



# HERO STONES OF KALAHANDI: A PRELIMINARY STUDY

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## ABSTRACT:

The district of Kalahandi is located in the south-western part of Odisha. The literary meaning of the word Kalahandi means “the Pot of Art”. In fact in the field of art Kalahandi has a rich culture. Artistic activities of man has been discerned Kalahandi at least since the pre-historic age, which witnessed the splendid development of art and architecture in this place. This region has a great antiquity, starting from the Mahabharata, various literature refers to the land in one geographical unit or the other. The landmass had variegated identities in different historical epochs. It constituted a part of *Taitilaka Janapada* in 5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE Kalahandi was centre of the far-flung *Atavika* land during the Maurya reign in India (4<sup>th</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BCE). According to Kautilaya’s *Arthasashtra* during 4<sup>th</sup> Century BCE the land between the river Indravati and Tel (South-West part of Kalahandi) known as *Indravana*. Hero Stones is an integral part of Memorial Stones tradition. Memorial Stones are erected to commemorate dead. The tradition of erection of a monument for the memory of the dead person originated from Vedic period when the dead bodies were not cremated but buried. The spot of burial are initially marked with single stones and later stone circle. The Hero Stones are erected to honour an individual for his heroism, allegiance and sacrifices. Most of the Hero Stones sculptures of Kalahandi are associated with battle fields and we noticed that a hero holds a sword on his raised right hand and shield on his left, also having a head wear and on the upper part symbol like- sun, crescent moon, female palm with bangles were depicted. So far as Hero Stones tradition of Kalahandi as well as Odisha is concerned no such major survey and research is conducted. The present paper attempts to study the nature and form of the Hero Stones, sculptural art traditions and their evolution. The present paper contains both primary and the secondary sources to reveal the political and socio-religious significance of the Hero Stones tradition of Kalahandi.

**Keywords:** Kalahandi, Hero Stones, Memorial Stones, Tradition, Sculpture

## STUDY AREA:

In the south-west of the state of Odisha is the district of Kalahandi. The districts of Balangir and Nuapada border it on the North, Rayagada borders it on the South, Nabrangpur and Chattisgarh state border it on the West, Boudh and Rayagada border it on the East. The district occupies 11885 Sq. km. The headquarter is at Bhawanipatna which stands almost the eastern border. The district may be separated into two main physical divisions, the plain area and the hill tracts, which have equal geographical areas. The first part consists of Tel river valleys and its tributaries, while the second part mostly consists of the hilly region extending from North-East to the South-West. The abundance of valuable and semi-precious deposits in this area, including carnelian, cat's eye, sapphire, ruby, garnet, topaz, alexandrite, crystal, tourmaline and diamond are its most notable characteristics. Even Kalahandi's tutelary deity, *Manikeswari*, derives her name from the term *Manikya*, which means Ruby (a gem stone).

According to the records of Old Central Provinces, this region is always known as Kalahandi (Crucible of Art)<sup>1</sup>, literary means "Pot of Art". A review of the literature indicates that the area is essentially *terra incognita*. Kalahandi has a great antiquity, starting from the Mahabharata, various literatures refers to the land in one geographical unit or the other. The landmass had variegated identities in different historical epochs. It was a component of the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE *Taitilaka Janapada*<sup>2</sup>. During the Mauryan era (4<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> Century BCE), Kalahandi served as the center of the vast *Atavi* or *Atavika*<sup>3</sup> territory. According to Kautilya's Arthasashtra during 4<sup>th</sup> Century BCE the territory between the rivers Indravati and Tel (South-West) was known as *Indravana* or *Indravanaka*<sup>4</sup> and it is rich in gem stones.

During the southern campaign of Gupta monarch Samudragupta in 350 C.E<sup>5</sup>, ancient Kalahandi recognized as *Kantara* or *Mahakantara* and ruler of *Mahakantara* Vyagararaja was defeated by Samudragupta. This campaign had a significant cultural and material impact on this region. Following, *Mahakantara*'s demise, Kalahandi lost its political identity and came under the Nala dynasty of Podagarh (4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> Century CE), then the Sarabhapurias. Temple and sculptural art traditions flourished in Kalahandi during 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> Century CE, when it was part of *Trikalinga* and came under the Somavamsis. In 11<sup>th</sup> Century CE, the *Chhindaka Nagas* replaced the Somavamsis. According to the inscription found in the Dadhivamana temple at Junagarh, the former capital of Kalahandi of Naga dynasty was named as *Kalahandi Nagara*. The region was identified as *Kamala Mandala*<sup>6</sup> under the Ganga dynasty in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century CE and remained so till the Maratha era. The former Maharaja of Kalahandi was acknowledged by the British government in 1946 as the head of *Karonda* state. Following Kalahandi's 1947 unification with India, the present day Kalahandi district was established on 1<sup>st</sup> November 1949.

