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HEROES BEYOND THE TEXTS: SACRIFICE, DEATH  
AND AFTERLIFE IN THE ICONOGRAPHY OF  
SOUTHERN MAHARASHTRA'S HERO-STONES

0. The Hindu concern for death and afterlife finds expression in a refined sequence of rites which aim at a twofold result: on one side, removing the pollution derived to the living from the contact with the mortuary remains, and, on the other side, ensuring the definitive transfer of the dead to their otherworldly abode. The funerary rituals are extensively described in the normative texts both in their practical and theoretical implications (Kane 1953: 180-679) and encompass a number of stages which include, among the others, the optional erection of a funerary monument over the post-cremation burial spot of the bones. The opacity of the terms recurring in the Vedic texts to indicate these monuments,<sup>1</sup> paralleled by the paucity of references in the epic literature (Bakker 2007: 15, 16), contributed to shape an idea of Hinduism where structures in honor of the deceased, if any, seemed to be confined to the fringes of tradition, with their relegation to the fringes of the scholarly discourse following as a result.

In the second half of the last century a countertrend developed from the comparison between archaeological records and epic sources in local vernaculars. A different picture of the Hindu funerary monuments throughout India was thus progressively sketched, with particular reference to the so-called

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<sup>1</sup> They consist of mounds, referred to as *loṣṭa-citti*; at times a sort of post (*sthūna*) is mentioned in connection with them. See Patil 1982: 49-52.

memorial stones and their most sizeable subgroup: the hero-stones. Functions, typologies and local varieties of this class of materials were framed within a theoretical context for the first time (Nagaswamy 1974; Vanamamalai 1975; Blackburn 1978; Settar – Sontheimer 1982). Megaliths, hero-stones, *satī*-stones, *samādhis*, *chattrīs*, *vṛndāvanas*, *thaḍes*, temples and even unhewn stones appear today as tangible proofs of a very much alive tradition of dead cults in different epochs and regions. Yet, the global assessment of this phenomenon continues to be challenging: any evaluation so far carried out on Hindu memorials suffers from the lack of an integrated approach combining rigorous archaeological methods with the theoretical tools offered by disciplines like anthropology, history of religions and art history.

## 1. Definition of materials

English defines by the word compound ‘hero-stones’ some slabs or pillars erected in honor of individuals who perished in a certain range of circumstances or while carrying out specific sorts of deeds, perceived as extraordinary by the community they belonged to. Typically, they bear an iconographical and epigraphical apparatus which provides with information on the identity of the deceased and the context of his death.

It has to be noted that the expression ‘hero-stones’ somehow smooths over the variety of terms with which Indian languages designate these artefacts. Such a variety is not just a matter pertaining to the linguistic domain, rather it reflects the formal and structural changes of these materials according to the region where they were produced. A series of etymologically related words like *vīragal* in Marathi, *vīrakkal* in Tamil, *vīragallu* in Kannada, *vīrakallu* in Telugu are the literal counterparts of ‘hero-stone’. Terms like *chāyāstambha*, proper of the specimens from Andhra Pradesh (Murthy 1982: 210)<sup>2</sup> or *khaṃbha*, and its

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<sup>2</sup> *Chāyāstambhas* designate hero-stones in the strict sense as well as funerary monuments like the 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD pillars from the site of Nagarjunakonda. The latter

alternative forms *khaṃba*, *khaṃbhi*, diffused in Northern and Central India (Sontheimer 1982: 92; Shah 1982: 102; Doshi 1982: 166), convey the meaning of shade-pillar and pillar, with reference to the memorial shape.<sup>3</sup> *Pāliya* and *govardhana* from Gujarat and Rajasthan allude instead to the concept of protection (i.e. a memorial to the protector of the community), as the root of the first term (Doshi 1982: 165) and the iconographic repertoire suggested by the second term (namely the representation of Kṛṣṇa Govardhanadhara. Agrawala 1982: 151) show.

