaka and a niche where a hero is depicted worshipping a Shiva linga. The stone shows signs of erosion in various areas and is broken at the lower portion.

Hero Stone 2

The slab measuring 28" × 16", this hero stone has an irregular shape. The niche, measuring 12" × 10", contains a depiction of a hero in an alidha pose, holding a sword in his right hand and a shield in his extended left hand. The figure's hair is styled into a chignon at the back.

Hero Stone 3

This is an unusual hero stone, measuring approximately 26" × 14". The carving, made on an irregular stone slab, depicts a hero holding a sword in his right hand while seated on an animal.

Hero Stone 4

Resembling Hero Stone 1 in design of upper part, this votive temple-like structure features an amalaka and beki and measures around 31" × 11" × 38". The niche, measuring 9" × 9", contains a distorted carving of a small figure sitting on an animal, similar to the depiction in Hero Stone 3. Due to erosion and damage, the details are unclear, but the presence of a Shiva linga being worshiped by the hero is a plausible interpretation, aligning with the votive temple design.

Hero Stone 5

This slab measures 19" × 8". Within the niche, measuring 10" × 6", a hero is depicted in an alidha posture, holding a sword in his right hand and a shield in his left. His hair is braided into a chignon at the back of his head.



Fig.1
Hero Stone 1



Fig.2
Hero Stone 2



Fig.3
Hero Stone 3



Fig.4
Hero Stone 4



Fig.5
Hero Stone 5

Observations and Discussion

The collection under discussion is inherently intricate, encompassing a diverse range of minor stone-carved art forms that illustrate both secular and religious activities while also highlighting the military significance of Odisha.

The village of Khelaur (or Khilore) derives its name from the presiding deity of the Khillesvar temple³. On the right wall of the temple's doorway is an inscription dated to the Śaka year 1035, corresponding to approximately A.D. 1113. This inscription, deciphered by Sri Satya Narayan Rajguru, is attributed to the reign of Anantavarman Chodagangadeva⁴, a prominent ruler of medieval Odisha. Its presence confirms that the Khillesvar temple predates the conquest of Utkala by Anantavarman Chodagangadeva and suggests that the temple originated during the Somavaṃśī period⁵. The original jagamohana (assembly hall) of the temple has been completely destroyed and replaced in recent years by a thatched shed serving as a temporary structure. The compound wall around the temple is no longer present, and villagers have constructed their homes close to the temple walls⁶. Approximately 500 meters from the temple's location are these five hero stones and broken sculptures, which likely belonged to the temple complex when the mukhasala (porch) was intact. One hero stone, depicting a scene of Śiva-liṅga worship, further corroborates the temple's Shaivite association. On the basis of the inscription and its affinities with the Ramesvara group of temples of Bhubaneswar the temple can be assigned to the eleventh century A.D. Khelaur appears to have been an important settlement during both the Somavaṃśī and Imperial Ganga periods. These hero stones, irregular in shape and engraved with heroic figures on undressed sandstone, are believed to date to the 11th–12th century.



Fig.6
Hero Stones in Khelaur (in 2009)
Source - Anam Behera



Fig.7
Hero Stones in Khelaur
(at present in 2024)

Khelaur's historical significance is further enhanced by its connections to trade and commerce. It is speculated that the village had links with the ancient Mesopotamian civilization. A.P. Patnaik mentions “Khelara as Khelaur,” a village near “Rench” or “Erech,” and suggests that this name might indicate historical ties to the Sumerian culture, though the implications remain unclear⁷. One sculpture on the left side of the Khillesvar temple exhibits artistic influences that could be associated with Sumerian or Egyptian styles, possibly a result of such trade connections. Additionally, the army of Rajendra Chola passed through Odisha in A.D. 1022–23, as evidenced by Chola inscriptions. Inscriptions of Anantavarman Chodagangadeva, dating to the 12th century A.D., have been found at various sites, including Nirmaljar in Ganjam district, Puri, Alagum, Khilore, Bhubaneswar, and Jajpur⁸. These inscriptions indicate the existence of a route connecting these locations, which facilitated the movement of armies, administration, and cultural exchanges. This route further highlights Khelaur's role as a hub for trade and commerce.

The hero stones near the temple, now worshipped as Kṣetrapāla (see Fig.7) by the nearby Maharana family, were once located under a banyan tree near a pond on an elevated platform (see Fig.6). Though none of these stones bear inscriptions, they are made of sandstone and are consistent with similar stones in Odisha that are often worshipped as Grāma Devatās (village deities). Each hero figure depicted in the Hero Stones has braided their hair into chignons at the back, a style commonly referred to as *Balaganthi*. In ancient times, this tradition was believed to offer protection against attacks from the rear during battle⁹. The figures portrayed wield various military weapons, such as swords and shields (Dhala-Tarabari), reflecting the martial culture of the period. The army depicted includes infantry, cavalry, elephantry, and archers, with a notable emphasis on infantry and archery at this site, highlighting the military strength of Odisha.

Additionally, the Hero Stones reveal a strong religious connection to Shaivism, particularly seen in Stones 1 and 4, where there are depictions of reverence toward a Shiva Lingam. These representations underscore the Shaivite religious influence, with the heroes shown paying homage to the Lingam, suggesting a pre-battle ritual. This aligns with the longstanding Indian tradition of invoking divine blessings for victory before engaging in warfare¹⁰. Although the observations above are preliminary, they require further research for a more comprehensive understanding. Collingwood¹¹ famously says, “that the historian must use his imagination is a commonplace; to quote Macaulay's Essay on History, 'a perfect historian must possess an imagination sufficiently powerful to make his narrative affecting and picturesque'; but this is to underestimate the part played by the historical imagination, which is properly not ornamental but structural. Without it the historian would have no narrative to adorn.” The essence lies in constructing History from the past where nothing can reach except imagination.

Conclusion

These Hero Stones, dating back to the 11th-12th century AD, are of great military and socio-cultural significance. These stones are not necessarily placed over the graves of fallen heroes or at the sites where they were cremated. Instead, they function as sepulchral monuments or cenotaphs. In Odisha, Hero Stones have been discovered across various geographical locations, with no uniform pattern in their placement. Many of these stones are found in temple complexes, including those at Beraboi in Puri (Brahmeswar Temple), as well as at Jajpur in the Viraja Temple and Trilochaneswar Temple.

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