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Memorials As Media: Re-Reading Andhra Pradesh Viragals Through Semiotics And Design

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Abstract
This article reconceptualises South Indian hero stones specifically those from Andhra Pradesh during the Chalukya, Kakatiya, and Vijayanagara eras as cohesive systems of visual communication rather than solely epigraphic documents or sculpted artefacts. This study synthesises archaeological, epigraphic, and art-historical evidence with semiotics and communication design theory, positing that viragals utilise a concise symbolic lexicon (weapons, animals, sun–moon, and the Shivalinga) within a clearly articulated tripartite narrative (combat, celestial ascent, devotional resolution). Their spatial strategies situating at village thresholds, crossroads, temple precincts, and frontier zones enhance communication reach, serving concurrently as memorials, territorial markers, and tools of sociopolitical education. The ritual activation involving garlanding, offerings, and festival cycles transforms these monuments into participatory media that preserve collective memory throughout generations. A comparative research of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu reveals regional "visual dialects" within a common framework, encompassing Andhra's sequential clarity, Karnataka's iconographic density, and Tamil Nadu's agrarian-bhakti nuances. This article, framed by Saussurean and Peircean models of signification and linked with concepts stated by Tufte, Kress, and van Leeuwen, situates viragals within world design history as pre-modern predecessors for branding systems, wayfinding, and memorial communication. The study illustrates how mediaeval cultures integrated values of courage, devotion, identity, and sovereignty into lasting, publicly accessible information design by emphasising iconography, inscription, spatiality, and ritual performance as interrelated avenues.
Keywords: *Hero Stones, Iconography, Semiotics Memory, Design, Communication*

INTRODUVTION:

Hero stones, known in South India as viragals or virakkals, are among the most evocative forms of commemorative monuments in the subcontinent. They record acts of martial sacrifice, memorializing warriors who died in battle, defending cattle, protecting villages, or upholding territorial honor. These stones, dating from early historic to late medieval periods, are especially prominent in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu. The earliest systematic survey was carried out by Settar and Sontheimer (1982), who demonstrated that these stones were not isolated memorials but part of a broad cultural tradition linking religious devotion, social values, and political legitimacy. Their study has since become the foundational reference for scholarship on memorial stones, situating them within the intersection of archaeology, epigraphy, and anthropology.

In Andhra Pradesh, the flourishing of hero stone traditions can be traced from the Chalukya and Kakatiya periods into the Vijayanagara empire. The Kakatiyas, in particular, left behind numerous examples across the Telugu-speaking region, often erected at village boundaries, crossroads, and temples. Scholars such as Murthy (1982) and Soundara Rajan (1981) have documented how these stones formed a crucial part of South India's monumental repertoire, carrying not only historical data but also visual and symbolic meaning. Yet while earlier studies privileged their epigraphic or iconographic dimensions, recent interdisciplinary approaches have begun to reframe hero stones through new lenses such as semiotics, communication design, and memory studies (Shulman, 1993; Doss, 2010; Young, 1993). This shift allows us to appreciate them not merely as static relics but as dynamic communicative artefacts, embedded within the living fabric of medieval communities.

The communicative strength of Andhra hero stones lies in their semiotic construction. A typical viragal presents a tripartite composition: the lower panel depicts the hero in battle, the middle shows celestial ascent aided by divine attendants, and the upper portrays worship before a Shivalinga. Each register functions as part of a narrative sequence, guiding the viewer through the hero's journey from earthly valor to divine reward. This design ensured that the stones could be "read" by both literate and illiterate audiences, compressing complex narratives into a visual grammar. The iconography swords, horses, celestial bodies, Shivalinga acted as symbolic signifiers that carried multiple layers of meaning. Through such strategies, hero stones exemplify what semioticians such as Saussure and Peirce describe as the interplay of signifier, signified, and cultural code. They

were, in effect, stones that spoke, encoding bravery, devotion, and immortality into universally accessible symbols (Settar & Sontheimer, 1982; Shulman, 1993).

Their placement in public spaces further amplified their communicative function. At village thresholds, they signified protection and territorial vigilance; at crossroads, they served as daily reminders of valor for passersby; at temples, they fused martial sacrifice with devotional practice. As Reddy (1994) notes, their locations were never accidental but chosen for maximum visibility and social impact. Much like modern billboards or public signage (Mollerup, 2013), hero stones confronted communities in the rhythms of everyday life. Their messages were simultaneously inward-facing, fostering collective memory within the community, and outward-facing, warning potential adversaries of communal resilience.

Equally important was the ritual activation of hero stones. Annual garlanding, offerings, and commemorative festivals ensured that these monuments did not remain inert but were continually re-inscribed with meaning. Sontheimer (1989) has shown how pastoral communities in Maharashtra and Karnataka integrated memorial stones into living ritual cycles, sustaining their relevance across centuries. In Andhra Pradesh too, hero stones were not simply artefacts but nodes of memory that participated in communal rites. In communication design terms, they resembled participatory media, where meaning was not fixed by the makers alone but was renewed through community engagement (Sanders & Stappers, 2008).

When approached through the lens of communication design history, hero stones acquire a new significance. Edward Tufte (1990) emphasizes clarity, hierarchy, and symbolic economy as hallmarks of effective information design. The same principles can be observed in the structure of viragals: hierarchy of scale (the hero larger than companions), narrative sequencing (single, two, three and more registers), symbolic economy (restricted motifs), and audience orientation (strategic placement). Their communicative strategies anticipate those of modern visual media, from posters to logos to wayfinding systems. This suggests that South India developed sophisticated design logics long before the advent of print or modern graphic design, reminding us of the non-Western origins of visual communication systems.

Against this background, the present study pursues three central questions. First, how did hero stones in Andhra Pradesh function as systems of visual communication through their iconography, inscriptions, and spatial strategies? Second, what semiotic codes underpinned their imagery, and how were these codes read by diverse audiences? Third, in what ways do the communicative strategies of hero stones anticipate modern practices in communication design, such as branding, memorial architecture, and public signage? By engaging these questions, the study aims to expand the historiography of South Indian art while simultaneously contributing to global design history.

