

## THE CĀYĀ-STAMBHAS FROM NĀGĀRJUNAKOṆḌA

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THE *cāyā-stambhas* from Nāgārjunakoṇḍa, a site now under complete submergence, constitute an invaluable source of the history of memorial pillars in India. Several clusters of them, datable in the third cent. A.D., were found in this valley. There are very few memorial pillars in other parts of the country, which go back earlier than this period; and one such example, from Andhau, in Kutch Dt., is the memorial of a Kṣātrapa king, whose name is now lost, dated the year 89.<sup>1</sup> But so far as south India is concerned, the Nāgārjunakoṇḍa series is undoubtedly the earliest. Innumerable hero-stones have been discovered in recent years from Cengam Tk., of the North Arcot Dt., in Tamil-Nadu,<sup>2</sup> but none of these is earlier than the reign of the Pallava king Simhaviṣṇu, who possibly ascended the throne in 536-37.<sup>3</sup>

1. *Indian Archaeology - A Review*, 1968-69, p. 46.
2. Nagaswamy, R., (ed.), *Seminar on Hero-Stones*, (Madras, 1974).
3. Krishnan, K.G., "Hero-stone Inscriptions of the Pallava times", *Ibid.*, p. 3. The concentration of hero-stones in the Cengam area, which borders the Karnataka plateau, bears certain interesting geographical features. By and large, these hero-stones record the death of heroes in course of cattle-raids. The intruders followed the narrow opening, 24 kms. broad, flanked by the Javvaji Range on the north and the Kalray Annamalai Range on the south. In the middle of this pass flows eastward the river Pennaiyar, suggestive of a border-line between the two feudatories or clan-chiefs. In this connection, mention may be made of the discovery, by Shri Narasimhaiah, B., a unique monolithic anthropomorphic figure raised in the midst of megalithic burials at Mottūr, a hamlet of Vellur, in Cengam Tk.

All the memorial pillars at Nāgārjunakoṇḍa were raised during the rule of the Ikṣvākus, who succeeded the later-Śātavāhanas in the lower Kṛṣṇā valley some time in the second quarter of the third cent. A.D. Nāgārjunakoṇḍa, known then as Vijayapurī, was their capital. They had close, sometimes even matrimonial, connections with various contemporary ruling families, including the Śakas of Ujjain. The founder of the Ikṣvāku line of rulers was Vāsiṣṭhīputra Cāmtamūla, followed successively by three more rulers — Māṭhari-putra Virapurūṣadatta, Vāsiṣṭhīputra Ehuvala Cāmtamūla and Vāsiṣṭhīputra Rudrapurūṣadatta.<sup>4</sup> Of these four, we have only the memorial pillar in honour of Cāmtamūla, the founder.

These memorials, generally tetragonal in section, are freestanding limestone columns. They are invariably inscribed and carved, but, unfortunately, most of them are damaged and inscriptions thereon are very badly defaced. Many of these pillars were located near some pillared hall which may have been a wayside rest-house.

All of them belong to the same architectural pattern, though they conform to four classes on the basis of the personalities for whom they were raised: (i) memorial pillars in honour of kings or queens, (ii) of chieftains and generals, (iii) of religious personages and artisans, and (iv) of soldiers. We will briefly deal with each of these classes. The earliest known memorial pillar from Nāgārjunakoṇḍa is that of king Vāsiṣṭhīputra Cāmtamūla,<sup>5</sup> while the last known *cāyā-stambha* of the dated series pertains to Śrī Vammabhaṭṭa, a queen of Ehuvala Cāmtamūla and mother of the last Ikṣvāku king, Rudrapurūṣadatta.<sup>6</sup> Fortunately, both these examples are in a fairly good state of preservation. The earliest memorial pillar came from an area close to *Stūpa* 9 in the centre of the valley, but its exact provenance is not known. Tetragonal in section, with a rounded top, it is about 12

4. Sarkar, H., and Misra, B.N., *Nagarjunakonda*, (New Delhi, 1972), pp.12-18.

5. *EI* XXXV, (1963-64), pp. 1-4; *Ibid.*, XXI, pp. 63-64 where the photograph of the pillar has also been published.