Kalahandi's cultural legacy can be uncovered through the excavation of pre-historic artifacts, currency, sculpture, architecture and forts etc. The pre-historic remains are noticed in the form of stone tools and paintings. The pre-historic rock painting of Gudahandi and Jogimath reflects the early cultural heritage of the region. The excavation of Asurgarh, Belkhandi, and Maraguda valley provides light on Kalahandi's early historic cultural advancements. A few inscriptions also depict the life, culture and different facets of ancient Kalahandi mention can be made of the Teresinga, Pipal Padar, Kudeipali Copper plate, temple inscription of Junagarh, Mohangiri, Narla,

Bodhikomna etc. The remains of Belkhandi, Junagarh, Asurgarh, Amaath, Sankush, Dadpur, Deheli, Biswanathpur, Madanpur, Bhimkela, Chhoriagarh etc. were noteworthy in the field of art and architecture.

### Hero Stones Tradition and its Origin:

Hero stones are a type of memorial stone that was typically erected to honor or commemorate a soldier or king who had died valiantly in battle. This custom had strong ties to different dynasties that held power. To honor those who have passed away for a just cause or made a remarkable contribution to society, hero stones are even built<sup>7</sup>. We find both inscribed and non-inscribed Hero stones in many parts of Indian sub-continent. The Hero stones with engravings provided us with comprehensive details about the construction of the relevant sculpture. And this type of Hero stones attracted the researchers but the present papers mostly deal with the non-inscribed Hero stones of Kalahandi, because in comparison to Southern India, very scanty inscribed Hero stones discovered in Odisha as well as in Kalahandi.

We discovered proof from the Vedic era that a monument had been built in honor of the deceased. At this time, burial took place rather than cremation for the deceased. Additionally, the burial site is initially designated by solitary stones, which are eventually replaced by stone circles discovered during excavation. The Vedic literature, *Sthapatha Brahmana*, provides detailed information regarding the practice of building monuments over bones or relics<sup>8</sup>. There is a well-established tradition in Sangam literature, such as the *Tolkappiyam*, *Akananuru*, *Purananuru*, and *Malaipadukadam*, of constructing memorial stones in remembrance of the deceased<sup>9</sup>. The first memorial stones in South India are essentially menhirs or upright stone posts, known as *Nadukals* and the Tamils worshipped idols in this manner for the first time. Later on these menhirs were transformed and took the sculptural form of Hero stones (*virakals*).

From 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E. onwards we have evidence of inscribed Hero stone culture in India. The inscribed Hero stones recorded the achievements, custom, rituals, rites etc. of this glorious tradition. Inscription on some of these give only a name, other offer details of the circumstances in which the person died. We found Hero stones in all over Indian sub-continent and its name differ from region to region. In Kathiawar region of Gujarat Hero stones called as “*Paliya*”<sup>10</sup> which means protect or guardian. In Maharashtra Hero stones are called as *Veeragal*<sup>11</sup> and normally consisted of two or three panels. In South India we noticed largest concentration of Hero stones. About 2650 hero stones dated between 5<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries have been found only from Karnataka<sup>12</sup>. And if we add the recent discoveries then may be the number increase to more than 3000. In South India these Hero stone called as *Veerakallu* in Kannada, *Natukals* in Tamil<sup>13</sup>. The earliest and oldest memorial stone is found in Tamil Nadu is

more than 2400 years old that is 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. Tribal communities of South-Western Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, and Chattishgarh (Bastar regions) still continued the tradition of erection of memorial stones/pillars or wooden post. These memorials are connected with their socio-religious practices and also part of their cultural life.

### Hero Stones of Kalahandi:

From 4<sup>th</sup> century C.E to medieval period Kalahandi was ruled by so many dynasties and identified with different name like – *Kantara, Mahakantara, Taitala Janapada, Indravana, Trikalinga, Karunda Mandala, Kamala Mandala, Chakrakota Mandala* etc. Dynasties like– Nala (Podagarh), Sarabhapuriya (Maraguda), Vakataka, Eastern Ganga, Kalachuri, Soma Vamsi, Ganga Vamsi and Naga Vamsi etc. ruled over in these regions and for territorial extension and political supremacy, these above dynasties fought with each other and the Kalahandi region experienced with so many battles. And it was enriched with a glorious military culture. Through the memorial stones we evidenced a military tradition and sculptural art of this region. These memorial stones were worshiped as village deity (Gramadevata or Devi) like – Chandi, Dharani, Bairava etc. In Junagarh, Belkhandi, Biswanathpur, Bhawanipatna, Narla, Dadpur, Choriagarh, Badchergaon, Rishda etc. we found a great number of Hero stones.