On the ground of the available data,<sup>4</sup> the death cases recorded on the hero-stones can be summed up as follows:<sup>5</sup>

- people who died to protect their livestock from theft; while retrieving it after the attack
- people involved themselves in cattle raiding
- people who died while defending their community and ruler from external attack; people died on the onslaught of a stronghold
- people who died to defend women and children
- people devoured by wild animals, most commonly tigers; people who freed the village from the threat of wild animals
- people who died after a snake bite
- people who committed religious suicide

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fall beyond the present scope “because they were mainly raised for elite people who attained a natural death” (Rajan 2000: 105), rather than for heroic figures. This specification becomes meaningful as to the definition of the hero-stones chronology, the *chāyāstambhas* from Nagarjunakonda being inevitably overlooked despite their remarkable antiquity.

<sup>3</sup> All these terms have the same root of *skambha*, pillar, mentioned in the *Atharva Veda Saṃhitā* as one of the epithet of the Puruṣa [AVŚ X, 7]. A connection between this particular aspect of the sacrificial being *par excellence*, the historically attested memorial stones and the terms in use to designate them may be postulated. I am thankful to Prof. Y. Vassilkov for kindly bringing to my attention this passage and for sharing his notes on the topic.

<sup>4</sup> The reported list results from the synthesis between secondary sources (among the others, see Rajan 2000) and my personal records.

<sup>5</sup> *Satī* cases, although strictly relevant to the context, have been omitted due to methodological reasons. *Satī*- and hero-stones share the same function, structure and iconographic code, to the point that we often find the two types merged (see fig. 4 and description); however the ‘religious heroism’ connected with the *satī*-stones would lead us beyond the scope of the present contribution.

- women who died in pregnancy or childbirth / suicide victims.

The *terminus a quo* for hero-stones relies on Southern Indian materials, but it is not free from uncertainties. Until few years ago, one of the earliest cases as such could be identified in a 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD cattle raider's inscribed pillar from Andhra Pradesh (Murthy 1982: 210-211; Rajan 2000: 102). However, a fast-paced series of discoveries would ultimately prove – according to some – the existence of hero-stones already in the 3<sup>rd</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BC Tamil Nadu.<sup>6</sup> Less problematic seems instead the *terminus ad quem*, which stretches up to the present time, if the living practices among tribal communities of both Northern and Southern India are considered.

The scholarly tradition (e.g. Vanamamalai 1975: 41) maintains that a hero-stone was raised on the spot where the hero fell or where his remains were buried, or alternatively in his native village or in the place where his relatives lived. The current position of the materials, however, hardly corresponds to the original one. Many have been relocated inside museums or temple premises, either as freestanding elements or as structural components; but even when found at the crossroads of hamlets, under trees or next to water reserves, one cannot ignore that some transformative process must have intervened over the centuries and reshaped the landscape (e.g. due to the construction of a new road, or to cropland expansion). Archaeological excavations never occurred systematically in the past, so that at present, threatened by an increasing urbanization, the veracity of both primary and secondary sources on this issue is *de facto* unascertainable.

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<sup>6</sup> News of hero-stones findings in the Tamil region with *Tamil-Brāhmī* scripts periodically appear on the press: see for instance

<<http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/stone-commemorating-heroic-act-with-tamilbrahmi-inscription-found/article3662994.ece>>. Such discoveries would represent a turning point for a certain tradition of studies (Rajan 2000: 24, 105) which used to classify the hero-stones engraved in *vaṭṭeluttu* script, dated to the Pallava period, as the earliest examples of their kind in India.

## 2. Case Study: Maharashtrian Hero-Stones

Maharashtra shows a high concentration of hero-stones which differ from all the other regional specimens by two features: a codified iconographic apparatus combined to an almost total absence of inscriptions, which makes their chronological horizons rather opaque.<sup>7</sup> The identification of the main figurative motifs – a research field still at an early stage – will be taken here as a focus through the analysis of seven prototypical steles from the South-Eastern area.<sup>8</sup> As I will try to show, the paradigmatic value of the selected hero-stones encompasses both the iconographic and the iconological levels: beyond a series of formal variations on the basic themes, each sample illustrates in its own way two of the three types of heroism to which Maharashtrian hero-stones can be virtually ascribed, that is to say ‘martial heroism’ and ‘religious heroism’.<sup>9</sup>

## 3. Structure and layout

The narrative develops across a series of horizontal panels carved on the front side, ranging between three and five; the back and lateral faces are just rough-cut. At times, in place of the more common one-sided slabs, square-based pillars engraved on the four sides are found. The steles may have equal width at the top and bottom, but more often they taper upwards. Typically, a frame divides each scene from the other; it is usually plain, although it may bear geometrical decorations or

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<sup>7</sup> These materials are normally dated to the Medieval period.

