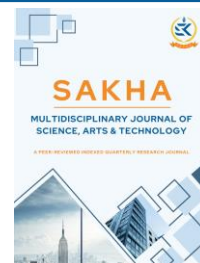




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Between Folk Religion and Material Culture: An Archaeological Study of Arikandam Stones in Chennai

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Abstract

Arikandam, a form of extreme ritual self-sacrifice associated in tradition with acts of devotion, protection, or vow-fulfilment, survives in the archaeological record through sculpted memorial stones that encode ritual action, sacred intent, and community memory. While such practices are primarily preserved in oral narratives and local belief systems, the study foregrounds the stones as durable material culture that bridges intangible ritual traditions and tangible heritage. Field documentation focuses on iconographic features, sculptural conventions, inscriptions (where present), stone typology, weathering patterns, and spatial placement within the sacred landscape in Chennai. These elements are analysed to understand how ritual acts were translated into visual symbols raised weapons, severed heads, offering postures, and divine motifs forming a standardized yet locally inflected memorial vocabulary. Spatial analysis further considers the relationship of these stones to temple complexes. The study situates Arikandam stones within broader South Indian hero-stone traditions while emphasizing their distinct ritual connotations. It argues that these monuments functioned not only as memorials but also as active ritual nodes that sustained collective memory and sacred presence. In the context of urban expansion and temple institutionalization, many such stones have been relocated, absorbed into formal religious settings, or rendered anonymous. Archaeological analysis thus becomes crucial for reconstructing layered histories of devotion, sacrifice, and localized sacred landscapes embedded in stone.

Keywords: Arikandam, Hero Stones, Folk religion, Chennai, Vattaparai Amman, Thoonguthalai, Village Goddess.

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Introduction

Ritual self-sacrifice, martial devotion, and the veneration of protective goddesses form a distinctive strand within South Indian religious history. Among the most striking material expressions of this tradition are Navakandam, Arikandam, and Thoonguthalai hero stones memorial monuments associated with acts of extreme bodily offering. These stones occupy a conceptual space between folk religion, royal ideology, and material culture, transforming ephemeral ritual acts into enduring visual and spatial markers of sacred memory. This study focuses on metropolitan Chennai, an ancient coastal settlement whose sacred landscape preserves layered evidence of such traditions. Literary, oral, and iconographic sources connect warrior self-sacrifice to devotion toward the Village goddess in ancient times. Historical traditions suggest that during the periods of the Pallavas, Cholas, and Pandyas, royal bodyguards undertook solemn vows before the war goddess Kotravai, later identified with Durga pledging acts such as Navakandam, Arikandam, or Thoonguthalai should they fail in their duty to protect the king. The regiments like the Chola Vela Padai and Pandyan Apattutavikal are associated with such oath-bound martial traditions. Over time, these acts were commemorated through hero stones (Virakkal), which served not merely as memorials but as active ritual nodes sustaining the spiritual presence of the deceased hero. Chennai presents an exceptional case where such hero stones are still preserved, worshipped, and spatially associated with the Village Goddess tradition. The present research approaches these stones archaeologically examining iconography, posture, weapon depiction, sculptural style, spatial placement, and patterns of ritual continuity to understand how folk martial devotion was materialized and subsequently integrated into institutional temple space. By situating these monuments within their changing urban, religious, and architectural context, the paper argues that hero stones function as bridges between intangible belief systems and tangible archaeological heritage. They reveal how memory, sacrifice, kingship, and goddess worship intersected within local sacred landscapes, and how urbanization and Brahmanical institutionalization have reshaped.

Folk Religious and Hero Stone context

Hero stones, known in Tamil as Virakkal or Naṭukal, were erected as memorial monuments to commemorate individuals who met heroic deaths. Such deaths occurred in diverse contexts, including warfare, cattle raids, the recovery of stolen livestock, and confrontations with wild

animals that threatened villages or herds. In certain cases, memorial stones were also dedicated to domestic animals such as dogs or cocks that sacrificed themselves to protect their owners or the wider community.