The Hero Stones of Kalahandi belongs to 6<sup>th</sup> century to 12<sup>th</sup> century C.E and most of them non-inscribed in nature. The common iconographical features of Hero stones in Kalahandi region was the carving of Sun and Moon symbol with a palm covered with bangles at the top portion. Below the motif the figure of the Hero is depicted, who died in the battle field. This type of Memorial stones called as Sati-cum-Hero stones<sup>14</sup>. Combined Hero and Sati stones are as common as the memorials erected in honour of several wives of the hero, who apparently accepted sati soon after the death of their husband.<sup>15</sup>

### Junagarh (19° 57' 19"N; 83° 09' 53"E):

The most important Hero Stone of Kalahandi is founded from Talbandhpada of Junagarh (fig.1). It is an inscribed Hero stone and a three lined inscription in the proto-Odia characters of the 13<sup>th</sup> century C.E has been inscribed in the lower portion of the stone slab. It has been deciphered by Dr. Snigdha Tripathy as:

(1<sup>st</sup> line) *Sri Durga (or Duva) dasagupta (?)cara*

(2<sup>nd</sup> line).... *Je (ye).....devarika samastasa*

(3<sup>rd</sup> line) *marpici (se) – mrta senapati (?)*.

The image of the hero is in fighting posture carrying a sword in his raised right hand and shield in his left hand. It is a rectangular stone slab, in the upper portion Sun, crescent Moon and female palm with bangles is carved. As per epigraphic study it seems that the Hero was a “Guptacara” (spy) of a foreign land and was killed in a battlefield. And for his memory the Hero stone was erected.<sup>16</sup>



**Fig.1 Hero Stone of Talbandhpada**

**(Courtesy Mr. S.S. Panda)**

The Hero stone (fig.2) of on the compound of Someswar temple draws close observations, because it has similarity with the two Hero stones at the entrance gate of Kalahandi University, Bhawanipatna and Belkhandi Museum. This sculpture measures 4feet x 1.5 feet. Here the Hero figure, holding a shield in his left hand and sword in his right hand is carved. Symbol of sun and moon is erected on the upper portion. The figure wears a

significant headwear or head dress. As studied the above head wear are usually found on Kalachuri sculptures. Therefore, the Hero stone is believed as a Kalachuri Hero stone<sup>17</sup>.

The Hero stone of Banjibandh (fig.3) area situated at Chandrasagar is worshipped as Bhairava (protecting deity of Garh/fort). In this sculpture a man holds a sword in his both hands, which is about 5feet height and 1.5feet in width. Most of the part of the lower portion this sculpture is buried under the ground.



**Fig.2 & 3 Hero Stone of Someswar Temple & Banji Bandh**

During fieldwork two Hero stones were discovered from Hirasagar pond of Hirasagarpada. The biggest sculpture (fig.4) is about 5 feet and 1.5 feet in width. The hero figure holds a sword on his raised right hand and shield on his left hand. The hero wears a unique head wear, which is generally noticed in Kalachuri sculptures. On the top portion of the left hand side the symbol of crescent moon is depicted and in the centre female palm is carved. On the lower portion we noticed a three lined inscription in proto-Odia characters. Being requested by this writer, the learned epigraphist Dr. Subrata Kumar Acharya has deciphered it as:

Line 1. *Sankara Vagha Bhuchara*

Line 2. *Kara Paaiam Sargara*

Line 3. *Papati Niha Dharma.*

As per the epigraphic study provided by Dr. Acharya the hero stone was belongs to one “*sankara vagha*”, an infantry soldier (*Bhuchara*) who died during a war. And this hero stone was installed after performing some rituals for the dead soldier for his attainment of heaven (*Sargara*).<sup>18</sup>

The other Hero stone (fig.5) is about 3 feet in height and 1 feet in width. This figure is also holding a sword in his raised right hand and shield in his left hand. Symbols like sun, crescent moon and female palm with bangles is carved on the top portion.



**Fig.4 & 5 Hero Stone of Hirasagarpada**

**Bhawanipatna (19.91<sup>0</sup> N; 83.128<sup>0</sup> E):**

Two Hero stones (fig.6 and 7) are installed at the two sides of the main entrance of the Kalahandi University, Bhawanipatna. In both these sculptures the Hero, holds a shield by the left hand and a sword by the right hand and wears a significant head-wear. On the top portion of the left hand side of the Hero sculpture only the symbol of sun is carved. But symbol like sun, half -moon and palm with bangles is carved on top portion of the right hand side Hero sculpture<sup>19</sup> and this type of iconographical feature we found on Hero cum Sati stones.