<sup>8</sup> Namely the districts of Pune, Solapur and Satara. The proposed samples were recorded during a two-session fieldwork I carried out in 2013 and 2014 in the frame of my Ph.D. research (Trinco, in preparation). Unless occasionally appearing in the works by the late German scholar Günter-Dietz Sontheimer (1982, 1989, 2004 [1976]), these materials are still unpublished.

<sup>9</sup> A third category is what I define “accidental heroism” (Trinco, in preparation). This theoretical distinction is so far substantiated by the data I collected during my fieldwork, concerning nearly 300 samples of hero-stones across 30 villages.

be replaced by a more sophisticated casing which imitates secular or religious architecture.

Often conceived to be looked from bottom to top, the panels show the physical and spiritual progression of the hero who ascends to heaven after passing through different kinds of trials in the worldly level which cost him his life. On the lowest panel the circumstances of the hero's death are captured (battlefield, self-sacrifice), whereas in the middle and top sections he is portrayed while ascending to heaven and ultimately in association with the god of whom is devotee. Exceptions are frequently found in this sequence, the most common featuring the representation of the dead hero on the lowest panel (lying on the ground or on his funeral pyre), a stage which theoretically should be following the circumstances of his death. The slab is usually crowned by a *kalaśa* and by the sun and moon, symbols of the eternal glory of the hero which will last as long as the two celestial bodies endure.

The hero shows codified attire and attributes: he regularly wears *dhotī*, armlets and bracelets, having the *yajñopavīta*, belt with sheathed dagger and anklets as optional features; his hair is always tied in a bun.

He is in the company of different personages according to the scene: enemies, *apsarases* and *ācāryas* are the most regular characters, contributing in their own way to his achievement of each stage, namely ascension to heaven and enjoyment of the celestial abode with the supreme Lord. The scenes are enriched with more or less details to the point that in some instances we find the hero surrounded by a procession of figures, such as musicians, or carried on a palanquin and protected by a parasol, alone or with his wife, whose *satī* ritual might be represented as well.

Sometimes the horizontal panels can be vertically split into two halves, mirroring each other in terms of content. As a result, the same episode is replicated twice, and by this device two heroes happen to be honored on one stele. A further strategy to condense on one and the same stone the story of many heroes can be detected in the pillars carved on the four sides: each of

them reproduces the same cycle of conflict-death-and-ascension with just slightly different details.

A free standing hero-stone in the village of Loni Bhapkar (fig. 1) is consistent with the features so far outlined except for a detail on the top frame. It has four panels: the lowest portrays the hero laying on the ground surrounded by his livestock. The second lowest scene shows him fighting against two enemies armed with shields and swords, while in the middle panel he stands between two celestial damsels (*apsarases*) taking him to heaven. The uppermost scene depicts the hero in *padmāsana*, his hands in *añjalimudrā* in the presence of a *śivaliṅga* accompanied by Nandi. On the right side (from the viewer perspective), a priest is performing a rite on the cult object. The top part of the stele reveals quite an unusual feature: in the place where a *kalaśa* is normally expected, a human figure is engraved whose interpretation is challenged by some unclear details depending on the bad preservation status of the relief (four arms are allegedly represented, and the body posture may either correspond to a cross-legged sitting or to a bust protruding from a balcony). In the lack of further data, the figure could be theoretically identified as a deity no less than as the hero himself deified, both cases being documented elsewhere.

