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WESTERN GANGA HERO STONE INSCRIPTIONS FROM MANDYA DISTRICT, KARNATAKA: A HISTORICAL STUDY OF THE AREKERE TURUGOL HERO STONE

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Abstract

Hero stones constitute one of the most significant primary sources for reconstructing the socio-political and cultural history of early medieval South India. During an extensive field survey conducted in Mandya District, Karnataka, two previously unpublished inscriptional hero stones belonging to the Western Ganga period were documented. The first is a **Turugol (cattle-raid) hero stone** from Arekere village in Nagamangala Taluk, while the second is a **village-defence (Uralivu) hero stone** from Kunduru settlement in Krishnarajapete Taluk. These inscriptions provide valuable evidence for understanding cattle protection, village administration, local warfare, and the commemorative traditions of the Western Gangas. The Arekere inscription records the heroic death of Siriyammayya, who sacrificed his life while recovering cattle seized by enemies. The Kunduru inscription commemorates the heroic death of Uttava Gavunda and Sattiyarasa, who defended their village during an enemy attack. This paper presents the inscriptions, their historical interpretation, and their significance in the socio-economic history of early medieval Karnataka. It also highlights the importance of GIS-based archaeological documentation for preserving and analysing hero stone distributions.

Keywords: Hero Stones, Turugol, Uralivu, Western Gangas, Kannada Inscriptions, Mandya District, Archaeology, GIS Documentation.

Introduction

Hero stones (Viragallu) represent an important category of commemorative monuments in the cultural history of South India. They were erected in memory of individuals who attained heroic death while defending their village, protecting cattle, fighting in battles, hunting dangerous animals, or performing acts of extraordinary sacrifice. Besides preserving the memory of these heroes, such monuments provide valuable evidence regarding the political, social, economic, religious, and military life of medieval Karnataka.

Among the ruling dynasties of Karnataka, the Western Gangas (4th–10th centuries CE) played a significant role in promoting the tradition of erecting memorial stones. Their inscriptions frequently record acts of bravery associated with cattle protection, village defence, military campaigns, and local administration. These records reveal the close relationship between agrarian society, local chieftains, Gavundas, and regional political authority.

As part of an extensive archaeological field survey carried out in Mandya District between 2022 and 2025, two previously unpublished inscription-bearing hero stones were documented. The first is located at Arekere in Nagamangala Taluk and belongs to the Turugol (cattle-raid) tradition. The second, discovered at Kunduru in Krishnarajapete Taluk, commemorates heroes who died while defending their settlement. Both inscriptions contribute new historical evidence to the corpus of Western Ganga epigraphy and expand our understanding of memorial traditions in southern Karnataka.

The present study analyses these two inscriptions from historical, epigraphical, archaeological, and geographical perspectives. It also demonstrates the usefulness of GIS-based documentation in recording and preserving archaeological heritage.



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Objectives of the Study

The present study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To document and publish two previously unpublished Western Ganga inscriptional hero stones from Mandya District.
2. To analyse the historical, epigraphical, archaeological, and cultural significance of the inscriptions.
3. To examine the role of cattle protection (Turugol) and village defence (Uralivu) in the socio-political life of the Western Ganga period.
4. To investigate the contribution of local Gavundas and village communities in protecting agrarian settlements.
5. To demonstrate the importance of GIS-based documentation in archaeological research and cultural heritage management.

The Arekere Turugol Hero Stone

Field Registration Number: MKD-NGM-ARK-2025-01

Location: Arekere Village, Nagamangala Taluk, Mandya District, Karnataka

GPS Coordinates: 12.821444° N, 76.907456° E

Dynasty: Western Gangas

King: Ereyappa (Ereyaparasa)

Date: c. AD 900

Type of Memorial: Turugol (Cattle-Raid) Hero Stone

Language: Kannada

Script: Early Kannada

Inscription (Transliteration)

1. Svasti Śrī ... Ereyapa...
2. ... rasara rājyadandu turu...
3. ... gonḍu...
4. ... kādi...
5. ... saggi...
6. ... yādaṃ...
7. ... uya...
8. ... Siriyamma...



9. ... Kāśyapa-gotra...

(The inscription is weathered and several portions are illegible.)



Figure 1 Arekere Turugol Hero Stone.

Historical Interpretation

Although the inscription is partially damaged, its surviving text clearly records a cattle-raid (Turugol) episode during the reign of the Western Ganga king Ereyappa. It commemorates a warrior named Siriyammayya, belonging to the Kāśyapa Gotra, who sacrificed his life while recovering cattle that had been seized by hostile forces.

The inscription demonstrates that cattle represented one of the most valuable economic resources of early medieval Karnataka. Protecting livestock was not merely an economic necessity but also a social responsibility closely associated with honour and community identity. Heroes who died while defending or recovering cattle were memorialised through hero stones, reflecting the high esteem accorded to such acts.

