

Memorial Stones Commemorating Ritual Suicide at Hampi-Vijayanagara

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Vijayanagara city was the largest urban centre in peninsular India during the 15th century and even more so in the first half of the 16th century CE. Nowadays the site of the erstwhile city of Vijayanagara is referred to as Hampi. Hampi-Vijayanagara is situated on the southern bank of the Tungabhadra River in Bellary district, Karnataka. This site served as the capital of the Vijayanagara Empire from the mid-14th century to CE 1565. From Vijayanagara city three dynasties ruled over a fairly large empire: Saṅgama (1336-1485), Sāḷuva (1485-1505) and Tuḷuva (1505-1565). The remains of the imperial city of Vijayanagara are spread over an extensive area of about 25 square kilometres south of the Tungabhadra, from the village of Hampi in the north to the village of Kamalapuram in the south. The outer lines of its fortifications and the suburban areas, however, include a very much vaster area.

In Hampi-Vijayanagara and its environs there are numerous temples and other monuments as well as vast number of sculptures carved on rocks, boulders and stone slabs. Among the large repertoire of sculptures at this site are those that serve as memorials to deceased persons. These memorial sculptures are sometimes carved on to rocks and boulders. But more commonly they are sculpted on flat stone slabs which were then embedded into the earth with a large uncarved portion at the base being buried. A few of these memorial stone slabs are still in situ, possibly in the original locations where they were erected during Vijayanagara times. But the majority of them are now found on display in the Hampi Archaeological Museum in the village of Kamalapuram; a few are in the compound of the site office of the Karnataka State Directorate of Archaeology and

Museums and a few others in the premises of the library of the Kannada University at the site. A few are also found lying around in different parts of the site. The fact that the majority of such memorial stones are now found in the local museums or in an unearthened condition, lying flat on the ground and sometimes even broken, reveals that even though they were once deeply embedded they were deliberately excavated or removed from their original positions. This hints at the fact that some valuable materials were probably buried below such memorials and that treasure seekers have excavated to the base of the vast majority of the memorial stones seeking the treasure beneath them. I have been doing research work at Hampi-Vijayanagara since 1985 and in the course of my field work have come across at least a couple of recent cases of such deliberate illegal acts of the digging up of memorial stones.

These memorials at Hampi-Vijayanagara may have only one panel, or may be divided into two or even three panels. If they are of the single panel variety then the deceased person(s), either alone or with others, or a representation of the person are sculpted on the panel. If they are of the two-panel type, then in the lower panel we find the hero/heroine alone or with others and in the upper panel the person(s) are shown to be in *svarga*, usually Kailāsa the abode of Śiva as proved by the presence of a *liṅga*. If it is a three-panel memorial stone, then in the lower panel is seen the deceased person(s) often with others, in the middle panel the hero/heroine is being carried up to *svarga* and in the top panel he/she are seen worshipping the Śiva-*liṅga*, denoting that they have reached Kailāsa.

Of these the memorial stones or sculpted memorial stone slabs set up by Hindus, predominantly by Śaiva, that are found scattered over the site and in the local museums, the most common among such memorial stones are the *satī*-stones commemorating women who immolated themselves following the death of their husbands. Besides *satī*-stones or *satīkals*, there are also the *vīrakals*, or hero-stones, that keep alive the memory of a male who had died in heroic action. There are also the *satī-vīrakals*, or the memorials which commemorate both a hero who died in action as well as his wife/wives who became *satī*, i.e. perished, usually by fire, following his death. A fourth, though less common, type of memorial stone at

Hampi-Vijayanagara is the suicide memorial, commemorating a person who had deliberately sacrificed his/her life, probably as an expression of religious devotion. The sun and crescent moon that generally appear on the top of most of the memorial stones indicate the lasting glory of the *satī* or hero or the person who committed ritual suicide. The prevalence of these types of memorial stones at Hampi-Vijayanagara is hardly surprising considering that in Vijayanagara the tradition of venerating those who died heroically was continued and memorials were erected in their honour, though this was likely an upper-class indulgence.