Hero stones, then, are more than archaeological curiosities. They are designed artefacts, intentional constructions that balanced narrative, symbolism, and spatial presence. They demonstrate how medieval communities encoded memory, identity, and devotion into durable visual forms. As "stones that speak," they remind us that the impulse to communicate through symbols is both timeless and universal bridging the medieval with the modern, the sacred with the social, and the local with the universal.

HISTORIOGRAPHY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of hero stones in South India has evolved through several distinct historiographical phases, each reflecting broader trends in archaeology, art history, and cultural studies. Early encounters with these memorials occurred during the colonial period, when British administrators and antiquarians recorded them primarily for their inscriptions. Scholars such as Colin Mackenzie and later epigraphists in the Epigraphia Indica series treated viragals mainly as sources of historical data, extracting names, dates, and dynastic references while paying little attention to their iconography or ritual significance (Settar & Sontheimer, 1982). This text-centric approach reflected the colonial emphasis on reconstructing political history rather than interpreting cultural memory or symbolism.

A shift occurred in the mid-20th century with Indian art historians and archaeologists beginning to examine hero stones as part of the broader corpus of South Indian monumental art. K. V. Soundara Rajan (1981) emphasized their stylistic features, linking Andhra Pradesh examples to the wider traditions of Chalukya and Kakatiya art. K. S. Murthy (1982) advanced this work by providing a comprehensive survey of South Indian memorial stones, categorizing them into types and outlining their historical significance. Both Rajan and Murthy established that viragals were not marginal artefacts but integral to understanding regional religious, social, and political histories. Their works remain essential references, offering the first attempts to treat hero stones as cultural rather than merely epigraphic monuments.

The most important turning point in hero stone studies came with the publication of Memorial Stones: A Study of Their Origin, Significance and Variety, edited by S. Settar and G. D. Sontheimer (1982). This interdisciplinary volume brought together historians, anthropologists, and art historians to explore the phenomenon across South India and beyond. The collection demonstrated the variety of memorial stones hero stones, sati stones, and others while situating them in ritual, social, and symbolic contexts. Sontheimer's own essays within this volume, and his later work Pastoral Deities in Western India (1989), reframed viragals not only as historical artefacts but as living components of pastoral and agrarian traditions. His anthropological approach highlighted how memorial stones served as sites of ritual interaction, linking the dead hero to ongoing cycles of community memory.In the 1990s, scholarship expanded in two directions. On one hand, philologists and historians of religion such as David Shulman (1993) emphasized the devotional and Bhakti dimensions of hero stones, arguing that their imagery cannot be understood without reference to the intertwined ethos of valor and devotion. On the other hand, regional historians such as P. R. Reddy (1994) situated Andhra Pradesh's hero stones within the longue durée of the region's history, showing how their symbolism reflected shifting dynastic, religious, and territorial contexts. Reddy in particular stressed their role in binding local communities to Shaiva devotional frameworks, particularly during the Kakatiya period when martial sacrifice and temple patronage intersected.

More recent contributions have located hero stones within broader frameworks of memory studies and political history. Cynthia Talbot (2001), in her influential work on medieval Andhra, highlighted the commemorative functions of inscriptions and monuments, including viragals, in shaping political legitimacy. Similarly, Richard Eaton and Phillip Wagoner (2014) examined how narratives of heroism and sacrifice were mobilized in Andhra and Telangana to sustain claims over land and authority. These studies place hero stones within the politics of identity formation, reminding us that they were not neutral memorials but instruments of sociopolitical communication.

Parallel to these regionally focused works, global scholarship on memorialization has offered useful comparative frameworks. James Young (1993), in his study of Holocaust memorials, and Erika Doss (2010), in her analysis of American memorial culture, stress that monuments are never passive but participate actively in shaping collective memory. Their arguments resonate strongly with the South Indian case, where hero stones similarly functioned as performative media, transmitting values of bravery and devotion across generations. These comparative perspectives allow us to see viragals not as isolated cultural artefacts but as part of a universal human impulse to materialize memory and identity in durable form.

The theoretical shift toward semiotics and communication design further enriches this field. Semiotics, as articulated by Saussure and Peirce, provides a framework for understanding hero stone motifs such as swords, horses, or Shivalingas as signs that operate on multiple levels of meaning (Chandler, 2017). Communication design theory, exemplified in the works of Edward Tufte (1990) and Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2006), highlights the importance of clarity, narrative sequencing, and symbolic economy in visual media. Applying these frameworks to hero stones reveals their striking affinities with modern design systems, from infographics to wayfinding signage. Their tripartite structures function like storyboards, while their repeated motifs operate like logos or brand identities.

Taken together, the historiography of hero stone studies shows a trajectory from epigraphic documentation, to art-historical classification, to anthropological and religious contextualization, and finally toward semiotic and communication design reinterpretations. Each phase has added layers of understanding: from factual data about names and dates, to appreciation of visual form, to recognition of ritual and sociopolitical functions, and now to acknowledgment of their communicative strategies. The richness of Andhra Pradesh's hero stone tradition becomes fully visible only when these perspectives are combined, situating them at the intersection of archaeology, history, religion, and design.

This review demonstrates that while a substantial body of scholarship exists, gaps remain particularly in explicitly linking hero stones to the history of communication design. By addressing this lacuna, the present study seeks to contribute not only to South Indian cultural history but also to global design history, affirming the place of viragals as early systems of visual communication.

General Structure of Hero Stones

The general structure of hero stones (viragals or virakkals) in South India reveals a consistent narrative framework, carefully designed to communicate the heroic act, its cosmic recognition, and its devotional culmination. Scholars have long noted that these stones rarely present random or chaotic imagery; instead, they employ a single, two, three and more than three tiered compositions (Fig 1, 2, 3) that structures the hero's journey into three sequential stages: battle, celestial ascent, and worship or deification (Settar & Sontheimer, 1982; Murthy, 1982). This structural clarity is most pronounced in Andhra Pradesh, where the Kakatiya and

Vijayanagara periods produced exemplary specimens, but it also resonates with broader South Indian practices in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. The deliberate sequencing of panels reflects not only artistic convention but also an underlying communicative logic: by guiding the viewer's eye upwards, the stones narrate the transformation of a mortal warrior into a revered figure of memory and devotion.