The second hero-stone composition displays a comparatively higher degree of dynamism. A free standing slab from the village of Bawada is divided into four panels (fig 2). The lowest depicts the hero lying prone on a structure which can be reasonably identified as a funeral pyre.<sup>10</sup> He is surrounded by six female figures (*apsarases*, in all probability), each of them raising a garland. Above a fight scene is portrayed: on the left, the horse riding hero faces a handful of enemies. Three of them move against him with their spears, while other six foot soldiers, equipped with shields and daggers, mill around the other side of an architectural barrier, likely the wall of a fort. A

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<sup>10</sup> This interpretation relies on the comparison between the alleged funeral pyre on this specimen with the burning pyre unequivocally portrayed on other steles, such as that of fig. 4 in the present contribution.

sprawling figure is depicted below the hero's horse. The middle panel displays the hero together with a female personage (likely his wife) resting on a seat which is apparently lifted up by two celestial figures fluttering about the bottom corners of the scene, adorned with anklets and a refined hairstyle. Behind them, a couple of standing female figures, wearing jewels and having their hair arranged in a bun, rises up two garlands. The top scene depicts the worship of the *śivaliṅga* by the hero in the presence of Nandi and an *ācārya* on the right edge. The priest holds a bell in his right hand, with an incense burner (?) in his left. On the left side, next to the hero, a standing male figure lifts a garland, showing no distinctive features beyond his *dhotī* and a classical bun hairstyle. The topmost section of the stele bears a *kalaśa* and a wavy decorative motif denoting the evident architectural inspiration of the design.

The same site reveals one more noteworthy stone, which exemplifies the case of two heroes celebrated on one and the same slab (fig. 3). Only three horizontal panels are carved, the lower ones divided into two halves. Although the whole right section of the stele is worn, its contents can be safely ascertained on the ground of their similarity with the left counterparts. The lowest level captures twin scenes of skirmish: both the halves show a hero standing on the left edge facing his foes (two, in the left section), who are armed with shields and swords/daggers. Each of the two middle scenes portrays a dead warrior standing between two *apsarases*. The uppermost panel shows instead the two heroes together, sitting cross-legged by the two sides of a *śivaliṅga*, above which a garland is hanging. Both of them are in *padmāsana*, with their hands in *añjalimudrā*, and display the same attire. We can catch sight of a standing figure on the right edge, whose role is arguably connected with the ritual performance as in the samples illustrated above. The top section of the stele is occupied by a *kalaśa*, a common iconographical code in this area. The frame bears a garland motif decoration as a distinctive trait. Unlike the other slabs considered so far (cattle raid; fort assault), here no additional information are provided to the viewer as regards the context of the skirmish.

At times the hero is portrayed in the company of his wife. A unique specimen from the village of Kumbharvalan (fig. 4), unfortunately incomplete, offers a vivid representation of the couple burning on the funeral pyre: on the lowest panel the wife lies prone on her husband's body, her left arm raised up in the flames. Above this scene, the skirmish where the hero sacrificed his life is shown. He appears in his traditional attitude on the left side, while his foes, who seem to be characterized to a lesser extent, face him standing on the right; once again no details are given about the reason of the violent dispute.

The iconographical patterns of Maharashtrian hero-stones can reach higher degrees of complexity as in the following example from the village of Velapur (fig. 5). This stele consists of four panels which frames are visibly more elaborated than in the previous instances, the narrative pattern itself displaying some variations. Both the lower panels depict indeed a battlefield scene. The hero stands in the center and is attacked head on and backside by six foot warriors wielding a sword in their lifted right hand, with a shield in their left. An irregular frame separates this scene from the upper one, providing the ground to a more complex battle episode, where the hero and his enemies fight on horseback. Interestingly, a figure stands on the left edge of the scene bearing next to the hero a parasol, one of the Indian royal symbols *par excellence*. A further intriguing but scarcely preserved figure is represented in the foreground in left profile view: a four-legged animal of medium size (a jackal?) with muzzle bent down. The middle panel features the hero flanked by six celestial damsels holding a *cāmara* (fly-whisk) in their right hands. A wavy motif crowns this scene, its pinnacle pointing to the center of the top panel, the spot where the *śivaliṅga* is represented. In the uppermost episode the hero is sitting in the classical worship attitude close to the *liṅga*, above which a garland hangs; on the opposite side are Nandi and an *ācārya* performing the ritual, with bell and censer/water pot (?) as his attributes. An unidentifiable element flanks the hero on his right. The whole composition is superseded by a stylized architectural frame reproducing a temple covering made of superimposed levels.