Satī or *sahagamana* was a widely practiced social custom in Vijayanagara city and empire. The performance of *satī* was often commemorated by the erection of a *satīkal* or *satī*-stone on which sculptural representations of the woman or women who committed *satī* were carved. The traditional iconography of a *satī* is the upright right arm, bent at the elbow, with bangles at the wrist, with the hand open in the *abhaya* (blessing) *mudrā*. The *satī* blessed the people gathered to witness her self-immolation with her right hand before entering the fire, and by means of her sculpted representation she continues to bless and protect her devotees. Bangles symbolize the married state; that they remain on the *satī*'s arm/wrist bears witness to the continuation of her wifely status. For even if her husband had predeceased her, by the very fact of choosing to become a *satī*, the wife/wives avoid widowhood. The left hand of the *satī* is generally extended downwards. A lime or a pot is sometimes held in this hand. There is another form of *satīkal* in which the woman herself is not shown, but only her right arm, bent at the elbow, with the hand in *abhaya-mudrā*, the gesture of blessing. The arm, which is typically adorned with one or more bangles, emerges from a post or pillar. This motif was perhaps associated with the pillar (*yūpa*) used in Vedic sacrifice, or with the *liṅga*.

In the *satī*-stone the husband, if he is portrayed, generally has his hands in *añjali*. However, in *satī-vīrakals*, which commemorate the death due to some praiseworthy exploit of the man as well as the meritorious act of self-immolation by his wife/wives, the heroic action of the man is depicted. *Vīrakals* commemorate an act of valour, which usually ended in the hero's death, such as chivalrous

service in war, retrieving cattle from raiders, protecting the honour of women, defending the village or town, resisting bandits or killing wild animals.

The focus of this paper is on the fourth category of memorials, which are much fewer in number than those dedicated to the memory of *satī* and/or heroes, namely the memorials commemorating persons who ritually sacrificed themselves, i.e. they deliberately committed suicide.

Ritual Suicide Memorials

The category of memorial stones at Hampi-Vijayanagara honours the memory of a person who deliberately sacrificed his/her life in a religious act. In these, death is not the unfortunate result of a heroic action, nor was the person pressurized or forced to die as may have been the case with some of the *satī*, but is self-inflicted and glorified. Acts of such self-immolation were perhaps undertaken in fulfillment of a vow to a deity or as an expression of gratitude for some great favour received.

The existence of around six such suicide memorials at Hampi-Vijayanagara, all of which are at present in the local museums, testify to the practice of ritual suicide at Vijayanagara. However, this was not something that is unique to this period or this site. For, though a rare practice, there is a long tradition of ritual suicide in southern India as is seen from sculptural renderings of the same. A few examples from pre-Vijayanagara times are given to demonstrate this.

Probably the earliest extant sculpture in southern India of ritual suicide is in the Draupadī Ratha, dating from the seventh century CE at Mahabalipuram, a Pallava site. On the interior rear wall of this small, hut-shaped monolithic shrine is a beautiful relief of the two-armed standing Durgā (Fig.1). On either side of her head are two flying *gaṇas*, while at her feet on each side is a handsome, youthful kneeling male devotee. The man to right side of the goddess holds aloft his elaborate *jaṭā*-like hair with his left hand, while in his right hand is a sword held against one side of his neck; with it he is chopping off his own head.

If this practice of ritual suicide was prevalent in the Pallava period, it continued to be practiced in the Coḷa times as well. In the tenth century early-Coḷa



Fig.1 : Durgā and her entourage, including a male performing ritual self-sacrifice, Draupadi Ratha, Mahabalipuram

Brahmapuriśvara temple at Pullamangai, Tamilnadu, has a magnificent niche sculpture of Durgā on the northern side of the exterior of this small, but exquisite temple (Fig.2). Flanking the goddess are a lion to her right and a *gaṇa* and deer to her left. Below these are seen a kneeling youthful male on either side. As in the Draupadi Ratha relief, here too the young man to the right of the *devī* holds his hair with his left hand while with his right hand he is engaged in cutting off his own head with a sword that is held at the back of his neck. The male devotee on the left side also holds a sword with which he is cutting off one leg as an offering to the goddess.