In the lower panel, the narrative begins with the hero's martial act, often depicted in vivid detail. Here the warrior is shown in combat armed with sword, spear, or bow sometimes mounted on a horse or accompanied by companions. The enemy may be human raiders or wild animals, depending on the local context of the battle. This panel dramatizes the moment of sacrifice, anchoring the stone in the historical reality of conflict. Scholars such as K. S. Murthy (1982) emphasize that this register situates the hero within his community's lived experience, representing threats to cattle, land, or kin. By capturing the decisive act of valor, the lower panel functions as the foundation of the narrative: it justifies the hero's commemoration by displaying his courage and ultimate death.

The middle panel represents transition the hero's passage from the earthly realm to the celestial sphere. Common motifs include divine attendants (apsaras or gandharvas) escorting the hero upwards, or the depiction of celestial symbols such as the sun and moon. This upward movement, often carved with diagonal or vertical visual cues, communicates the idea of ascension and recognition. G. D. Sontheimer (1989) interprets this stage as a symbolic translation of the hero into the cosmic order, where human bravery is validated by divine acknowledgment. The presence of celestial motifs also ensures that the hero's memory is projected into eternity, much as the sun and moon endure perpetually. In semiotic terms, these signs serve as both icons (literal celestial images) and symbols (metaphors of eternal remembrance).

The upper panel depicts the culmination of the hero's journey: worship before a deity, most often a Shivalinga, though occasionally Vishnu or other local divinities appear. The hero is shown in an attitude of reverence standing, kneeling, or offering prayer. This final register underscores the process of deification, integrating the act of valor into a devotional framework. In Andhra Pradesh, the predominance of Shaiva imagery reflects the strong religious culture of the region under Chalukya and Kakatiya influence (Soundara Rajan, 1981; Reddy, 1994). By portraying the hero as a devotee before Shiva, the stone communicates that sacrifice leads to moksha, the liberation of the soul. This scene not only reinforces the hero's moral worth but also instructs the community in the values of courage, devotion, and piety.

While the tripartite scheme is dominant, variations exist. Some stones compress the narrative into two registers, omitting either the middle or upper panel, while others expand into four or more panels, especially in Karnataka where elaborate iconography often extends the sequence (Murthy, 1982). In Andhra Pradesh, however, the triptych format prevails, offering a clarity and economy that resonates with the communicative principle of sequential storytelling. This design ensured accessibility: for literate audiences, inscriptions supplemented the images; for non-literate villagers, the imagery alone conveyed the narrative. Thus, the structure functioned as a multimodal system, integrating text, image, and spatial arrangement into a unified communicative form.

Inscriptions, when present, usually appear at the base or alongside the panels. They provide crucial contextual information such as the hero's name, the date of the event, the nature of his sacrifice, and the identity of donors or patrons. As Settar and Sontheimer (1982) observe, these inscriptions connect the visual narrative to historical memory, grounding the symbolic story in concrete social contexts. They also reinforce the authority of local chieftains or rulers, whose patronage of such stones enhanced their legitimacy. Thus, the structure of the hero stone is not only visual but also textual, combining narrative imagery with epigraphic detail to produce a layered memorial.

The architectural framing of hero stones also deserves attention. Many are set in niches, with carved borders or ornamental elements that highlight their sacred significance. Placement on pedestals or at temple entrances further sacralized their presence, encouraging ritual interaction. Ritual activation through garlanding, offerings, or annual festivals ensured that the structured narrative of the stone remained a living part of community memory (Reddy, 1994). In this way, the design extended beyond the stone itself into its spatial and ritual contexts.

From the perspective of communication design, the tripartite structure of hero stones resembles modern infographic sequencing. Each register acts like a panel in a storyboard, conveying a stage in the narrative. The use of repetition (weapons, celestial symbols, Shivalinga) establishes a recognizable visual vocabulary, much like icons in contemporary design systems (Tufte, 1990). The upward orientation of the narrative mirrors the logic of vertical reading, guiding the viewer step by step from earthly struggle to spiritual transcendence. This clarity of design demonstrates that medieval artisans consciously employed principles of hierarchy, sequencing, and symbolic economy principles that remain central to communication design today.

In sum, the general structure of hero stones reveals a designed system rather than an arbitrary assemblage of images. By organizing the hero's journey into sequential registers, combining imagery with inscriptions, and embedding the stone within ritual and spatial contexts, artisans created a communicative medium that transcended literacy barriers and endured across generations. The tripartite structure battle, ascent, worship thus stands as the defining hallmark of Andhra Pradesh's viragals, embodying both narrative clarity and symbolic depth.

Symbolic Vocabulary and Iconography

The communicative strength of hero stones lies not only in their structured composition but also in the symbolic vocabulary through which they conveyed meaning. Across South India, and particularly in Andhra Pradesh, artisans employed a restricted yet powerful set of motifs swords, spears, horses, celestial attendants, the sun and moon, and the Shivalinga that together formed a coherent visual language. This vocabulary was not decorative but deeply semiotic, encoding values of bravery, devotion, eternity, and divine sanction. Each motif operated simultaneously as an icon (a visual likeness), an index (a sign pointing to an actual event or condition), and a symbol (a culturally encoded meaning), in the sense articulated by Charles Sanders Peirce (Chandler, 2017).

The weaponry swords, spears, and bows was central to this language. These objects not only identified the hero as a warrior but also signified his valor and readiness to defend the community. Raised swords in particular functioned as icons of martial action, while also symbolizing courage and authority. Murthy (1982) emphasizes that such depictions linked the individual hero to a larger martial ethos, making his act representative of communal resilience rather than personal achievement. In some Andhra examples, multiple weapons are depicted around the hero, reinforcing his martial identity and the scale of his sacrifice.

The horse emerges as another recurrent symbol, often associated with mobility, protection, and status. Its depiction alongside the hero communicated his role as defender of territory, since horses were key in both cattle raids and frontier defense (Settar & Sontheimer, 1982). Horses also indexed elite warrior culture, aligning the fallen hero with ideals of kshatriya valor. In certain stones, elephants appear as well, connoting royal authority and the scale of battle. The symbolic presence of animals thus situated the hero within a broader cosmological order, linking human action to natural and divine forces.