Hero-stones are not reserved just to those who lost their lives on the occasion of events having social implications, such as defensive or offensive deeds. The steles erected to perpetuate the memory of those who committed religious suicides are one of the most peculiar variants. Several types of self-immolations are recorded in Medieval Deccan (Sircar 1971: 206-220). Beyond those committed by heroes on the battlefield as a consequence of their failure in achieving death by the hand of their enemies, suicides might have taken place in the fulfilment of a vow made to secure the accomplishment of a certain desire (winning a war, getting a son, etc.), or in order to propitiate a deity whose wrath was believed to get manifest through pestilences or other calamities in the village. Expiatory suicides by criminal are known as well, occurring as an alternative to the execution or to regain lost honor (Filliozat 1991: 144-145).

The immolation ritual could take the form of the hero's beheading in front of the god or goddess, known as *kamala pūjā* (Sontheimer 1982: 163), or could alternatively be performed by throwing oneself under the wheels of a running temple cart, or even by piercing one's own body on a sharp spiked pedestal (Rice 1909: 187-188). Through such practices, which transformed the suicide victim into the prototypical sacrificial animal of more traditional rites, the devotee aimed to obtain the God's response or to get closer to him in the afterlife.

A huge-size slab from the village of Mangalwedha accounts for this custom (fig. 6). The stele is incomplete, the lowest panel being lost; nonetheless the story can be detected from the surviving four panels. The bottom one depicts a choral scene: it is a procession of men in army (left) and musicians (right). Both the groups converge towards the center, where a male figure sits on an elephant back. A *dhvaja* (banner) held by one of the men in army is topped by a composite animal, namely a *makara*, which recurs also in other spots of the depiction, as we shall see. The focus of the second scene is on the sacrifice: the hero, portrayed on a bigger scale compared to the other figures and sitting in *padmāsana*, is beheaded. Once again, a procession takes place wherein we can observe his head being carried on a plate, preceded by the same *makaradhvaja* (likely, the family

banner) represented in the panel below, and by a group of musicians (oboe and percussion players). The scene above features the hero's ascension to heaven in the company of ten *apsarases*. Two of them embrace the hero by resting an arm around his back. The content of the last panel is consistent with the records we analyzed so far: the hero is eventually in the presence of the *śivaliṅga*. The officiant on his left holds a bell and a censer/water-pot (?); the right side of the scene displays three more *ācāryas*, similarly involved in the performance of the ritual as confirmed by their attributes, and again a group of musicians playing tambourines, drums and a conch shell. On the top section, beyond a variation of the architectural covering that we have already encountered on the other hero-stones, a *makara* is depicted on the right, echoing the family emblem of the banner depicted in the panels below. Even the interpretation of this fabulous aquatic animal as an apotropaic element could be considered.

The last hero-stone of this review embodies a synthesis between the classical heroism displayed on the battlefield and the type of heroism connected to the performance of self-mortification practices (fig. 7). This small size sample from the village of Kikli is divided into three panels, which apparent iconographic simplicity betrays a certain complexity of meanings. The uppermost scene includes the expected iconographical repertoire: the dedicatee of the stele is worshipping a *śivaliṅga*, upon which a garland hangs; interestingly, no officiants are portrayed. The middle panel depicts the hero involved in a skirmish. He is pierced by his two enemies' spears while wielding his dagger. The lowest panel captures a sacrificial ritual performed by the hero: he moves towards a square based pillar bearing a *triśūla*-shaped set of spikes on the top. It will be noted that while the heavenly ascension is missing, two different ways of dying are represented on one and the same slab, which coexistence still awaits for a proper explanation. On one hand, self-immolation on spiked pillars is usually associated with extreme *bhakti* rituals, rather than with suicides on the battlefield, where the sword could reasonably serve the purpose; on the other side, the

battlefield scene portrayed in the middle panel seems already to give proper account of the heroic death of the protagonist at the hand of his foes.

#### **4. Conclusions**

The seven samples we offered can be looked at as a small scale compendium of South-Eastern Maharashtrian hero-stones in relation to iconographic motifs and meanings conveyed. But what does it precisely mean, and which kind of data can we elicit by this review?