The hero stone tradition thus represents a broad cultural practice of honouring acts of courage, protection, and loyalty. Within this wider commemorative system exists a distinct category of memorials associated with ritual self-sacrifice, namely Navakandam and Arikandam stones. Unlike stones commemorating battlefield death, these monuments depict individuals who voluntarily offered their lives, typically through self-decapitation, as a sacred act of devotion. Such sacrifices were believed to secure victory in war, ensure the health and safety of the king, or fulfil solemn vows made in times of crisis. These practices are closely linked to the worship of the Tamil war goddess Kotravai, later assimilated into the Brahmanical forms of Durga and Kali.

Over time, hero stones frequently evolved from commemorative markers into objects of local veneration, becoming integrated into folk religious traditions. When a female figure appears alongside the hero, it may signify that the hero's wife performed ritual self-immolation following her husband's death. These memorials, often termed Sati stones, represent another category within the larger hero-stone tradition and reflect the intersection of memorial practice, social customs, and gendered ideals of loyalty in early South Indian society.

Arikandam belongs to a broader spectrum of ritual self-offering that also includes Navakandam and Thoonguthalai. These practices were rooted in folk religious belief, martial ethics, and goddess-centered ritual systems rather than orthodox Vedic sacrificial traditions. The individual who performed Arikandam was believed to gain spiritual merit, heroic recognition, and divine grace. The term Navakandam, meaning "nine cuts," refers to a ritual in which the devotee wounded vital parts of his body before finally severing his head, symbolizing the complete offering of life force to the goddess. In contrast, Arikandam represents a more concentrated form of self-decapitation, typically depicted in sculpture as a kneeling figure holding his hair tuft with one hand while cutting off his head with a sword in the other. Thoonguthalai, literally "suspended head," denotes another form of ritual offering in which the severed head is ritually elevated or supported after decapitation. Hero stones illustrating this type often portray the figure in a composed, kneeling, or meditative posture, underscoring the ceremonial and devotional nature of the act.

Case 1: Arikandam Hero stones at Thiruverkadu



The Panayaathamman Temple at Thiruverkadu is situated along the banks of the river Cooum at a geomorphologically significant point where the river changes its course. Such liminal river beds are traditionally considered sacred in South Indian folk belief systems, enhancing the ritual importance of the site. The presiding deity, Sri Panayaathamman, is worshipped as a village guardian goddess, representing a category of localized protective deities central to Tamil folk religion. Architecturally, the shrine faces east and lacks a formal vimana, suggesting a non-Agamic origin. The goddess is represented in seated posture with four arms, holding a damaru, pasa, knife, and bowl attributes typically associated with fierce protective forms of the goddess. The presence of a lion vahana and a trident placed before the shrine further aligns the deity with Kali traditions. A distinctive feature of the temple complex is the presence of three hero stones, all installed facing north an orientation often associated with memorial or ancestral symbolism. Based on inscriptional and sculptural style, these stones may be tentatively dated to the indicating a medieval phase of hero-stone dedication. Over time, these memorials have undergone religious reinterpretation and are presently worshipped as Muniswaran, Katteri Amman, and Ondi Veeran Swamy, demonstrating how hero stones transition from commemorative monuments into living folk deities.

Muniswaran: This smaller stone depicts a hero performing Navakandam, a ritual act of self-decapitation. The figure holds a knife in the left hand in the act of cutting the head, while a sword rests grounded in the right hand. The arrangement suggests left-handed execution. Ornaments and waist attire identify him as a warrior. A broken inscribed fragment behind the stone indicates its original memorial context.

Katteri Amman: Although presently worshipped as a female spirit-deity, the sculpture portrays a male warrior standing and holding a sword with both hands behind the neck, an

iconographic gesture associated with self-decapitation or preparatory sacrificial stance. A dagger tied at the hip reinforces the martial identity. This example illustrates how gender reinterpretation occurs when hero stones enter the sphere of folk deity worship.