Perhaps the most distinctive motifs are the sun and moon, often carved at the top of hero stones. Universally understood as symbols of permanence and cosmic order, these celestial bodies assured that the hero's fame would endure as long as the cosmos itself. Settar and Sontheimer (1982) interpret their presence as a metaphor for eternal remembrance, transcending individual mortality. In semiotic terms, they function both as icons (literal depictions of sun and moon) and as symbols (signs of immortality and timelessness). Their use reflects a sophisticated symbolic economy: by carving two simple celestial forms, artisans compressed an abstract idea eternal fame into instantly legible imagery.

The Shivalinga occupies the highest place in the iconographic system of Andhra hero stones. As Soundara Rajan (1981) and Reddy (1994) note, the prominence of the Linga reflects the dominance of Shaiva devotionalism in Andhra Pradesh during the Chalukya and Kakatiya periods. The hero is frequently shown in an attitude of reverence before the Linga, underscoring the belief that martial sacrifice leads to spiritual emancipation (moksha). This iconographic element transformed the hero from a fallen warrior into a devotee, integrating the act of valor into a religious framework. In semiotic terms, the Shivalinga functioned as a cultural symbol its meaning derived not from visual resemblance but from centuries of ritual association. Its repetition across hundreds of stones reinforced a recognizable visual brand of valor linked to Shaiva piety.

Celestial attendants apsaras, gandharvas, or minor deities further enriched this vocabulary. Depicted guiding the hero's soul upwards, they communicated divine recognition of human bravery. Sontheimer (1989) interprets these figures as ritual mediators, ensuring the hero's smooth transition into the divine sphere. Their presence affirmed that the community's sacrifice was acknowledged and rewarded by cosmic forces. In design terms, these figures added dynamism to the composition, directing the viewer's gaze upward and reinforcing the narrative of ascension.

Other symbolic elements include animals such as lions, bulls, and tigers. The lion and tiger symbolized ferocity and royal power, aligning the hero with sovereign qualities. The bull, associated with Nandi and Shaiva iconography, symbolized dharma (cosmic order) and agrarian vitality (Reddy, 1994). These animal motifs acted as semiotic anchors, situating the hero's act within larger cosmological and social frameworks. By invoking familiar cultural codes, artisans ensured that viewers immediately grasped the broader implications of the sacrifice.

Gestures and postures also formed part of this symbolic vocabulary. Heroes raising weapons symbolized courage and defiance, while kneeling before the Linga conveyed humility and devotion. Such embodied signs resonate

with what Shulman (1993) identifies as the Bhakti ethos the intertwining of martial action with personal devotion. These gestural codes provided viewers with models of conduct, teaching communities that true heroism combined bravery with piety.

The economy of this symbolic system mirrors the principles of modern communication design. Just as logos and pictograms distill complex meanings into simple forms, hero stones compressed abstract cultural values into repeatable, legible motifs. Edward Tufte (1990) describes effective design as maximizing clarity with minimal elements a principle clearly operative in viragal iconography. For instance, a sword and sun together instantly communicated valor and eternal remembrance without need for text. The repetition of motifs across regions also created a recognizable visual identity, comparable to branding systems in contemporary design (Mollerup, 2013).

The symbolic vocabulary of hero stones constituted a semiotic code intelligible across caste, class, and literacy divides. By combining weapons, animals, celestial motifs, and divine symbols into coherent compositions, artisans created a visual language that was both accessible and profound. This iconography did more than commemorate the dead: it encoded cultural values of bravery, devotion, and continuity into enduring visual forms. In the Andhra context, where Shaiva traditions predominated, the repeated pairing of the hero and the Shivalinga became the central emblem of this communicative system an image as instantly recognizable in its time as modern logos are today.

Spatial Placement and Function

The communicative power of hero stones (viragals) in South India was not confined to their carved surfaces; it was amplified by their spatial placement within the lived landscape of villages, temples, and frontier zones. As Settar and Sontheimer (1982) emphasize, the location of these stones was never arbitrary. Their visibility, accessibility, and integration into communal spaces ensured that they functioned as public media, transmitting values of valor, protection, and devotion to wide audiences. In Andhra Pradesh, the placement of hero stones at crossroads, village thresholds, and temple precincts transformed them into active participants in the social and ritual life of communities.

One of the most common sites of installation was the village boundary or threshold. Positioned at entry points, hero stones functioned as both protective markers and symbolic guardians. They reminded passersby whether community members or outsiders that the village valued and memorialized those who defended its integrity. In this sense, the stones acted as territorial signposts, communicating both internal solidarity and external deterrence. Murthy (1982) observes that their presence on boundaries reinforced the idea that community space was sacralized through sacrifice, linking land with memory. The placement thus materialized a visual cartography of defense and belonging, where the hero's memory literally stood guard over the village.

Another frequent context was the temple precinct. By locating hero stones near shrines, communities aligned martial sacrifice with divine sanction. In Andhra Pradesh, where Shaiva traditions predominated, stones were often placed in proximity to Shiva temples, integrating local heroes into the devotional landscape (Soundara Rajan, 1981). This placement underscored the idea that valor and piety were inseparable, reinforcing the Shaiva ideal that martial sacrifice led to moksha. The ritual environment of temples also ensured that hero stones received regular offerings and garlanding, which renewed their significance across generations (Reddy, 1994).

In frontier regions or contested landscapes, the placement of hero stones acquired a more explicitly political function. Prominently displayed near battle sites or territorial boundaries, they proclaimed the community's willingness to defend its land and honor. Eaton and Wagoner (2014) highlight that in medieval Andhra and Telangana, such commemorations were part of a broader political strategy of inscribing power into the landscape. A hero stone at a contested site was not only a memorial but also a visual claim of authority, warning rivals of the community's resilience. This strategic placement resonates with modern practices of political memorials and boundary markers, where monuments define space as much as they commemorate individuals.

The ritual activation of hero stones further enhanced their public function. Communities often performed annual ceremonies at these sites, offering flowers, food, and lamps. These rituals transformed the stones from static monuments into living memorials, sustaining their communicative power through repetition. Sontheimer (1989) stresses that the vitality of memorial stones lay in their integration into cycles of ritual, where they became nodes of cultural memory enacted through performance. In Andhra Pradesh, such rituals reinforced collective identity, linking the hero's sacrifice to the ongoing moral and spiritual life of the village.