The very existence of a large number of hero-stones and the almost ubiquitous depiction of warlike contexts on them reflect a social milieu where disputes of different nature must have not occurred sporadically in the Medieval period, should they have been triggered by the defense/pillage of livestock (as the head of cattle around the dead hero indicate in fig. 1), or been connected to fort assaults (fig. 2) and other local controversies not always specified (fig. 3-5, 7). The higher concentration of cattle-raid steles in a particular strip (i.e. the Western Ghats) of the area under examination, in addition, would be indicative of the predominant pastoral character of the region, the hero-stones thus becoming authentic economic markers as well (Dandekar 1991).

Although produced in a rural environment by and large, these steles commemorate ordinary villagers as much as higher-rank individuals whose identity is inferred by the presence of royal symbols like parasols, banners, attendants and horses (fig. 5 and 6), with the stone size and refinement as further distinctive factors.

Interestingly, even when the steles extol practices of devotional heroism, according to the above mentioned variants of religious suicide, the warlike component is not necessarily excluded (fig. 7 and likely fig. 6, where the missing lowest panel may have represented a battle scene). Whatever the vow of self-sacrifice, either related to success on the battlefield or not, the devotional heroism it entails shares indeed the same

nature with martial heroism: eternal glory is reserved to the hero on the worldly sphere – as the dedication of a memorial to him proves – no less than on the otherworldly dimension – through the attainment of the *Śivaloka*. Following Sontheimer (2004 [1976]: 125-126), on one side a hero-stone dedication may have permitted

the hero to ascend to the world of gods. But the concept of hero and fame (*vīra* and *kīrti*) is also present and must have been a strong overriding motive in warring communities who did not have any claims as such to be called ‘Kṣatryias’ but who aspired to rise in social and ritual rank. [...] Death or victory in battle or in a hunt against a tiger [or in a self-immolation ritual] indicated special qualification for rank and honor [...]

and ultimately equate the hero’s deeds to the yogi’s. The hero is perceived as such since by means of a death through trial (being it war or self-mortification) he obtains closeness to the Lord in the same way as the yogi does by means of his penance. “The fight in itself becomes a kind of religious, yogic exercise for achieving the supernatural” (*ibid.*): and by this martial and devotional heroism ultimately merge.

Beside the religious affiliation of the hero explicitly provided on the upper section of the iconographic program, these materials implicitly throw light on another set of religious data: the beliefs on death and afterlife which are rooted in the so-called popular religion. The necessity to provide those who suffered from an *akāla mṛtyu* (untimely death) with honors must have played indeed a significant role in the decision to erect hero-stones to certain categories of dead far beyond a mere commemorative intent. The deification process occurred at times for some deceased would confirm it (Vanamamalai 1975). Hero-stones erection and heroes’ apotheosis, in other words, can be interpreted as strategies to prevent potentially unsatisfied spirits in search for revenge or wish fulfilment from harming the living community (on spirits afflictions and their treatment see for instance Fuller 1992: 231-232).

In the light of these considerations it becomes clear that a proper evaluation of the “hero-stones heroism”, that is to say of the system of values conveyed by this class of materials, relies not only on *dharmasāstras* and epic texts, but also on a broader understanding of the local context which produced it.

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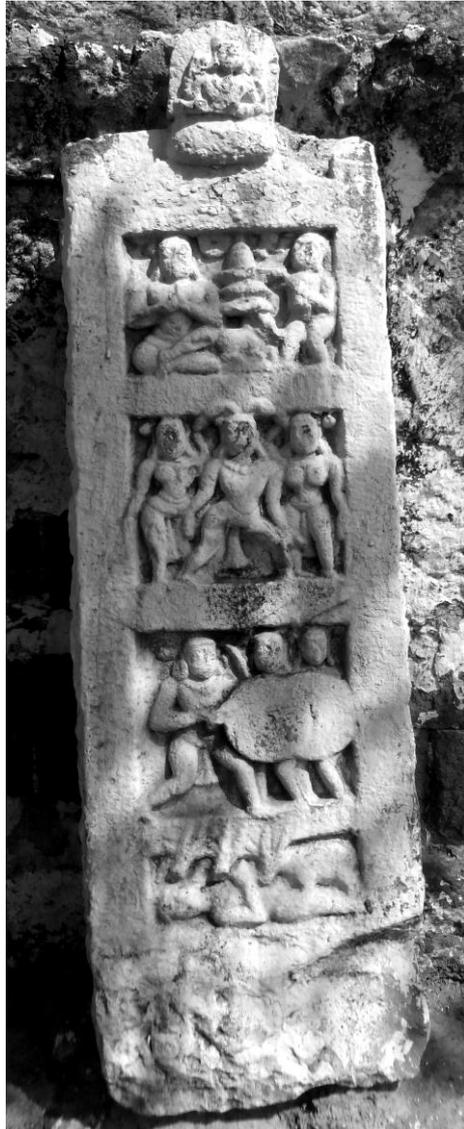