Ondi Veeran Swamy: The third figure stands with bent legs turned sideways while the torso faces forward, suggesting movement or ritual posture. He holds a sword with both hands similar to the adjacent figure. Ornaments and attire confirm warrior status. Inscriptions above the head panel preserve the stone's commemorative function, even as it is now venerated as a guardian spirit.

This site thus provides important archaeological evidence for the transformation of memorial hero stones into active agents of folk religious practice within the urban landscape of Chennai.

Case Study 2: Arikandam Hero Stones at Tiruvottiyur



Tiruvottiyur preserves one of the most significant clusters of ritual self-sacrifice memorials in northern Tamil Nadu, providing crucial evidence for the intersection of martial devotion, goddess worship, and material culture. A group of eight hero stones, traditionally dated to the medieval period, survives along North Mada Street near the Adhipureeswarar Temple complex. These stones are still under worship, indicating their transformation from memorials into sacred presences. Seven stones depict Arikandam and the heroes shown kneeling, holding the hair tuft with the left hand and a sword in the right, poised for self-decapitation. Figures are adorned with neck ornaments and waist garments. The kneeling posture parallels Kotravai iconography at Mamallapuram and Thirupullamangai, reinforcing the goddess

connection. One stone represents Thoonguthalai, a rarer form of sacrifice where the severed head is ritually elevated. While traditionally associated with meditative posture, the Tiruvottiyur example uniquely shows the hero kneeling and self-performing the act, indicating local adaptation of ritual form. Local tradition links these sacrificial acts to the cult of Vattaparai Amman, a powerful local goddess once central to the ritual landscape of Tiruvottiyur. She is remembered as a fierce protective mother deity associated with boundary protection, disease removal, and martial power. Older visual record describe her image with skull garlands, serpentine ornaments, a trident, skull bowl, and a flaming halo tributes aligned with Tantric forms of Kali worship. The original icon, now partially buried near the 27 Nakshatra Lingam row within the temple complex, suggests an early medieval origin, possibly Chola-period in date. The incorporation of her shrine into the larger temple complex reflects a process of religious transformation. Earlier non-Agamic rituals, including blood offerings, appear to have been regulated or discontinued as the goddess became absorbed into institutional temple worship. Nevertheless, memory of her fierce character and her association with sacrificial vows survives in connection with the hero stones.

Case study 3: Arikandam Hero Stones at Manimangalam



Manimangalam preserves an important archaeological context where hero stones are associated with an early medieval Saiva temple environment. The site houses the temple of Dharmeswarar Temple, dedicated to Lord Siva (Sri Dharmeswarar) with the goddess Sri Vedhaambigai. Inscriptions identify the settlement as Chaturvedimangalam, located in Kunrathur Nadu of Puliyur Kottam within Jayamkonda Chola Mandalam, indicating Chola-

period administrative and religious significance. The temple is presently protected and maintained by the Archaeological Survey of India. Architecturally, the shrine faces east with Gajaprishta vimana. A small mandapa stands before the sanctum, and images of Vinayagar and Subramanyar flank the entrance, reflecting a typical Saiva temple arrangement. On the outer prakara, however, stand four Arikandam hero stones, forming a notable survival of martial-ritual memorials within a formal temple setting. The original find spots of these stones are unknown, suggesting they were relocated, possibly during conservation or temple reorganization.

All four sculptures depict warriors in standing posture, richly ornamented and dressed, emphasizing their social and martial status. No inscriptions are visible on the stones, making stylistic analysis the primary tool for dating. Two figures are shown cutting their heads with a sword held in the left hand, while another sword rests grounded in the right. The remaining two figures grasp their hair with the left hand while performing self-decapitation with a sword in the right, an iconographic variation within the Arikandam tradition.