From the perspective of communication design, the placement of hero stones resembles the logic of modern public signage and wayfinding systems. Just as designers today position signs at junctions, thresholds, or nodes of high visibility to maximize impact, medieval communities placed hero stones at points of convergence boundaries, temples, markets where their messages would be encountered repeatedly (Kress & van Leeuwen,

2006). The stones thus functioned as designed interventions in the landscape, ensuring continuous audience engagement. Their location, combined with their iconography, transformed them into effective tools of collective persuasion and remembrance.

Moreover, their spatial function extended beyond communication into the domain of communal cohesion. By placing stones in shared spaces, communities created sites of gathering where collective rituals could unfold. The hero stone thus became a medium of social integration, binding individuals together through shared acts of remembrance. Reddy (1994) notes that in Andhra villages, such stones often became focal points during festivals, integrating the memory of martial sacrifice into cycles of agricultural and devotional celebration.

Ritual Activation and Intangible Heritage

While hero stones (viragals) are often studied as physical artefacts of stone, their enduring significance in Andhra Pradesh and wider South India lies equally in their ritual activation the practices that transformed them from mere memorials into living cultural nodes. As Sontheimer (1989) emphasizes, the communicative power of hero stones was not static but performative, continually renewed through offerings, ceremonies, and communal remembrance. This ritual dimension situates hero stones within the framework of intangible heritage, where meaning is generated through collective practices of memory, devotion, and identity.

The most common ritual associated with hero stones was the act of garlanding and offering. Communities regularly adorned the stones with flowers, smeared them with turmeric or vermilion, and lit lamps at their base. These acts signaled the transformation of the fallen hero into a semi-divine presence who could be venerated alongside local deities (Settar & Sontheimer, 1982). In Andhra Pradesh, especially during the Kakatiya period, viragals were ritually treated as shrines, reinforcing the link between martial sacrifice and sacred devotion (Reddy, 1994). By receiving offerings, the stone ceased to be a passive object and became an active participant in ritual exchange between the living community and the memory of the dead.

Annual or seasonal festivals provided another layer of ritual activation. In many villages, communities performed commemorative ceremonies around hero stones, particularly during agricultural or New Year festivals. These events often included collective feasting, music, and dance, situating the memory of the hero within the rhythms of seasonal renewal (Sontheimer, 1989). Such rituals not only reaffirmed the hero's place in communal memory but also integrated his sacrifice into the cycle of agrarian prosperity and divine blessing. In semiotic terms, the ritualized garlanding and festivity acted as indices of continuity, pointing to the ongoing vitality of the heroic message across generations.

Rituals also reinforced the protective function of hero stones. Positioned at village thresholds, viragals were activated through prayer whenever the community faced external threats or epidemics. In such moments, offerings to the hero were believed to secure his continued guardianship of the land and people (Murthy, 1982). This ritual invocation reveals the apotheosis of the hero: through sacrifice, he became a guardian spirit whose memory was not confined to the past but mobilized in the present to protect the community. The stone thus bridged temporal boundaries, connecting ancestral valor with contemporary needs.

The ritual life of hero stones also intersected with Bhakti devotional practices. In Andhra Pradesh, where Shaivism was dominant, the depiction of the hero before the Shivalinga was not merely symbolic; it was ritually enacted by communities who offered prayers at both the Linga and the stone (Soundara Rajan, 1981). In this way, the hero was integrated into the devotional cosmos of Shiva, becoming a participant in the Bhakti ethos of personal devotion combined with social duty. Shulman (1993) argues that such practices embodied the Bhakti principle of collapsing distinctions between divine, human, and heroic, thereby allowing local communities to identify intimately with the commemorated figure.

From the perspective of intangible heritage studies, these rituals exemplify how communities continuously produce meaning around material culture. UNESCO's 2003 Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage emphasizes practices, expressions, and rituals as essential vehicles of heritage transmission. Hero stones fit precisely into this category: while the carved stone is tangible, its significance is sustained only through the intangible practices of garlanding, storytelling, and ritual activation (Smith, 2006). Without ritual, the stone risks becoming an inert archaeological object; with ritual, it remains a living node of cultural identity.

The oral traditions surrounding hero stones further enhanced their intangible functions. Ballads and folk songs narrated the deeds of the fallen hero, often performed during festivals or ritual gatherings. These oral narratives served to re-contextualize the visual narrative of the stone, embedding it within a broader cultural memory. Eaton and Wagoner (2014) highlight that in medieval Andhra, bardic traditions were integral to the dissemination of heroic ideals, ensuring that the meaning of hero stones extended beyond their immediate locality. Through song and performance, the stones became part of a multi-modal memorial system that combined image, text, ritual, and oral tradition.

In communication design terms, ritual activation ensured that the message of hero stones was iterative and participatory. Much like modern campaigns that rely on repeated performances parades, anniversaries, re-enactments to sustain collective memory, hero stones drew their power from cyclical renewal. Each garlanding or festival re-encoded the stone's imagery within communal consciousness, ensuring its continued legibility across generations (Connerton, 1989). The ritual dimension thus transformed the viragal into a performative medium, one that relied as much on audience participation as on artistic design.

The gendered dimension of ritual activation also deserves attention. In some communities, women played a prominent role in maintaining and venerating hero stones, particularly when the memorial commemorated a husband or kinsman. By performing acts of garlanding or ritual lamentation, women reinforced kinship ties and transmitted heroic values across family lines (Reddy, 1994). Such practices highlight the intersection of memorial culture with domestic and social life, where ritual ensured that hero stones remained integrated into everyday existence rather than isolated relics.

Semiotic Analysis and Communication Theory

Hero stones in Andhra Pradesh gains new interpretive depth when approached through the lens of semiotics, the discipline concerned with the study of signs, symbols, and meaning-making. Semiotics offers a framework for analyzing how hero stones functioned as communicative devices, encoding complex social, religious, and political values into visual and spatial forms. By examining their imagery through the semiotic models of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, one can understand viragals not only as memorials but also as systems of communication design that operated across audiences and generations.

In Saussure's model, every sign consists of two elements: the signifier (the material form) and the signified (the concept represented). Applying this framework, a carved sword on a hero stone is the signifier, while the signified is the concept of martial valor, protection, and sacrifice. Similarly, the Shivalinga depicted in the upper register is the signifier, while its signified concept is spiritual emancipation and divine sanction. This dyadic relationship illustrates how visual motifs on hero stones were not mere decorations but coded symbols intelligible to medieval communities regardless of literacy levels (Chandler, 2017).