Both the above examples depict one person in each relief performing a ritual self-sacrifice in honour of a deity. But group ritual suicides were also in vogue. This is revealed from some very interesting sculptures that are found in the temple of Tillai-Kālī at Chidambaram. Chidambaram, the famous temple-town in



Fig.2 : Durgā and devotees, including a male performing ritual self-sacrifice, Brahmapurīśvara temple, Pullamangai

Tamilnadu, is traditionally associated with the Śiva Naṭarāja temple. However, besides this great Śiva temple, there is also the temple dedicated to the goddess Kālī at Chidambaram. She was probably the original deity of the site, as in southern India the ancient village or site deities were local goddesses, who in course of time through the process of 'Sanskritization' came to be absorbed into the Brahmanical pantheon usually by marriage to Śiva or one of his manifestations and as a result lost her preeminence to the male god.¹ Chidambaram is also known as Tillai (since there was first a forest of *tillai*, *Excoecaria agallocha*, trees in this site). According to a well-known oral tradition, which later came to be written in the *Vyāghrapada Mahātmya*, Kālī was the original inhabitant of the Tillai Forest; Śiva engaged her in a dance competition and goddess agreed to participate in the same and also to live in exile on the outskirts of Chidambaram if Śiva defeated her. Śiva vanquished Kālī by lifting one leg straight up in the *ūrdhvatāṇḍava* pose; as a female, modesty did not permit Kālī to follow suit in this dance pose and she accepted her defeat and exile. However, she is still worshipped under the name of Tillai-Kālī and worship at her temple is considered the proper conclusion of a pilgrimage to the Śiva temple.² Tillai-Kālī is a very fearsome deity who accepts blood sacrifices; her *mūrti* is so totally covered with vermilion that nothing, except the fierce eyes, is visible. Adjoining the shrine of Tillai-Kālī is a wonderful set of sculptures depicting youthful males in the act of ritually sacrificing themselves to Kālī by each cutting off his head; each youth has poised his sword at the back of his neck ready for the ritual self-sacrifice (Fig.3). Locally the group is identified as Vīra Perumāḷ and his companions. Vīra Perumāḷ literally means the 'heroic lord'. This group, too, like the image of the goddess, is usually covered with vermilion³ and these heroes are worshipped by the visitors to the temple. One, probably Vīra Perumāḷ, is seen in a seated pose; he holds a sword with both hands against the back of his neck in the ritual act of self-sacrifice. His seven companions are all standing. Each holds a sword in his right hand held against the neck. These figures, too, as in the case of those seen in the reliefs in the Draupadī Ratha and Brahmapurīśvara temple, are depicted in the act of cutting off their heads. In all these cases, the sacrifice is in honour of a goddess and the devotees are handsome,



Fig.3 : Vira Perumāḷ and his companions, Tillai-Kālī temple, Chidambaram

youthful males in the prime of life. They are depicted as serene and relaxed, denoting that they are voluntarily and cheerfully performing the act of ritual suicide. While the sculptures in the Tillai Kālī temple can be considered as suicide memorials, the others that have been mentioned form part of sculptures of the goddess Durgā.

At Hampi-Vijayanagara, unlike in the three examples given above where the ritual suicide is in honour of a *devī*, there is none that can be identified as one performed in honour of a goddess. The presence of the Śiva-*linga* in the two which give evidence of sectarian affiliation would indicate that they were performed by Śaiva. Among these self-sacrifice or ritual suicide memorials at Hampi-Vijayanagara, is a magnificently carved stone slab that was once lying in the grass near a dilapidated temple in the northeastern part of the 'urban core' of the city. Fairly recently it has been moved from this location and is now housed in the

compound of the site office of the Karnataka State Directorate of Archaeology and Museums (Fig.4). The stone slab is divided into three registers. The bottom panel depicts the hero unflinchingly preparing to decapitate himself. His head is tied to a mechanical contraption, the lever of which he grasps in his left hand, while holding a sword in his right hand. On his releasing the lever, it would fly upwards and the weapon would sever his head, leaving it hanging on the lever. An attendant at one end is shown working the mechanism. The hero is flanked by his two wives, who hold their hands in the *satī*-pose indicating either that they have already become *satīs* in anticipation of their husband's death or that they plan to perform self-immolation following their husband's self sacrifice. In the middle register the three figures are shown seated, their hands in *añjali*, ascending towards *svarga*. A small female figure, probably a girl child or a large doll, is seated on the knee of one of the women. In the top panel a priest performs the worship of a *liṅga* by waving an *āratī* lamp and ringing a bell; the seated Nandī is to one side of the *liṅga*; the sun and crescent moon are carved above.