Discussion: Patterns in Arikandam Hero Stones

A comparative study of the Arikandam hero stones from Tiruvottiyur, Thiruverkadu, and Manimangalam reveals both shared iconographic conventions and meaningful regional distinctions. A recurring visual pattern concerns the positioning of weapons and hands. In several examples, the hero is depicted severing his head with a sword held in the left hand, while a second sword rests grounded in the right hand. In other representations, the sword is held in the right hand, while the left hand grasps the hair tuft, steadying the head during decapitation. These combinations reflect a structured iconographic code, emphasizing control, intention, and ritual purpose rather than uncontrolled violence. The depiction of left-hand sword use is particularly noteworthy. It may indicate that some of these heroes belonged to elite warrior groups trained in ambidextrous or specialized combat techniques, including left-hand weapon operation. Such martial skill would mark them as members of select regiments or royal bodyguards, strengthening the argument that Arikandam was not a marginal act but one associated with high-status warriors. The grounded sword in the opposite hand may symbolize the ordinary warrior or common man and the transformation of martial agency into sacred offering. The ritual motivations behind such acts are consistent with traditions that link Arikandam to the well-being of the king, protection of the realm, or assurance of victory in warfare. These sacrifices, performed before fierce goddess forms such

as Kotravai - Kali, express a belief that voluntary death could influence cosmic and political outcomes through divine grace. Postural differences among sites further deepen interpretation. At Manimangalam and Thiruverkadu, Arikandam figures are shown in standing posture, reflecting the conventional heroic stance associated with valor and readiness. In contrast, the Tiruvottiyur stones uniquely portray the heroes in a kneeling posture. This variation likely carries ritual significance. Kneeling suggests devotional surrender and submission before the goddess, highlighting the sacrificial and temple-centered dimension of the act over its purely martial identity. Thus, while the fundamental iconography of Arikandam remains stable self-decapitation, weapon symbolism, and ritual gesture the variations in handedness, weapon handling, and posture point to differences in marital status, ritual context, and local religious interpretation.

Conclusion

This study has examined Arikandam hero stones within the broader framework of folk religion and material culture, demonstrating how ritual self-sacrifice traditions were translated into enduring stone monuments across the sacred landscapes of Chennai and its surrounding regions. The case studies from Tiruvottiyur, Thiruverkadu, and Manimangalam collectively reveal that these stones are not merely commemorative artifacts but material embodiments of a religious ideology in which martial loyalty, goddess devotion, and sacred power were deeply interconnected. The Arikandam tradition reflects a worldview where death, when ritually offered, functioned as an active spiritual force capable of influencing divine will, securing victory, ensuring royal well-being, or fulfilling vows. Iconographic consistency, self-decapitation, the grasping of the hair tuft, and the use of the sword indicates a shared ritual vocabulary, while variations in posture and weapon handling reveal localized expressions. The kneeling posture unique to Tiruvottiyur suggests a stronger devotional or temple-centered dimension, whereas the standing figures at Manimangalam and Thiruverkadu emphasize heroic stance and martial identity. The depiction of left-hand sword use in several examples may further indicate the involvement of elite warrior groups trained in specialized combat, reinforcing the connection between Arikandam and royal protection. The association of these stones with fierce goddess traditions, particularly Kotravai - Kali and local forms such as Vattaparai Amman, highlights the centrality of goddess worship in legitimizing and sacralising acts of self-offering. Over time, these memorials transitioned from markers of individual heroic death into objects of continued veneration, often reinterpreted

as folk guardian deities. Their integration into institutional temple environments reflects broader processes of religious transformation, Sanskritization, and urbanization, through which earlier ritual practices were absorbed, regulated, or symbolically preserved. Archaeologically, Arikandam stones demonstrate how intangible belief systems, vows, devotion, and ritualized death can be accessed through material evidence. They serve as durable cultural archives, preserving traces of embodied religious experience that textual sources seldom record. Ultimately, these monuments stand at the intersection of memory, ritual, and identity, offering valuable insight into the lived religious and martial ethos of early and medieval Tamil society.

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