As many as five hero stones were preserved in the district museum of Kalahandi located at Bhawanipatna and all these sculptures were collected from Belkhandi and Risida area.





**Fig. 6 & 7 Hero Stones of Bhawanipatna**

**Biswanathpur (19° 49'20.01"N; 83° 25'9.17"E):**

Biswanathpur is also known as Topigaon, famous for its sculptural arts and a unique Hero stone (fig.8) is kept in the compound of a Shiv temple. It is a two panel sculpture, carved on a heavy stone block, the upper portion is in semi-circular shape. In upper panel the image of Hero is depicted in a fighter pose holding a sword in his raised right hand and shield in his left hand. On the lower panel we clearly noticed that the carving of a male person engaged in fighting with a wild animal<sup>20</sup>. This type of Hero stones are erected in Karnataka (Belligame and Sasuvehalli) to honour the heroes who exhibited extra ordinary courage at the cost of their lives to defend the weak and helpless<sup>21</sup>. But the hero stone of Karnataka are inscribed in nature which was a common iconographical feature in South Indian Hero stones tradition.



**Fig.8 Hero Stone of Biswanathpur**

**(Courtesy Mr. S.S. Panda)**

**Narla (20°3'27.61''N; 83°23'4.18''E):**

Two Hero sculptures are found from the Balabhadreswar Shiva temple of Narla. One is kept leaning on the Southern outer wall and another is on the Northern outer wall of the temple. The Hero stone of Southern wall (fig. 9) hold a sword in his raised right hand and a shield in his left hand. And this sculpture is worshipped as *Kartikeya (Parswa Devata)*. It's height is 2.2 feet and width is 1.7 feet. The hero sculpture of Northern wall (fig.10) worshipped as *Khasua Mahadev* by the local people specially those who affected from any kind of skin disease and they offer broom. This front faced hero stone holds a staff (*Danda*) in his right hand and the left palm placed on someone's head. Some portion of the upper part is broken. The height of the sculpture is 2feet and width is 1.7feet. Both the Hero stones are crowned by *Jatabhara*<sup>22</sup>.



**Fig. 9 & 10 Hero Stones of Narla**

### **Discussion and Conclusion:**

The Hero stones of Kalahandi are generally made of a single vertical stone slab. Sand stone is generally used for this sculpture and it is locally available. Just like the Hero stones of South and North India we don't notice any lavish carvings on it and most of them non-inscribed in nature. The basic iconographical features we found here is the symbol of sun, crescent moon, female with bangles in *Abhayamudra*, holding of sword and shield by a soldier /hero etc. The erection of the symbol sun and moon signifies that as long as the sun and moon is exist the name and fame of the hero is exist<sup>23</sup>. It represents the immortal feature of this tradition. Romila Thappar provides us with an intriguing background regarding the erection of the Sun and Moon symbol on Hero stones by citing the text *Mahanirvana Tantra*<sup>24</sup>. This text states that the union of the *Nada* and the *Vindu*, which represent the Sun and the Moon (*Pingala* and *Ida* respectively), is sought in yogic practices. The *Vindu* is the body's nerve centre<sup>25</sup>. And similarly as the departed individual in whose honour the hero stones were installed, the *Sadhaka* who carried out the yogic procedures was known as *Veera*<sup>26</sup> (Hero). The women's marital status is symbolized by the raised female palm with bangles, while the *Abhayamudra*<sup>27</sup>, also known as *Vyasana Tholu*<sup>28</sup> in Kannad, stands for protection, bravery, kindness and blessings for all people. The majority of the Hero stones in Kalahandi date from

6<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century CE<sup>29</sup>, and because they were connected to themes of war and battlefields, they have great political significance in the annals of history. Furthermore, the discovery of two inscribed Hero stones from Junagarh indicates that Kalahandi regions saw numerous battles. Even through these engraved sculptures, we are able to learn about the existence of spy system, honouring enemy soldiers, a valiant military history and a long standing tradition of paying respect to the departed<sup>30</sup>. The bulk of the Hero stones in Kalahandi region are found next to a pond/tank and adjacent to the Shiv temple, signifying the Brahmanical association with this illustrious history. This association enriched the Hero stones culture and even led to their worship as Vedic deities. For instance, the two hero stones of Narla Shiv temple were revered as Kartikeya and Khasua Mahadev. Even the Hero stones were worshipped as Bhairava. Furthermore, Mantra and Tantra are closely associated with Bhairava cult. This Vedic and local connection caused the Hero stones tradition to lose its significance and uniqueness. The present paper made a sincere attempt to reveal the glorious tradition and its connection with the local history, as well as its political and socio-religious importance.

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