Peirce's triadic model distinguishing icons, indices, and symbols provides an even more nuanced interpretation. Hero stones contain all three types of signs simultaneously. The hero's carved likeness is an icon, visually resembling the individual. Blood-stained weapons or battle depictions serve as indices, pointing directly to the event of sacrifice. Meanwhile, celestial motifs like the sun and moon or the Shivalinga operate as symbols, their meanings derived from shared cultural conventions rather than resemblance (Peirce, as discussed in Noth, 1995). This multimodal use of signs made hero stones effective communicative artefacts, accessible to both the unlettered villager and the elite patron.

The tripartite structure of Andhra hero stones itself embodies a semiotic narrative. The lower panel, with its martial scenes, represents the earthly signifier of valor the hero's physical act of defending cattle, land, or kin (Murthy, 1982). The middle panel, often with apsaras guiding the soul, functions as an index of transition, indicating the movement from human to divine realms (Sontheimer, 1989). The upper panel, depicting the hero worshipping a Shivalinga, becomes the symbol of ultimate liberation, where valor is transmuted into devotion. In semiotic terms, the stone encodes a narrative sequence of signs valor → recognition → liberation readable as a structured communication system.

The semiotics of celestial symbols further illustrate this point. The sun and moon carved above the hero signify eternity and cosmic permanence. As Settar and Sontheimer (1982) explain, these motifs ensured that the hero's fame would endure "as long as the sun and moon endure." Semiologically, they function simultaneously at multiple levels: as icons (literal depictions of celestial bodies), as indices (markers of temporal cycles), and as symbols (cultural metaphors for immortality). This layered signification exemplifies Roland Barthes's concept of mythologies, where symbols operate at a second-order level to naturalize cultural values (Barthes, 1972). The sun and moon, while ordinary celestial objects, were mythologized into signs of eternal remembrance, embedding communal memory into cosmology.

Semiotics also illuminates the role of gesture and posture. Raised weapons signify courage, while kneeling before the Shivalinga signifies piety and humility. These embodied signs provided a visual rhetoric of conduct, instructing viewers on how to embody both martial valor and devotional humility. Shulman (1993) interprets such gestures as extensions of the Bhakti ethos, where external bodily actions symbolize internal states of devotion. Thus, semiotic analysis reveals that hero stones were not passive depictions but didactic texts teaching ethical behavior through visual codes.

The semiotic framework also explains the communal accessibility of hero stones. Because their meanings were encoded in culturally shared symbols, they could be understood without literacy. A villager who could not read

inscriptions could still "read" the stone by decoding its motifs: the sword for valor, the sun for eternity, the Shivalinga for salvation. This accessibility parallels what Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2006) describe in visual communication theory as multimodality the use of multiple modes (image, text, spatial arrangement) to broaden comprehension. Hero stones thus democratized memory, ensuring that heroic ideals were intelligible across caste and class divides.

From a communication design perspective, hero stones demonstrate the economy of signs that defines effective design systems. Edward Tufte (1990) notes that clarity arises when complex information is distilled into minimal, repeatable elements. Hero stones exemplify this principle by encoding bravery, eternity, and devotion into a limited symbolic vocabulary sword, horses, celestial motifs, and the Linga. These recurring signs functioned like a visual lexicon, much like the standardized icons in modern wayfinding or branding systems (Mollerup, 2013). Their repetition across regions created a recognizable semiotic code a visual dialect of South Indian heroism.

The semiotic reading of hero stones also situates them within the larger discourse of collective memory. Paul Connerton (1989) emphasizes that cultural memory is sustained not only through texts but through bodily practices, spatial markers, and ritual performances. Hero stones embody this principle: their carved signs encode memory into stone, their placement situates it in communal space, and their ritual activation sustains it through practice. Semiotics thus reveals the layered communicative strategies that allowed viragals to function as stones hat speak sign systems that transmitted cultural values across centuries.

Sociopolitical Communication through Hero Stones

Hero stones (viragals) in Andhra Pradesh and wider South India were not simply private memorials to individual bravery; they were also instruments of sociopolitical communication. Their inscriptions, iconography, and spatial positioning articulated values of loyalty, authority, and territorial integrity, broadcasting messages to both local communities and rival groups. By examining these stones through the lens of political communication, one can appreciate how they functioned as media of governance and collective identity, comparable to modern monuments, billboards, or propaganda tools.

The political dimension of hero stones is evident in their commissioning. Most viragals were erected not spontaneously but under the patronage of local chieftains, rulers, or wealthy donors (Murthy, 1982). These patrons often inscribed their names alongside that of the hero, ensuring that the act of commemoration also reinforced the sponsor's legitimacy. Settar and Sontheimer (1982) note that such inscriptions typically highlighted the chieftain's generosity or his role in upholding communal values. By financing the memorial, the patron positioned himself as the guardian of valor and protector of dharma, consolidating his political authority. This dual function honoring the hero while glorifying the sponsor demonstrates the political calculus embedded in memorial culture.

The placement of hero stones in public and strategic spaces further underlined their sociopolitical role. Erected at village thresholds, crossroads, or contested frontiers, they signaled the community's resilience and readiness to defend its territory. Eaton and Wagoner (2014) emphasize that in medieval Andhra, commemorative practices were part of a broader strategy of inscribing authority into the landscape. A hero stone erected on the periphery of a village was not only a reminder of sacrifice but a symbolic claim to territory. It communicated to outsiders: this land is defended, and its defenders are remembered. Thus, the hero stone acted as a visual deterrent, much like boundary markers or military monuments in modern contexts.

The iconography of hero stones also conveyed political messages. Scenes of cattle raids defended, villages protected, or enemies slain communicated that the community's survival depended on martial vigilance. By immortalizing such acts in stone, communities reinforced the value of collective defense. Swords raised in triumph, horses galloping into battle, and celestial validation of the hero's deeds were visual statements of the community's martial ethos. Shulman (1993) interprets such depictions as part of a Bhakti-infused political order, where loyalty to deity and loyalty to community overlapped. In Andhra Pradesh, the hero kneeling before a Shivalinga symbolized not just spiritual salvation but also the alignment of local defense with Shaiva cosmic order.