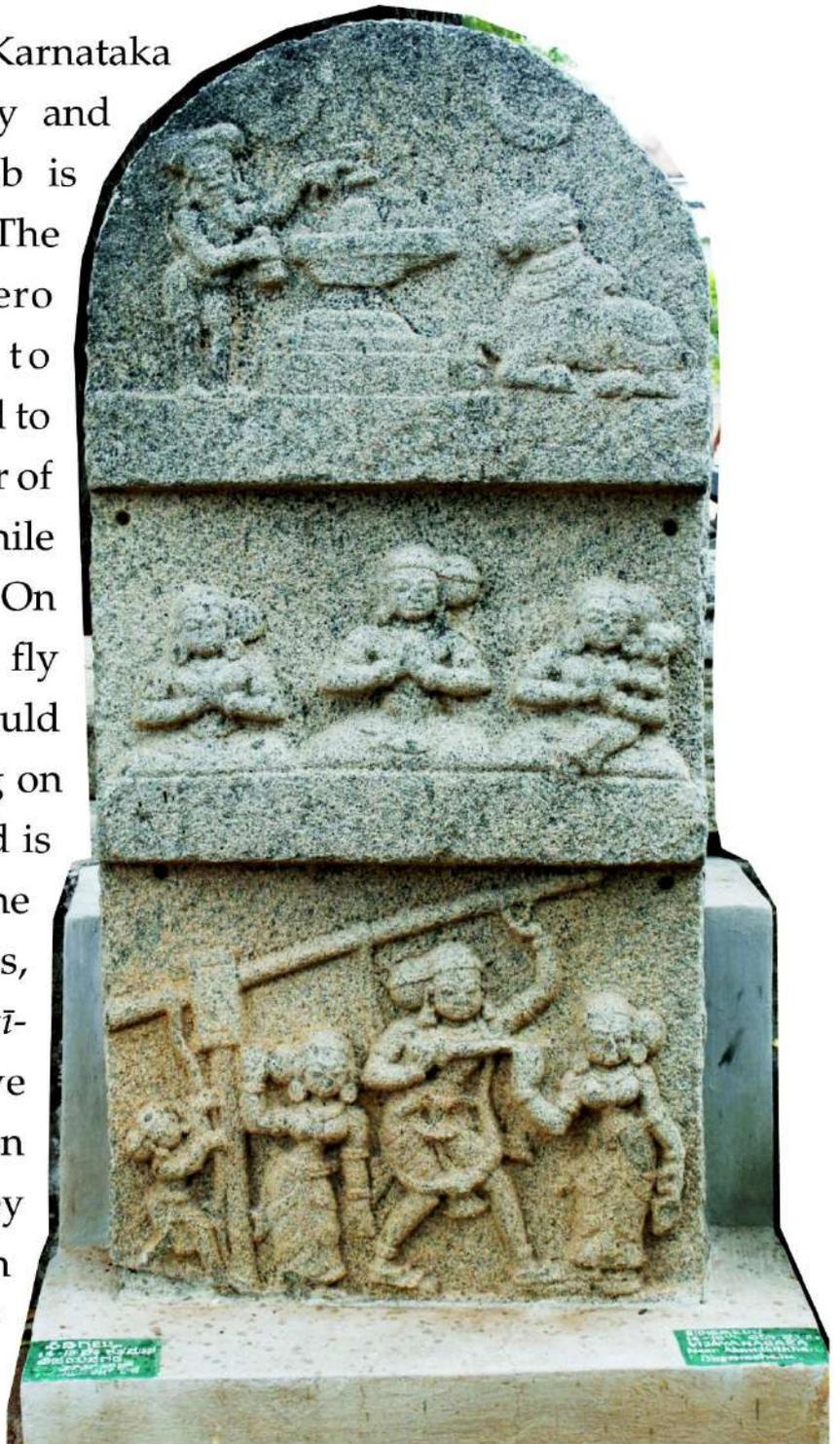


Fig.4 : Self-sacrifice memorial of a hero and his *satī* wives Hampi-Vijayanagara

