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# Glimpses of Wild Encounters in Past Societies: A Study on Tiger Slayer Type Memorial Stones of Dharmapuri District, Tamil Nadu

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## Abstract

The tradition of erecting memorial stones to commemorate heroic deeds is an ancient practice, with Tamil Nadu showcasing its deep roots through the presence of hero stones dating back to the megalithic period. It is innate human nature to imagine and express the surrounding environment in their art forms, which is evident since time immemorial. This paper focuses on a specific category known locally as Pulikutthipattan Kal—hero stones depicting tiger slayers—found in the ecologically diverse Dharmapuri district. The region, historically inhabited by pastoral communities dependent on cattle, faced recurring human-animal conflicts, particularly with tigers, due to habitat loss from settlement expansion. These conflicts led to acts of valour, some of which were immortalised through intricately carved hero stones. A descriptive and analytical methodology is adopted, combining field surveys and iconographic and epigraphic analysis. Fourteen tiger-slayer hero stones were identified across Dharmapuri's taluks, showcasing various scenes of human-tiger combat. The paper also documents the current status of these stones—ranging from active worship to neglect—highlighting the urgent need for heritage management and public engagement. This micro-historic study not only sheds light on land use patterns and human-animal relationships but also emphasises the importance of preserving such cultural symbols.

**Keywords:** Cultural Monuments, Hero Stones, Human Animal Interactions, Iconography, Micro-History

## 1. Introduction

The erection of memorials to the dead is an ancient custom and is found all over the world. In Tamil Nadu, clear indications denoting the custom of erecting memorials date back to the megalithic period. There are several excerpts from the Sangam literature about Hero stones that praise the deeds of the warriors. Dharmapuri district is surrounded by Mullai (Forest areas) and Kurinji (Mountainous region) landforms.

Pastoral communities, who are experts in cattle breeding has populated this region. Cattle are the most prized possession, and the whole economy of this region revolves around it[1]. It is to be reiterated that state formation in the medieval period involved the repurposing of forests into agricultural lands and settlements[2]. This led to the loss of habitat for the wild animals, which in turn created wild encounters in past societies.

Wild animals like Elephant, Tiger and Boar were slayed when they proved to be disturbing the settlements that rested on past forests. The slaying of Tiger is very particularly praised as it is very difficult to control the beast, and its fast pace makes it difficult to handle. In the heroic act of slaying a tiger, sometimes men lost their lives in the struggle. Hero Stones taken to commemorate the valour of the hero are called "pulikutthipattan kal" locally.

The present paper aims to highlight the significance of the tiger slayer type hero stones, locally called "Pulikutthipattan Kal". This paper examines the iconographic representations and realism depicted in the hero stones[3]. This paper will provide various implications of land use and human-animal relationships in the study area, which is confined to Dharmapuri District only, in order to emphasise the micro-historic study in a unique ecological niche. An analysis of epigraphy and iconography is undertaken in this study

## 2. Methodology

This paper adopts a descriptive and analytical research approach to analyse the nature of the tiger slayer type hero

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stones. The method provides a holistic understanding of social, political and economic implications of tiger slayer type hero stones. The study tries to unravel the nuances of these hero stones through analysis of iconography and sometimes epigraphs found on them[4].

## 3. Data Sources and Analysis

The primary data used in the paper were collected through field surveys. The secondary literature includes reports, books and databases. A total of 14 tiger slayer-type hero stones found in the Dharmapuri district is analysed in the study. The review and synthesis of available data focus on the following aspects:

- *Historical Importance*: This includes a study on the role of hero stones in determining the history of the landscape.
- *Political Background*: This section focuses on the role of various dynasties throughout the past in the expansion of settlements. This also highlights how similar issues were tackled over time.
- *Current Status*: These hero stones are often worshipped by the locals, yet some lose their vogue and are neglected by the present population. Through field work, the current status of the previously and newly recorded hero stones are documented[5]. This step is important as it provides insights for conservation and heritage management.

## 4. Research Aims and Contributions

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the significance of tiger slayer-type hero stones found in the Dharmapuri district. The paper gives insights into land use through the presence of tiger slayer-type hero stones. The paper discusses the implications of past societies, their cultural practices and beliefs, through the iconography of these hero stones. The paper also highlights the role of heritage management and public engagement, which helps in the preservation of hero stones[6]. The paper also shows the importance of a systematic documentation process for better data analysis.

## 5. Tiger Slayer Type Hero Stones of Dharmapuri District

### 5.1 Kondaharhalli Pulikutthi Hero Stone, Dharmapuri Taluk (Table-1)

A Pulikutthi Hero Stone belonging to circa. The 14th Century CE is found alongside the bank of a stream in Kondaharahalli Village. The sculpture shows the scene of a hero piercing the chest of the tiger using a spear, and the hunting hounds seem to bite the tiger in its rear (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Kondaharahalli Village, Stream Left Corner toward Vellalappan temple.