6. *Ibid.*, XXXIV, (1961-62), pp. 20-22.

feet high. A thirteen line inscription has been found at the base, above which are five sculptured panels, arranged one above the other, from bottom to top. In the centre of the lowermost panel, or the first scene, is a corpulent person wearing a simple dress and sandals, but holding a staff, a *rāja-daṇḍa*, in his left hand. The absence of crown is noteworthy here. A man behind him holds the parasol over the king's head, and on the dexter is the priest with a vessel in both the hands. Five other figures appear like monks or ascetics. Undoubtedly, the scene represents the distribution of gifts during the performance of the *hiranyakoṭi* ceremony. As the inscriptions of his successors say, Vāsiṣṭhīputra Cāmtamūla performed *hiranyakoṭi*, *aśvamedha*, *vājapeya*, *agniṣṭoma* and other sacrifices (*āgñihoma-vājapeya-samedha-yājisa hiraṇa-koṭi-go-satasaha-hala-satasahasa-padāyisa*).<sup>7</sup>

The next scene or panel portrays the same royal figure on an elephant; a man seated behind him holds the parasol over the monarch's head, while the four marching attendants, surround the elephant. Above this is a palace scene, in which the central figure is surrounded by ladies — three of them, perhaps musicians, being seated on the floor and the one, dancing to his left. In the next panel occurs another palace scene, an oft-repeated theme in the art-tradition of Nāgārjunakoṇḍa. Here, the corpulent male figure is seated on the throne in the *ardha-paryanka* posture. On either side of him stands a lady, while two other women are to be seen behind them, one of them holding a fly-whisk in her hand. The two ladies on either side are possibly queens of Vāsiṣṭhīputra Cāmtamūla. The uppermost panel delineates an edifice in three vertical panels, denoting a palace, or the idea of *vīrasvarga*. All this clearly shows the developed nature of the memorial pillar, its evolved plastic form, portraying the life-story of the king.

The inscription below the sculptured panels is a sort of an epitaph. Significantly, though the *cāyā-stambha* was erected in the

7. *Ibid.*, XXXV, p. 3. His own inscriptions have not been found at Nāgārjunakoṇḍa. There are only two inscriptions of his reign — one at Rentala and another at Kesanapalli, Guntur Dt.

early years of the rule of Māṭharīputra Virapuruṣadatta, the son and successor of Cāmtamūla, the persons responsible for its installation were all ladies — mothers, sisters or queens of the deceased monarch. The majority of the names bear the honorific *Śrī*; the two names without it are of Sarasikā and Kusumalatā, described in the inscription as *abhatarikā* (*abhyāntarikā*) meaning probably an intimate female friend or concubine.<sup>8</sup>

The one raised in honour of the Śaka princes Vammabhaṭā, the queen-mother, by King Rudrapuruṣadatta, in his eleventh regnal year, was found in the precincts of a Buddhist monastery (Fig. 1). No other memorial pillar comes either from a Buddhist monastery or a Brahmanical temple. Here, the sculptural embellishment is confined to only one panel, depicting Vammabhaṭā as seated on a stool and holding a mirror in one of her hands. She is dressed like a foreign lady, accompanied by two female attendants. We have no hesitation in identifying the relief as the portrait of the queen-mother. The inscription, engraved in the usual ornate style, runs to nine lines.<sup>9</sup> This is the only memorial pillar raised in honour of a lady at Nāgārjunakoṇḍa. There are, however, at least two memorials at Andhau, of the time of Rudradāman I, raised in memory of ladies.<sup>10</sup>

Yet another pillar representing a memorial to a royal personage, prince Eli Ehavūladāsa, a step-brother of the ruling king, Ehuvala Cāmtamūla, comes from the vicinity of pillared hall (site 61).<sup>11</sup> It is just a fragment in which only one panel and the inscription are extant. The scene depicts a princely person seated in the *ardha-*

8. *EI XXXV*, (1963-64), p. 3.

9. *Ibid.*, XXXIV, (1961-62), p. 22.

10. *Ibid.*, XVI, (1921-22), pp. 19-25. These two records register the erection of funerary pillars by one Madana, son of Simhila to the memory of his sister Jaṣṭavīrā and his wife Yaśodattā. The Wandh inscription of Rudrasimha I, dated in 183, records the erection of the *yaṣṭi* in memory of a woman who has been described as the servant of the mother — *Ibid.*, XXXVII, (1967), pp. 142-44.

11. *EI XXXV*, (1963-64), pp. 10-11.

*ṣaryanka* pose, surrounded by four ladies. To his left is a dancer, while to his right is a lady playing on the *vīṇā*; two other ladies are seated at two corners with outstretched legs. Dated in the thirteenth regnal year of Ehuvala Cāmtamūla, the inscription uses the characteristic Śaka title *Svāmī* for the Ikṣvāku kings for the first time at Nāgārjunakoṇḍa.