Self-sacrifice by decapitation seems to have been the most common manner

in which such rituals were performed. In the Kamalapuram Museum there are a few sculptures which depict this. Two are on a tapering pillar with a square base (Fig.5). On each side of the base is carved a human figure; two are males and two are females. Both the males are in the process of cutting off their own heads with a short sword, dagger or knife held in the right hand which is positioned at the front of the neck. Both the men are shown with feet apart as though they are striding. The only difference in the action of self-sacrifice of the two men is that one holds his hair, which is piled up on top of his head, with his left hand, while in the right he holds the weapon at his neck in the act of decapitating himself (Fig.6). The second man does not hold up his hair; his left hand is resting against his body (see Fig.5). These depictions, though very crudely executed, are of men performing ritual suicide in a manner very similar to those in the sculptures at Mahabalipuram, Brahmapurīśvara and at the Tillai-Kālī temple at Chidambaram. Another is a stone slab (accession number 524; Fig.7) on which is carved a headless man who is



Fig.5 : Pillar with two reliefs of ritual suicide in action
Hampi-Vijayanagara

standing erect with both hands at his side; the decapitated head is attached to his left hand by his hair which is tied to his arm; by his side is some sort of a contraption which was probably used by performing the decapitation. In this case, it is not the actual performance of the ritual suicide that is depicted, but the hero after his death. The man's erect posture even after decapitation as well as the serene look on the face of the decapitated head indicates that this is a memorial sculpture. Very similar to this

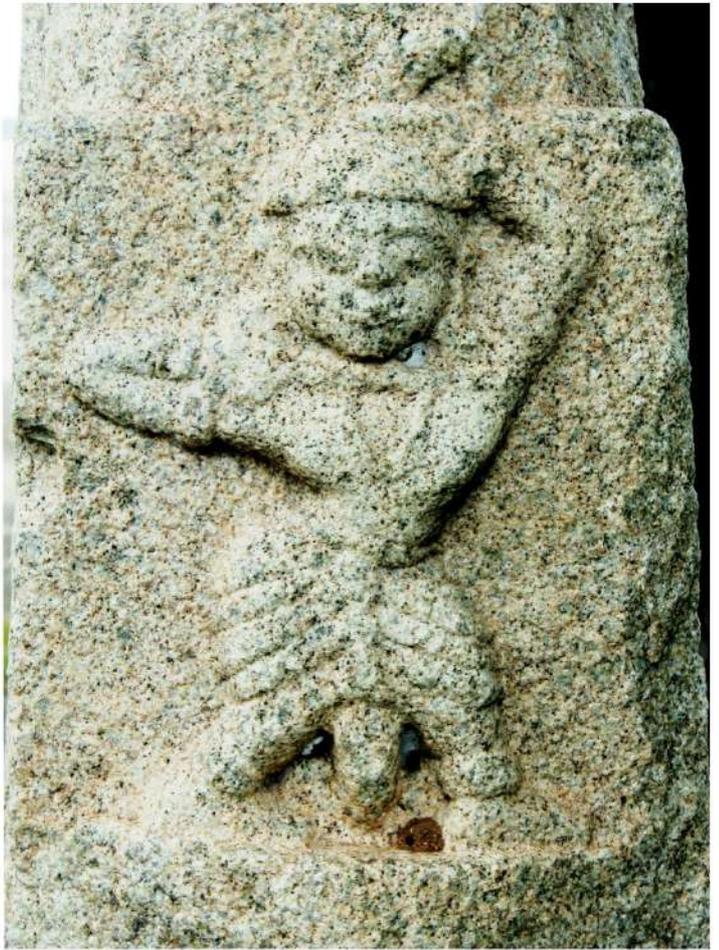


Fig.6 : Man holding up his hair while he cuts off his head (on the pillar depicted in Fig.5), Hampi-Vijayanagara



Fig.7 : Suicide Memorial depicting a decapitated male Hampi-Vijayanagara

memorial stone is another in the museum (accession number 525) which also portrays a headless man with the head attached to his left hand with the same type of contraption to one side as in the previous case. However, this man appears to be rather short and stocky in built as compared to the former.