### 5.2 Dharmapuri Site Museum Pulikuthi Hero Stone, Dharmapuri Taluk (Table 1)

Uthankarai Taluk, the hero stone brought from Anandur, is a huge hero stone. A tiger is seen running in front of the hero. The hero is holding a spear in both hands and stabbing the tiger. The tip of the spear has passed through the tiger's body and comes out on the other side. Between the hero are a dagger and a sword. The inscription is found on the left side of the hero in a damaged state. The details of the hero are not known. But it is only known that this inscription was carved in the month of Aippasi during the reign of Vijayanagara king Mukkanna Udayar[7](Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Govt. Site Museum, Dharmapuri.

### 5.3 Sandur Pulikutthi Hero Stone, Dharmapuri Taluk (Table 1)

This stone was brought from Sandur. The knife in the right hand is in the tiger's mouth. The short sword in

the left hand is ready to stab above the head. The hero is fighting with the tiger. An inscription has been carved on this relief sculpture[8](Table 1).

The Inscription reads as:

(i) Svasittiśrī kaṭṭāṉai parumaṟku yāṇṭu nāṟpattaintāvatu perum
(ii) Pāṇiḷavaraicar vēḷāla nāṭāḷa perumukai kaliyaṭa
(iii) Kkiyār cēvakaṉ kaṭṭiya viccaṉ
(iv) Pulik kuttippaṭṭāṉ (Figure 3)



**Figure 3.** Govt. Site Museum, Dharmapuri.

## 5.4 Elagiri Pulikuthi Pattan Hero Stones, Nallampalli Taluk (Table 1)

(i) This stone shows a warrior fighting a tiger and a female figure with him, so it can also be considered a sati stone. The sculpture is carved in the form of a warrior holding a sword in both hands and fighting a tiger. The warrior is shown wearing only a lower garment and a kudu. The woman is shown wearing a hairpin and a lower garment, and the lower garment covers the waist down completely. The woman's ornaments and decorations are very beautifully carved, and the man's hands and feet are also decorated. The woman is depicted holding a lemon in one hand and a flower in the other. There are also figures like Nandi, the moon, the sun, and a parrot. Nandi is a symbol of the religious faith of this hero, and the moon, sun and images are carved to indicate that the fame of this place will remain as long as they exist. The parrot shown in this is said to be a symbol of prosperity by historians (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** Elagiri Village, Rise Mill opposite.

(ii) The Hero stone is located outside the town, enshrined in a rise mill opposite. The hero in this seems to be stabbing a tiger with a spear; the tip of the spear has come out on the other side. The hero's hair is in a bun on the left side, he is wearing a half-length belt and a sword. He is holding a warrior's shield in his arms and ornaments on his neck. It also contains images of the moon, sun and parrot. Another feature is the Tilakam (*Nāmam*) that Vaishnavites put on their forehead (Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** Elagiri Village west side, Mango garden.

The two Hero stones found in this area with tiger's stings also have the image of a parrot. This implies that the parrot held an important role in local belief, and it had some significance and symbolism. The people of this area worship the hero stones as border deities.

## 5.5 Alepuram Pulikuthi Hero Stone, Pennagaram Taluk ( Table-1)

A stone on the side of the road in Alepuram village on the way to Eriyur in Pennagaram taluk of Dharmapuri district. It

depicts a tiger prancing towards the warrior and him fighting against it. Most of the stone carvings depict tigers fighting on two legs, but this one depicts a tiger in a running posture and during the attack. The warrior has weapons in both hands. The dagger in his left hand appears to have been stabbed in the tiger's mouth, and the tip is pointing backwards. The sword in his right hand is depicted as ready to stab. The sculpture is very realistic and lively in nature. The warrior's hair is braided on the right side, and he is wearing a half-dress, and there is a waistcloth in between (Figure 6).



**Figure 6.** Alepuram Village, Pennagram to Eriyur rd left side.

## 5.6 Kompadiyur Tiger Slaying Hero Stone, Pennagaram Taluk (Table 1)

The scenes of the Hero stone in Kompadiyur village near Perumpalai in the Pennagaram taluk of Dharmapuri district are very beautifully carved. In this, the hero is seen piercing the tiger's stomach with a spear, and the tip of the spear is seen on the other side of the tiger. The woman is wearing a saree with her hair tied in a bun on the left side and is wearing a headress. In this, a dog is shown biting the tiger's back. The villagers, belonging to one particular family, worship this as Veera Karan (Figure 7).