Fig. 1. 142h x 42w x 22t. Exterior West wall of Māruti shrine. Loni Bhapkar, Baramati tk., Pune dt.



Fig. 2. 162h x 57w x 16t. *Exterior West wall of Māruti shrine. Bawada, Indapur tk., Pune dt.*



Fig. 3. 120h x 50w x 19t. *Exterior East wall of Māruti shrine. Bawada, Indapur tk., Pune dt.*



Fig. 4. 72h x 40w x 15t. *Exterior East wall Mahādeva shrine. Kumbharvalan, Purandar tk., Pune dt.*



Fig. 5. 185h x 89w x 11t. *Hero-stone storage building. Velapur, Malshiras tk., Solapur dt.*

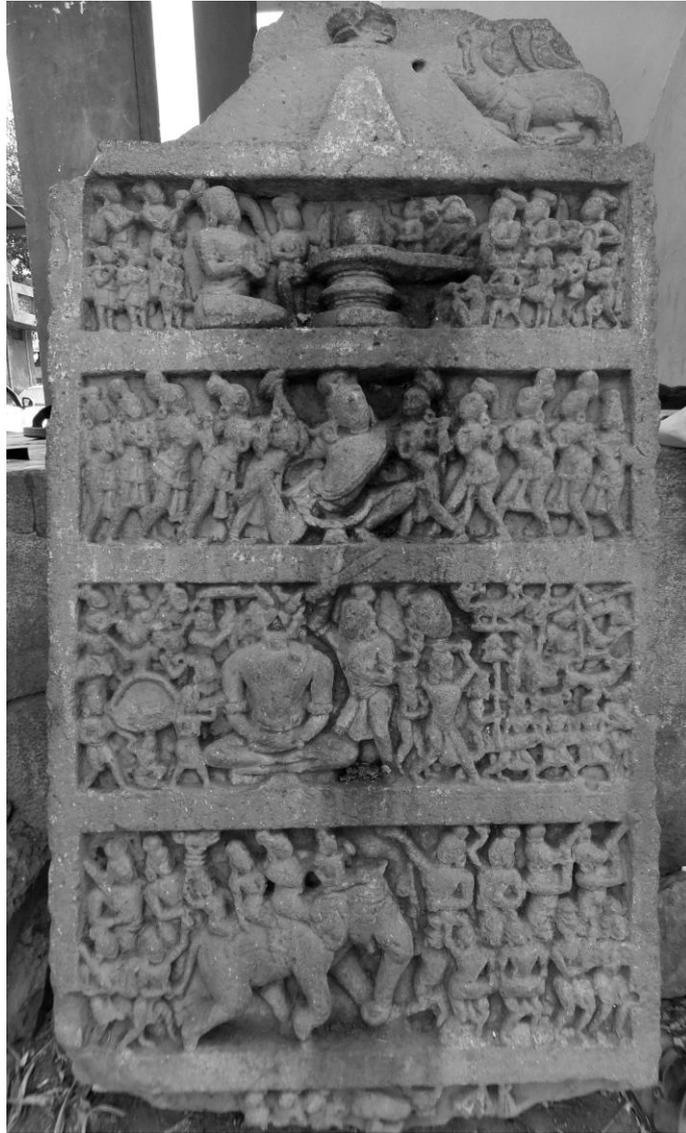


Fig. 6. 154h x 56w x 21t. *Nearby Mhasobā shrine. Mangalwedha, Mangalwedha tk., Solapur dt.*



Fig. 7. 111h x 44w x 17t. *Public square. Kikli, Wai tk., Satara dt.*