Besides these three sculptures which depict males who sacrificed their lives by cutting off their heads, in the premises of the library of the Kannada University at Hampi there is an interesting memorial stone which depicts a seated headless



Fig.8 : Suicide Memorial of a woman, Hampi-Vijayanagara woman prove that this woman was venerated; the serene look on the face of the suspended head indicates that she was not the victim of a murder or an execution. This stone slab appears to be a suicide memorial dedicated to the memory of a woman. However, unlike in the case of the men who engaged in self-sacrifices, she is not shown in the act of cutting off of her own head.

There is another memorial stone that apparently depicts a different form of self-immolation (Fig.9).⁴ In it the hero

woman with hands in *añjali* (Fig.8). The head is shown by itself above the woman's right shoulder. The hair is piled up on top of the head in an elaborate hairdo and there are large earrings in each ear. The hands in *añjali* and the sun and moon carved above the



Fig.9 : Suicide memorial depicting death by impalement Hampi-Vijayanagara

seems to be disemboweling himself or killing himself by impalement. The slab is divided into three panels. In the bottom panel is seen the hero impaled on a tall, tapering pillar-like structure. In one hand he holds aloft a dagger or a sword, while an attendant holds an umbrella over his head. Two musicians each on either side of the hero celebrate this meritorious act by playing on drums, flute and tambourine. The central panel is occupied by four *apsarās* who carry the hero to heaven in a palanquin. In the top panel he is seated with other figures in heaven adoring a *linga*, while a priest with flowing hair performs worship. The hero looks so calm that one might imagine that he is just seated astride on a tall, narrow stool or pillar; however, the entire composition and the fact that he is taken up by the *apsarās* to Kailāsa indicate that this is a case of ritual self-sacrifice. Also, there are south Indian murals of the Vijayanagara and post-Vijayanagara period that depict death by impalement and in some of these the rendering of the person(s) impaled



Fig.10 : Mural painting depicting various forms of punishments, including death by impalement
Ātmanātha temple, Auvadayarkoil

is very similar to this hero in the stone-slab from the Kamalapuram museum. One such example is from a late nineteenth century mural on the life of saint Māṇikkavācakar from the Ātmanātha temple at Auvadaiyarkoil, Tamilnadu, in which death by impalement is shown among the types of punishments that are depicted (Fig.10). However, in the mural, the persons impaled have been sentenced to death as a punishment and obviously their faces are not portrayed with the serene look of the hero in the ritual suicide slab who had voluntarily embraced death by impalement.

These ritual suicide memorials at Hampi-Vijayanagara, though very few, are of interest in throwing light on some of the religious practices that prevailed. They also prove that the practice of religious self-sacrifice was prevalent from the ancient to the medieval times in southern India.

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my sincere thanks to C. Ganesan and Lata Pujari for permission to use their photographs for this paper.

References & Notes

1. H. Whitehead, *The Village Gods of South India*, second edition, Oxford University Press, Calcutta, 1921, p.126.
2. David Smith, 'Chidambaram', in George Michell (ed.), *Temple Towns of Tamil Nadu*, Mārg, Mumbai, 1993, p.60.
3. Special permission was sought from the *pujārī* in charge to remove the vermilion and the cloth that covered these heroes prior to photographing this group. Usually they are covered with so much of vermilion and also draped with cloths that little or nothing of the details is visible.
4. This stone slab was originally in the Museum at Kamalapuram; it has been moved from there and is currently among the exhibits that the Archaeological Survey of India has set up in the so-called Female Guards' Quarters close to the Lotus Mahal.

Photo Courtesy: 1,2,9 - Author; 3,10 - C. Ganesan; 4-8 - Lata Pujari