**Figure 7.** Komnadyiur Village, School near 7.

## 5.7 Dasampatti Pulikuthipattan Hero Stone, Pennagaram Taluk (Table 1)

A memorial stone in the Dasampatti forest area of Pennagaram taluk, Dharmapuri district. In these stones, there is a scene where a tiger attacks a warrior, targeting his hands and feet, and the warrior, in response, stabs in the tiger's mouth with a sword and is ready to cut it with an axe. This warrior is fighting a tiger to protect the animal he was protecting. In this, the warrior is shown wearing half a dress and a sword. The ornaments worn by the warrior, the bracelets on his hands and feet, are very clearly carved, which suggests that he may have been a leader in this area. In addition, there are moon and sun symbols in it (Figure 8).



**Figure 8.** Dhasampatti near Forest inside, Narasimma Swamy temple.

## 5.8 Bikkanalli Hero Stone, Palacode Taluk (Table 1)

Two hero stones are located in Bikkanalli village. There is no inscription on either of these.

(i) The hero is seen standing with a short sword in one hand, the short sword in the other hand is in the position of a tiger, and the short sword in the other hand is in the position of stabbing the tiger in the neck. He is shown with a belt and a short sword in between, and with one side of his head curled. The tiger is seen standing on two legs and facing the hero. To the right of the hero is a woman holding a bag in her hand. Two dogs seem to be biting the tiger's head and stomach. This relief sculpture is developed, so it looks like a sculpture (Figure 9).



**Figure 9.** Govt. site Museum, Dharmapuri

(ii) The second Pulikutthi Pattan stone also does not have an inscription. It shows a scene of a warrior fighting a tiger and a scene of the warrior riding a horse on top of a tiger. The warrior is shown with a sword in his right hand and a dagger in his left. The dagger is stuck in the tiger's mouth. Judging by the warrior's attire and ornaments, it seems that the warrior would have been an important representative of the village (Figure 10).



**Figure 10.** Govt. site museum, Dharmapuri

### 5.9 Veerabhadra Durgam Pulikuttipattan Hero Stone, Palacode Taluk (Table-1)

The statue depicts a warrior stabbing the tiger's mouth with a dagger in his left hand. The sculpture is of a sword in his right hand, half a dress is tied in between, and a cutting sword is also present. There is also a figure of a woman nearby. The woman is holding a jug in her right hand, and her left hand is pointing upwards. The woman is shown fully dressed (Figure 11).



**Figure 11.** Veerbadrduragam Village, Mango farming land.

### 5.10 Arathahalli Hero stone, Palacode Taluk (Table-1)

One of the Hero stones near Arathahalli Kootrodu in Palacode taluk of Dharmapuri district. The hero stone here was taken for a woman[9]. In this, the woman is seen standing with folded hands; the woman is shown fully dressed, waist down. The sculpture is of a tiger coming to attack the woman. The sculpture is crudely carved and lacks intricate details. The nearby Kurumbar people worship this (Figure 12).



**Figure 12.** Arthalli Village, X road Manru near.

### 5.11 Kadathur Herostone, Pappireddipatti Taluk (Table-1)

This hero stone is located opposite the children's park in Kadathur, Pappireddipatti taluk, Dharmapuri district. This hero stone is constructed in a manner resembling a megalithic monument called a dolmen. The sculpture is carved as if the hero is stabbing the tiger in the mouth and stomach with a dagger and a sword. The hero is shown with a robe and hair tied on the right side. In addition, the inscription found beside the hero stone indicates that this hero stone belongs to the 13$^{th}$ century (Figure 13).



**Figure 13.** Kadathur Village, Park opposite but back side.

## 6. Discussion and Notable Features

In Tamil Nadu, the districts of Dharmapuri and Krishnagiri are home to the greatest concentration of hero stones, which come in a variety of forms spanning over a millennium. Domestication of Animals and farming are considered major feats in Human evolution[10]. For instance, numerous hero stones in this area depict dogs battling along with their owners, demonstrating their devotion and loyalty. Similarly, utilisation of natural resources for the expansion of