Historical Significance

The Arekere hero stone is one of the few unpublished Western Ganga inscriptions documenting the Turugol tradition in Mandya District. It provides fresh evidence regarding cattle-raiding practices, pastoral economy, village security, and the memorial traditions of the Ganga period. The GIS documentation of the monument further contributes to understanding the spatial distribution of cattle-protection hero stones in southern Karnataka.



The Kunduru Uralivu Hero Stone

Field Registration Number: MKD-KRP-KND-2025-05

Location: Kunduru Settlement, Krishnarajapete Taluk, Mandya District, Karnataka

GPS Coordinates: 12.73515° N, 76.47059° E

Dynasty: Western Gangas

Date: 8th Century AD

Type of Memorial: Uralivu (Village Defence) Hero Stone

Language: Kannada

Script: Early Kannada

Inscription (Transliteration)

1. Svasti Śrī ... Uttava Gavundanum Ballahana...
2. ... Pubbigeya Mahāsāmanta...
3. ... Ūraḷivinol kādi Uttava Gavunda Sattiyarasa...

(The inscription survives only in a fragmentary condition.)



Figure 2 Kunduru Uralivu Hero Stone.



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Historical Interpretation

The inscription records that Uttava Gavunda and Sattiyarasa lost their lives while defending their village during an attack led by the Mahāsāmanta of Pubbiga. Their sacrifice was commemorated through the erection of this hero stone.

The record provides important evidence regarding local administration and military organisation during the Western Ganga period. It indicates that village leaders, particularly the Gavundas, were entrusted with responsibilities extending beyond land administration to include defence and protection of settlements.

Historical Significance

The Kunduru hero stone represents an important unpublished inscription illustrating the Uralivu (village-defence) tradition of early medieval Karnataka. It enriches our understanding of village administration, local warfare, political authority, and community organisation under the Western Gangas. The GIS documentation of the monument enables accurate spatial analysis and strengthens the archaeological record of Mandya District.

5. Comparative Analysis

The two unpublished hero stone inscriptions presented in this study represent two distinct yet closely related aspects of Western Ganga society. The Arekere inscription belongs to the Turugol (cattle-raid) tradition, whereas the Kunduru inscription represents the Uralivu (village-defence) tradition. Although the immediate causes of heroism differ, both inscriptions reveal the importance of collective security in early medieval Karnataka.

The Arekere inscription highlights the economic significance of cattle in the agrarian society of the Western Gangas. Livestock constituted an essential component of rural wealth, and cattle raids frequently resulted in armed conflicts. The hero Siriyamayya sacrificed his life while recovering stolen cattle, demonstrating that cattle protection was regarded as an honourable social duty worthy of permanent commemoration.

In contrast, the Kunduru inscription records the defence of a village against hostile forces. The participation of Uttava Gavunda and Sattiyarasa indicates that village leaders and local chiefs played an active role in protecting settlements. The inscription also reflects the administrative structure of the Western Ganga kingdom, where local elites were responsible for maintaining peace and security.

Together, these inscriptions illustrate that memorial stones were not merely funerary monuments but valuable historical records documenting rural administration, military organisation, social values, and the collective memory of medieval communities.

Significance of GIS Documentation

The application of Geographic Information System (GIS) technology has considerably enhanced archaeological documentation and heritage management. During the present field survey, both hero stones were recorded with precise Global Positioning System (GPS) coordinates, enabling accurate spatial documentation.

GIS-based documentation offers several advantages:

- Precise recording of archaeological locations.
- Mapping the spatial distribution of Western Ganga hero stones.
- Identification of regional patterns in cattle-protection and village-defence memorials.
- Integration of archaeological, epigraphical, and geographical datasets.



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- Development of digital heritage inventories and cultural resource management systems.
- Support for future conservation, monitoring, and heritage tourism initiatives.

The integration of GIS with epigraphical research represents an important methodological advancement in the study of Karnataka's archaeological heritage.

Conclusion

The unpublished inscriptions from Arekere and Kunduru constitute valuable additions to the corpus of Western Ganga epigraphy. They provide fresh historical evidence concerning rural society, local administration, cattle protection, village defence, and memorial traditions in early medieval Karnataka.

The Arekere Turugol hero stone demonstrates the economic and cultural importance of cattle in the Western Ganga period, while the Kunduru Uralivu inscription illustrates the responsibility of local Gavundas in safeguarding villages against external attacks. Both inscriptions reveal the close relationship between community organisation and political authority.

The present study also demonstrates the importance of systematic archaeological field surveys combined with GIS technology for documenting and preserving endangered heritage monuments. Since both inscriptions remain unpublished, they significantly contribute to the epigraphical database of Karnataka and provide new evidence for future historical research.

Further archaeological investigations in Mandya District are likely to identify additional unpublished hero stones, thereby enriching our understanding of the memorial traditions of early medieval South India.

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