Though hailing from the royal family, Eli Ehavūladāsa has been described in the inscription as *mahāsenāpati*.<sup>12</sup> Besides this, there are about a dozen mutilated memorial columns, raised in honour of *senāpatīs* and *mahātalavārs*. Of all such memorials, the one set up in memory of the Kuṣahaka chief, Cāmtapuḷa, occupied the most prominent position by virtue of its location just outside the main, or eastern, gateway of the citadel. There was also a pillared hall close by. The relief on this pillar depicts an elephant with a rider (Fig. 2). Three epithets — *amita-janasa dapa-damana*, *khamdhā-vārāna okhamdhaka* and *olabaku-hathi-gahaka* — are applied to his name; the expression *hathi-gahaka* (Skt. *hasti-grāhaka*) may mean one who seizes the elephant, evidently of the enemies.<sup>13</sup> Besides elephants, the *cāyā-stambhas* sometimes bear a horse and chariot while delineating the life-sketch of the *mahāsenāpatīs* or *mahātalavāras*. For instance, one of the memorials shows a rider on a prancing horse. Originally, it must have been a beautifully-carved pillar with at least four registers, arranged one above the other; but for the three small lotus medallions, the topmost panel is lost. In the relief below it is a bulky figure, with a dancing woman to its left. There is no trace of the next panel; the last one, however, portrays a rider on a prancing horse, followed by an attendant. In front of the horse is a human figure. It bears a brief inscription (*mahāsenāpati mahātalavara Mayabhala*). An interesting relief on a fragmentary *cāyā-stambha* contains an ornate chariot occupied by a person having a squarish face and tightly-fitted headgear. The hero is looking through the opening of the wheeled chariot, and a seated lion is shown to its front left. Obviously, it is

12. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

a hunting scene in the Girnār forest, the only place in India where lions are still found.

About five memorial pillars, raised in honour of dead soldiers and their chiefs, were discovered at site 133, close to a pillared hall. Sometimes, a single column was set up for a number of dead soldiers. These fragmentary pillars are both inscribed and carved with battle-scenes. One such example depicts a horseman approaching a fortress, guarded by three cavaliers with drawn swords. Another pillar at the same time portrays four warriors with a sword or spear and a shield in their hands. The pillar-inscriptions provide names of at least three leaders: Raṭaputa, prince Karadaru, and Haraka. While the last-mentioned person has been referred to as a *raṭhika* (*rāṣṭrika*) or governor of a *rāṣṭra*, the other two seem to be only *senāpatis*.<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting that all of them, soldiers and their leaders, hailed from a place called Magalarāṇa, the location of which is not known.<sup>15</sup> But all this certainly indicates that a battle was fought near the Ikṣvāku citadel, and these columns were raised in memory of the dead soldiers and their generals.

The tradition of setting up *cāyā-stambhas* was not confined to royal personages, generals or soldiers; for there is at least one example each where the death of a religious teacher and an artisan has been commemorated. At site 56, which has escaped submergence, was installed a memorial close to a temple, in honour of one Koḍaraka, who has been described as *araka-bhaḍaraka* (Skt. *āryaka-bhaṭṭāraka*) and *yati-samaṇa-kṛta*.<sup>16</sup> These epithets suggest that Koḍaraka was a religious personage, probably the head of a religious institution. A short pillar with a curved top, later used as the base of a limetrough at the site of the *stūpa* with *svastika* inset, contains an epigraph, but it is not incised in the characteristic ornate style of Nāgārjunakoṇḍa. This is also a memorial pillar, in honour of a foreman of artisans

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 14-16.

15. One of the suburbs of Vijayawāḍa, Krishna Dt., is known now by the name Mogalrājapuram. It is, however, difficult to say if the present name has anything to do with the Magalarāṇa of the Ikṣvāku inscriptions.

16. *EI* XXXV, (1963-64), p. 13.

(*āvesani*), Mūlabhūta by name, who hailed from a place called Pavayata.<sup>17</sup> A narrow-necked vase, perhaps the guild-mark of Mūlabhūta, has been incised above the inscription.