**Table 1.** Locations of tiger slayer-type hero stones in the Dharmapuri district, Tamil Nadu

| S. No. | Taluk | Block | Village | Period (in Century CE) | Location code |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Pennagaram | Pennagaram | Alepuram | 13 | 12.1101432, 77.8764059 |
| 2 | Pennagaram | Perumbalai | Kombadiyur | 17 | 11.9697430, 77.9130636 |
| 3 | Pennagaram | Pennagaram | Dasampatti | 16 | 12.20555556, 77.94216667 |
| 4 | Nallampalli | Nallampalli | Elagiri | 16 | 12.03561111, 78.07088889 |
| 5 | Nallampalli | Nallampalli | Elagiri | 16 | 12.03816667, 78.06700000 |
| 6 | Nallampalli | Nallampalli | Balajangamanhalli | 17 | 12.07194444, 78.07430556 |
| 7 | Dharmapuri | Bommidi | Kondagarahalli | 17 | 12.00750000, 78.22777778 |
| 8 | Pappreddypatty | Kadathur | Kadathur | 13 | 12.08663889, 78.28997222 |
| 9 | Palacode | Vellisanthai | Arathahalli | 15 | 12.33800000, 78.10691667 |
| 10 | Palacode | Vellisanthai | Bikkanahalli | 14 | 12.379481, 78.086217 |
| 11 | Palacode | Vellisanthai | Bikkanahalli | 14 | 12.379481, 78.086217 |
| 12 | Palacode | Vellisanthai | Veerabadradurgam | 15 | 12.389055, 78.109418 |
| 13 | Dharmapuri | Dharmapuri | Site Museum (Ananthur) | 16 | 12.135755, 78.162424 |
| 14 | Dharmapuri | Dharmapuri | Site Museum (Sandur) | 7 - 8 | 12.135755, 78.162424 |

Source: Scholar Field Survey

settlements and deforestation for bringing more land into cultivation posed a major threat to wildlife, since their habitat is endangered. This, in turn, leads to wild encounters. The hero stones of the area depict how the pastoral communities handled these incidents to protect their land, cattle and their people. In the early period, people stayed in one location and wandered around for foraging and hunting. With the growth in population and need for farming, imposed migration into the forest lands and utilisation of the forest resources[11]. This type of displacement and expansion is the reason why there are many memorial stones for warriors who died fighting tigers in this area. We can understand that there was a significant increase in animal intrusions in this area after the 12th century, based on the discovery of a large number of hero stones.

These pastoral people have various weapons for their protection. Most often, daggers and swords are found, and only one hero stone shows an axe in the hand of a warrior. Clear indications are shown to denote male tigers. In this study, it is revealed that the katari or dagger is the most commonly used weapon to slay tigers.

A few memorial stones in this study reveal the religious affiliations. Nandi is used to represent Shaivism, and rarely, a *Nama* is used on the forehead to represent Vaishnavism.

The study also highlights how memorials were erected not just to commemorate acts of bravery; it was also to show the importance of acknowledging the demise of family members during such attacks. One unique instance of a memorial stone erected for a woman who died due to a tiger attack, which is situated in Arathahalli, is included in the study. This indicates the significance of societal norms and customs that are involved in erecting memorials for females.

## 7. Protection and Public Engagement

A large number of hero stones are available in the Dharmapuri district. Are all of them in a safe environment? It is to be accepted that not all hero stones are protected; some hero stones are preserved due to public engagement caused by worship and a belief that these are commemorative sculptures of their ancestors. But there are significant numbers that are neglected, ruined or lost in time. Initiatives of the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology must be appreciated here, as they have established a separate site museum for the hero stones, and a few of the endangered hero stones have been relocated and preserved here. The museum initiative has also provided opportunities to educate and create awareness among the public about Hero Stones.

## 8. Conclusion

The study of Pulikuttipattan Hero Stone—tiger slayer type hero stones—in Dharmapuri district reveals an intersection of ecology, valour, and cultural memory. These memorial stones are not just expressions but also serve as vital historical records reflecting the socio-political conditions, land-use changes, and human-animal interactions of the past. The prevalence of tiger slayer-type hero stones signifies the importance of cattle protection in pastoral communities and the heroic status accorded to those who risked or lost their lives in such wild encounters.

Iconographic and epigraphic analyses reveal rich details about attire, weaponry, religious beliefs, and cultural elements. Motifs like the sun, moon, Nandi, and parrot add symbolic depth, indicating varied beliefs and community values. The presence of female figures in some stones possibly denotes the importance given to companionship, sati traditions, or familial devotion.

While some of these stones are still revered and worshipped, many are neglected and at risk of damage. This brings the pressing need for systematic documentation, awareness, and conservation efforts. As micro-historic sources, these hero stones are invaluable in reconstructing the region's past and understanding the relationship between humans and animals.

In conclusion, the Pulikutthipattan Hero Stones of Dharmapuri district are not only markers of individual valour but also a collective memory of a community's resilience towards wildlife, belief systems, and adaptation to ecological challenges caused by expansion and deforestation. Preserving them is essential not only for heritage conservation but also for deepening our understanding of who we are, where we come from, and how we have evolved.

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