From a communication design perspective, these visual narratives functioned as public pedagogy. They reminded villagers of their duty to protect livestock, land, and kin, embedding moral lessons into public space. Reddy (1994) observes that by linking everyday concerns like cattle raids with larger ideals of honor and devotion, hero stones democratized political messaging. The stones became tools of mass communication, intelligible to illiterate farmers and elites alike. Their simplicity and symbolic economy ensured that values of loyalty and vigilance were accessible to all.

The sociopolitical function of ritual further amplified their communicative impact. Annual ceremonies held at hero stones were not only religious but also political events. By gathering communities to honor the fallen hero, patrons reinforced communal solidarity and their own leadership role. Sontheimer (1989) highlights how these rituals kept the memory of sacrifice alive while binding the community to the political order that sponsored the stone. In effect, the ritual calendar transformed hero stones into performative media, where authority was rehearsed and renewed through public participation.

The territorial dimension of hero stones is particularly significant. In many cases, viragals marked zones of conflict or control. By commemorating a hero's death at a frontier, the community inscribed its claim to that land. Such practices resonate with Pierre Nora's (1989) notion of lieux de mémoire (sites of memory), where memorials anchor history into geography. Hero stones were both markers of memory and markers of space, embedding political authority into the very soil of Andhra villages. This visual cartography of valor was a form of political messaging as durable as the stone itself.

The comparative perspective underscores this function. Across cultures, monuments often serve as instruments of political legitimacy: obelisks in ancient Egypt, cenotaphs in Europe, or war memorials in modern nation-states. James Young (1993) argues that such structures always perform a dual role: they commemorate the dead and instruct the living. Hero stones in Andhra Pradesh fit precisely into this tradition. They not only honored fallen heroes but also shaped living political culture by affirming the values of loyalty, sacrifice, and territorial belonging.

In semiotic terms, the sociopolitical message of hero stones operated at multiple levels. Icons (the hero in battle) appealed to immediate recognition. Indices (the carved names of patrons) pointed to actual political authority. Symbols (the sun, moon, or Shivalinga) anchored these acts within cosmic and religious orders. This layered semiotics ensured that hero stones communicated simultaneously to local villagers, rival communities, and divine audiences. Such multivalence made them powerful tools of political communication, comparable to modern propaganda posters that blend imagery, text, and symbolism to persuade across audiences.

Regional Variations and Visual Dialects

While the tradition of erecting hero stones (viragals) is pan-South Indian, the regional variations observed across Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu reveal how local sociopolitical conditions and religious frameworks produced distinctive "visual dialects" within a shared symbolic language. These variations underscore the adaptability of the hero stone tradition, demonstrating how common motifs such as battle scenes, celestial ascent, and divine worship were articulated differently to resonate with local audiences. In communication design terms, these differences resemble regional adaptations of a unified design system, where core visual elements are reconfigured for contextual legibility.

Andhra Pradesh: Hero stones in Andhra Pradesh are most commonly associated with composition in single, two, three and more than three registers: the lower register depicting the martial act, the middle register illustrating celestial ascent, and the upper register showing the hero worshipping a Shivalinga. Settar and Sontheimer (1982) emphasize that this format was particularly prevalent during the Chalukya and Kakatiya periods, reflecting the dominance of Shaivism in the region. The repeated depiction of the Shivalinga, often with the hero in a posture of reverence, highlights the theological framing of valor as a path to moksha (liberation).

This sequential clarity gives Andhra hero stones a striking resemblance to modern infographic storytelling, where information is arranged in linear, digestible stages. The clarity of narrative ensured accessibility across caste and literacy divides: the illiterate villager could "read" the stone as a journey from earthly valor to divine reward, while the literate elite could engage with the inscriptions that supplemented the imagery (Reddy, 1994). By combining visual clarity with theological symbolism, Andhra hero stones epitomized a minimalist visual dialect, privileging narrative economy and devotional integration.

Karnataka: In contrast, Karnataka produced the largest number and most elaborate hero stones in South India, many with multiple tiers and densely packed iconography (Murthy, 1982). These stones often extended beyond the tripartite scheme, incorporating detailed depictions of courtly life, ritual offerings, and elaborate battle sequences. Horses, elephants, processions, and even depictions of gods in anthropomorphic form appear frequently on Karnataka stones (Settar & Sontheimer, 1982).

This richness reflects both the political complexity of Karnataka home to the Chalukyas, Hoysalas, and later the Vijayanagara empire and its religious pluralism, where Shaiva, Vaishnava, and Jain traditions coexisted. Hero stones in this context functioned like dense visual campaigns, where multiple layers of symbolism addressed different interpretive communities. For a Shaiva devotee, the Shivalinga signaled liberation; for a courtly elite, the elaborate processions reinforced dynastic grandeur; for villagers, the battle scenes emphasized communal defense. In communication design terms, Karnataka's stones embody a maximalist dialect, where multiplicity and density conveyed richness of meaning rather than narrative clarity.

Tamil Nadu: Tamil Nadu developed yet another variation, emphasizing heroism in the agrarian and Bhakti devotional frameworks. Stones often depicted heroes defending cattle raids, a theme particularly significant in the pastoral economies of Tamil country (Settar & Sontheimer, 1982). The hero was not only a warrior but also a protector of livelihood, situating martial sacrifice within the everyday life of agrarian communities.

Tamil stones also displayed a strong integration of Bhakti motifs, where devotion and heroism were inseparable. As Shulman (1993) argues, the Bhakti ethos collapsed distinctions between personal devotion and communal responsibility. Thus, Tamil hero stones sometimes included Vaishnava symbols, reflecting the religious diversity of the region. The communicative emphasis here was less on sequential storytelling and more on embodied values valor, devotion, and protection as simultaneous and overlapping messages. In design terms, Tamil Nadu's stones represent a participatory dialect, one rooted in lived experience and communal integration.

Despite these regional differences, certain motifs such as the sun and moon, the raised sword, or the hero's final act of worship appear consistently across Andhra, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu. Settar and Sontheimer (1982) interpret these as part of a shared symbolic code that ensured communicability across regions. The universality of these motifs parallels modern design systems where standardized symbols (such as road signs or medical icons) maintain continuity across diverse contexts. The shared motifs created a pan-South Indian semiotic system, while regional adaptations functioned as visual dialects tailored to local audiences.