It is thus evident that the raising of memorials was a widespread practice at Nāgārjunakoṇḍa. It is also certain that the reliefs carved on various pillars are real episodes from the life of the persons for whom these have been erected. There is hardly anything conventional in the theme, for, the scenes are not only varied but also realistic in delineation. They may have been termed *cāyā*-(image) *stambhas* (pillars) because the reliefs were almost true reflection of the hero's life and actions.<sup>18</sup> These memorials, taken collectively, reflect a developed idea as well as a high artistic attainment. The line of evolution that gave rise to this level of achievement is, however, not easy to trace, though there is scope to imagine that the monumental character of the memorial and their lasting form, may have had their germination in the areas where the Śakas held their sway in the early Christian era. Mention has already been made to the memorial pillar of a Kṣātrapa king at Andhau in Kutch; to this, we may add, among several others, the *stele* found at Salad and the '*pāliya*' stone erected by the Mahākṣātrapa Svāmī Rudrasena I at Mulwasar.<sup>19</sup> The word used in the Kṣātrapa inscriptions for memorial stone is not *cāyā-stambha* but *śilalaṣṭi*, *śilā-yaṣṭi* or merely *yaṣṭi*. It occurs not only in the Mulwasar inscription dated in C. 200 A.D., but also in the Bhuj inscriptions (dated in 130) of the Mahākṣātrapa Rudradāman I.<sup>20</sup> There is, thus, indubitable evidence of the prevalence of inscribed memorial stones during the first and second centuries of the Christian era in Gujarat. The Mulwasar inscription records that the sepulchral

17. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

18. *Ibid.*, XXXIV, pp. 20-21 for the meaning of the term *cāyā-stambha*. It has been translated by Mirashi as the sculptured pillar. *Ibid.*, XXXVII, (1967), p. 202.

19. Goetz, Hermann, *The Art and Architecture of Bikaner State*, (Oxford, 1950), p. 88.

20. Gadre, A.S., *Important Inscriptions from the Baroda State I*, (Baroda, 1943), pp. 1-4. For Andhau inscriptions of Rudradāman, see *EI* XVI, (1921-22), pp. 19-25.



*stele* was raised for the son of Vāṇijaka. Unlike the Prakrit tablets of Nāgārjunakoṇḍa and the Andhau inscriptions of Rudradāman, its language is Sanskrit.

The fragment of a dark, grey, slate *stele* from Salad, near Baroda, has a rounded top; its upper part, writes Goetz, "is covered with a clumsy relief, or rather a drawing on a slightly deepened background. It represents a tree, flanked on both sides by curious animals, distantly resembling heraldic bulls. There is no inscription, nor any other indication of the time and purpose of the curious monument."<sup>21</sup> Goetz has called it elsewhere a warrior memorial stone.<sup>22</sup> There are pitfalls in assessing the archaeological evidence without having any personal knowledge of it, but one may be tempted to say that two types of memorials were erected in Gujarat specially before the third cent. — one bearing only the inscription, and the other with only the reliefs. Both these trends merged at Nāgārjunakoṇḍa, to give birth to a new artistic as well as evolved sepulchral form during the middle of the third cent.

The Śakas of Ujjain, or parts of Central India that came under their influence, must have acted as an intermediate point for dispersal of the tradition, as can be testified from the discovery of a memorial pillar at Pawni, on the bank of the Waingangā, in Bhandara Dt., Maharashtra. It is a Prakrit inscription of a Mahākṣātrapa Rupiamma and datable palaeographically in the second cent. The pillar being fragmentary, it is difficult to say whether it bore the relief panels similar to those of Nāgārjunakoṇḍa. That there is a possibility of its containing some reliefs can be surmised from the occurrence of a half lotus motif immediately above the inscription. A significant point is the occurrence of the very term *cāyā-kambha* in this epigraph (*Mahakhattava-Kumārāsa Rupiammasa cāyā-kambho*).<sup>23</sup> This is, indeed, the earliest reference to this word and appears to have been used only in the case of sculptured memorial columns.

21. Goetz, Hermann, "An Early Indo-Scythian Monument", *BBSMPG* III, Pt. I, (Baroda, 1947), p. 13.

22. Goetz, Hermann, *The Art and Architecture of Bikaner State*, (Oxford, 1950), p. 88.

23. *EI* XXXVII, (1967), pp. 201-203.