From the standpoint of communication design, these variations highlight the tension between standardization and localization. Andhra stones prioritized clarity and sequence, Karnataka emphasized richness and density, and Tamil Nadu foregrounded integration of devotion and agrarian life. This mirrors modern design systems, where a core identity is adapted for cultural specificity for instance, how multinational brands adapt logos, colors, or imagery for regional markets (Mollerup, 2013). Together, these visual dialects demonstrate the adaptability of the hero stone tradition, confirming its role not just as memorial culture but as living communication design responsive to context.

Contemporary Relevance and Communication Design

Although hero stones (viragals) originated as medieval memorials, their visual strategies continue to resonate in contemporary communication design. By employing symbolic economy, sequential storytelling, spatial placement, and ritual activation, hero stones anticipated many of the principles now central to branding, wayfinding, and memorial design. Understanding their communicative strategies not only enriches historical scholarship but also provides practical insights for modern design practice, especially in heritage communication, museum display, and cultural branding.

One of the most striking aspects of hero stones is their reliance on a restricted but powerful symbolic vocabulary: swords, horses, the Shivalinga, celestial symbols of the sun and moon, and divine attendants. These motifs recur consistently across regions, forming what can be described as a visual lexicon. Much like contemporary design systems rely on standardized icon sets for signage, hero stones employed repeatable symbols that could be instantly recognized across audiences (Settar & Sontheimer, 1982).

This consistency invites comparison with modern branding and identity systems, where logos distill complex values into a single visual form. For example, the repeated depiction of the hero kneeling before the Shivalinga functions almost like a brand logo of valor and devotion in Andhra Pradesh. Shulman (1993) interprets such motifs as encoding the Bhakti ethos of devotion through action. In modern contexts, these motifs could be adapted into a Hero Stone Iconographic Archive a curated design resource that could inform cultural heritage branding, museum graphics, or digital heritage platforms. Such a resource would bridge traditional symbols with contemporary applications, ensuring their continued relevance.

Sequential Storytelling and Infographic Design

The tripartite structure of hero stones battle, celestial ascent, divine worship bears a remarkable resemblance to modern infographic storytelling. As Edward Tufte (1990) notes, clarity in visual communication often depends on structuring information sequentially, guiding the viewer through stages of meaning. Hero stones accomplished this by arranging scenes vertically: the lower register showing earthly action, the middle depicting transition, and the upper symbolizing transcendence.

This narrative clarity can be directly applied to heritage communication design, where complex historical events must be made accessible. Museums, exhibitions, or textbooks could adopt the sequential logic of viragals to narrate historical stories in simple, engaging stages. Just as medieval communities could "read" the hero's journey from earth to heaven, modern audiences could follow a visually structured narrative about cultural history, battles, or devotional practices.

Memorial Design and Collective Memory

Hero stones also prefigure the strategies of modern memorial architecture. Like cenotaphs, national war memorials, or monuments such as the India Gate, they functioned as sites of collective remembrance (Young, 1993). Their placement in public spaces ensured maximum visibility and reinforced communal identity. Reddy (1994) observes that by embedding heroic narratives into landscapes, communities naturalized values of sacrifice and loyalty. In contemporary practice, these lessons remain pertinent. Memorials such as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. or the 9/11 Memorial in New York rely on symbolic economy (names, simple forms, reflective surfaces) to communicate permanence and loss. Hero stones likewise relied on economical but potent symbols (sun, moon, weapons) to sustain remembrance. Their communicative logic demonstrates that memorials are effective not through ornament but through clarity, repetition, and universal symbolism.

Wayfinding and Spatial Communication

The spatial placement of hero stones also resonates with contemporary wayfinding design. Positioned at crossroads, village peripheries, and temple courtyards, they operated like public markers that oriented communities toward values of vigilance and devotion. Their function was not only commemorative but also instructive, guiding individuals through cultural landscapes of meaning (Settar & Sontheimer, 1982).

Modern designers place signage at nodes of high visibility airports, metro stations, or city centers to orient the public. Hero stones embody the same principle, showing how spatial design amplifies communicative impact. In heritage contexts, wayfinding systems inspired by hero stones could use adapted iconography such as stylized sun or sword motifs to direct visitors through temple towns, archaeological sites, or cultural museums.

Ritual Activation and Participatory Design

Perhaps the most overlooked but highly relevant feature of hero stones is their ritual activation. These stones were not static monuments; they were continually renewed through annual ceremonies, garlanding, and offerings (Sontheimer, 1989). In communication design terms, this aligns with participatory design, where meaning is co-created and sustained by community interaction rather than fixed by designers alone (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).This principle holds rich potential for contemporary heritage projects. Interactive memorials or digital heritage platforms could incorporate community participation inviting people to add stories, light lamps, or contribute digital offerings. In this way, modern designers can emulate the living communicative function of hero stones, ensuring that memory remains active rather than passive.

Finally, reading hero stones as communication design contributes to a more global history of design. Much scholarship situates the origins of design systems in European traditions of print, typography, and advertising (Meggs & Purvis, 2016). However, hero stones demonstrate that South Asian cultures developed sophisticated visual communication systems centuries earlier, embedding values into structured symbolic vocabularies and spatial strategies. Recognizing this lineage expands the scope of design history, affirming that non-Western artefacts contributed profoundly to the evolution of visual communication.

The contemporary relevance of hero stones lies in their ability to bridge past and present. Their symbolic economy anticipates branding systems; their sequential narratives prefigure infographic design; their spatial strategies resonate with wayfinding; their ritual activation aligns with participatory communication; and their universality situates them within global design history. By viewing hero stones as early communication design systems, we affirm their continuing relevance not only as archaeological artefacts but as living sources of inspiration for modern designers. As “stones that speak,” viragals remind us that the impulse to encode memory, identity, and authority into visual forms is a deeply human endeavor, linking medieval South India to contemporary global design practice.

Fig 1, Hero Stone Allagadda

Fig 2, Hero Stone - Pushpagiri

Fig 3, Hero Stone - Pushpagiri

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