In all likelihood, Nāgārjunakoṇḍa rulers derived their inspiration from the Kṣātrapa rulers of Kathiawar via the Śakas of Ujjain; but, the developed type of Nāgārjunakoṇḍa, representing high artistic excellence and architectural beauty, never found its way into Gujarat or Kathiawar. A *yatti*, or *yaṣṭi*, set up in 283 at Mevasa, Bhuj Dt., during the reign of Bharṭradāman, shows, in outline, a lamp-stand, a *damaru* and a small stand.<sup>24</sup> Evidently, the conception of *cāyā*, or depiction of the life-history, did not find favour in Gujarat, the area where the memorial pillars had, so far as our present knowledge goes, their early beginning.

24. *EI* XXXVII, (1967), pp. 144-46. An early example of memorial, containing reliefs, comes from Belvaḍigi, Gulbarga Dt., Karnataka. The inscription on it clearly states that it is "the memorial image of Kalaka" (*Kalakasya Cy -p[ati]mā*), *Ibid.*, pp. 131-32. Another early example, mentioning the word *cāyā-stambha*, comes from Gangaperūru, Cuddapah Dt., Andhra Pradesh. Ascribable to the third or fourth cent. it records the death of Śivadāsa in a fight arising out of a cattle-raid. See *ARSIE* 1939-40 to 1942-43, p. 228. This *cāyā-stambha* appears to be the precursor of the Pallava hero-stones.



Fig. 3. Memorials from Himachal Pradesh (stone)

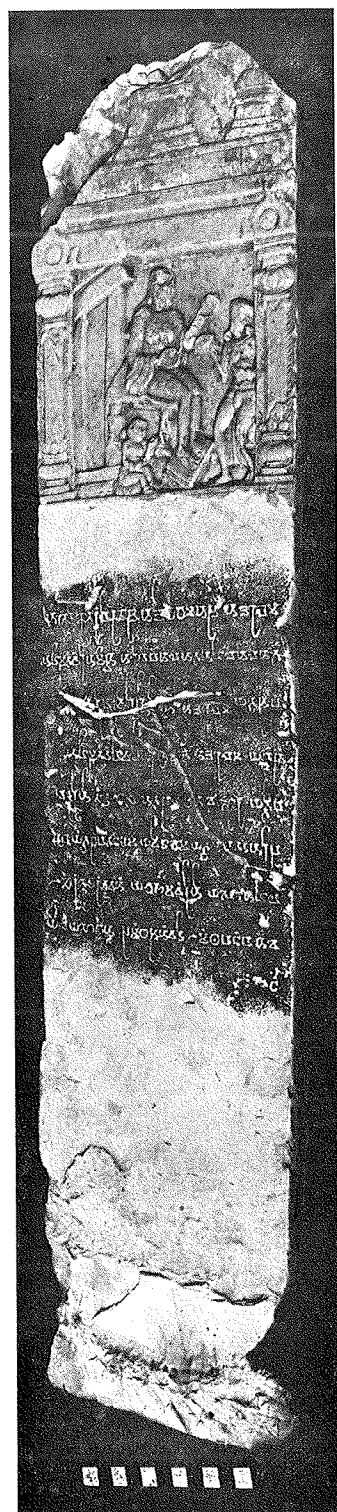


Fig. 1. *Cāyā-stambha* raised in honour of Vammabhaṭṭā, Nāgārjunakoṇḍa

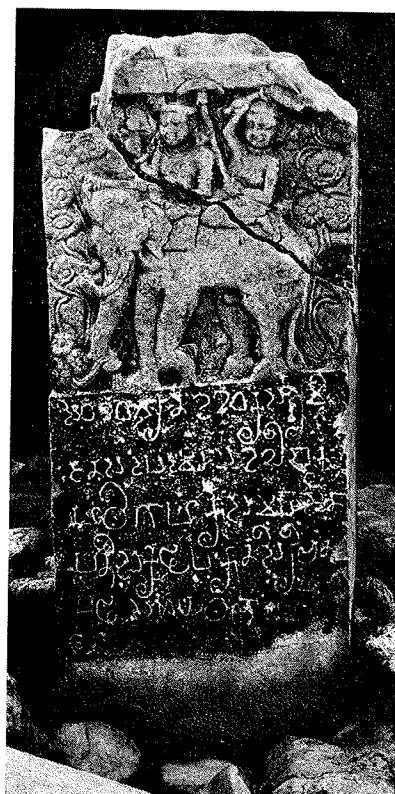


Fig. 2. Memorial for Kuḷahaka chief, Cāmtapuḷa, Nāgārjunakoṇḍa

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## MEMORIAL STONES

*a study of their origin, significance and variety*

*Editors*

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