Cracow Indological Studies
Vol. XXVII, No. 1 (2025), pp. 1–42
https://doi.org/10.12797/CIS.27.2025.01.01

Daud Ali
daudali@sas.upenn.edu
(University of Pennsylvania, US)

Rural Violence and Warfare in Medieval South India
The Evidence of Hero-Stones

ABSTRACT: This paper explores the problem of rural violence in medieval South India through a study of hero-stones collected from the districts of lower Karnataka between the 9th and 13th centuries. These documents reveal a world of everyday violence in which the countryside emerges as a space of potentially open-ended belligerence, and the peasant an armed agent. Furthermore, hero-stone inscriptions suggest that localized rural violence was continuous with, and only partly distinct from, what historians often characterized separately as 'state violence,' and in fact existed in a heuristically 'intermediate realm,' a point that has serious implications for understanding the nature of state, society and conflict in medieval South India more generally.*

KEYWORDS: violence, warfare, hero-stones, rural society, Ganga, Hoysala, medieval South India

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* This essay was graciously encouraged by Professor Lidia Sudyka and conceptually inspired by the work of my colleague and friend at SOAS, Professor Michael Charney (2018). It benefitted from the comments of the readers, particularly one, who though having little understanding of Indian history, provided useful suggestions for revision.

—"during calamity, the inhabitants of one village wish, by plundering their neighbors, to support life" (Buchanan 2011 reprint: I, 400)

Sometime in the year 1000 AD, a merchant by the name of Maḷanāgaseṭṭi was robbed and killed in an encounter with a man called Saṁṇanākana of the forest-dwelling Bēḍa people, known as hunters and brigands, while he was travelling on the 'eastern road' probably near Bedkihal, in modern day Belagavi (Belgaum) district, Karnataka. While further details of the event lie beyond the reach of the historian, a copper-plate inscription, dated to the reign of the Western Chalukya king Irivabeḍanga Satyāśraya (r. 997–1008), provides us with the barest of details, saving it from the darkness of unremembered quotidien, in detailing the repercussions of Maḷanāgasetti's death (*KI* IV 1961: 55).[1] This is because Maḷanāgaseṭṭi was no ordinary merchant, but a member of the powerful Ayyavōḷe 500, a traders' association that stretched through much of peninsular South India at the turn of the millennium. The inscription goes on to record that at a meeting in the house (*bīḍe*) of one Nāchiyar Bembiseṭṭi, where members of the Ayyavōḷe 500 along with local and regional notables came together to

[1] Inscriptions, which will form the primary documentary materials used for this essay, will be cited as is convention in the field, using the abbreviations for the relevant journals, *EI* (*Epigraphia Indica*), *SII* (*South Indian Inscriptions*), *EC* (*Epigraphia Carnatica*) and *KI* (*Karnataka Inscriptions*) followed by the volume, date of publication, and inscription number. In the case of *Epigraphia Carnatica*, both the old and new series will be used depending on the districts of the inscriptions in question, with the publication date directing the reader to the relevant volume. Inscriptions in *Epigraphia Carnatica* are organized by district and taluk and citation convention includes a taluk abbreviation before the inscription number. These abbreviations, which facilitate easy reference, are as follows. Hassan District: Ak (Arsikere), Ag (Arkalgud), Al (Alur), Bl (Belur), Hn (Hassan), HN (Holenarsipur), Cp (Channarayapatna), and Sk (Sakleshpur). For Chikmagalur District: Cm (Chikmagalur), Tk (Tarikere). For Mandya District: Kr (Krishnarajapete). For Mysore District: Gu (Gundlupete) Pp (Piriyapatana), My (Mysore), and Hg (Heggadadevankote). For Chikkaballapura (formerly Kolar) District: Ct (Chintamani). A note on style: modern place names and well-known dynastic names will not receive diacritics.

discuss the matter, one Revaṇa was appointed to carry out the punishment upon Samṇanākana and his people. Revaṇa seems to have been retained by the Ayyavōḷe 500 and was apparently eager to take up the task, taking an oath on the occasion to kill Saṃnanākana. The inscription continues that Revaṇa fulfilled his assignment by running through the Bēḍa village (*paḷḷige paridu*) with his men, killing some thirteen people, not only Saṃnanākana, but six other men, four children (*kiṟumakkaḷ*) and two "babies in the cradle" (*toṭṭila kūsugaḷ*) before "drinking the blood" (*nettaram kuḍidu*) of the unfortunate Saṃnanākana. So pleased were the merchants with this outcome that Revaṇa was given the title "chaser of enemies" (*pageya beṅkolva*) and allowed to purchase goods outside the monopoly of Ayyavōḷe markets without the payment of special dues to the merchants.

The brutality of the violence celebrated in this inscription perhaps stands out in the larger context of epigraphic sources, and in important ways is more than a little reminiscent of the all too common atrocities documented in contemporary India against Adivasis and Dalits. Two aspects of this inscriptional account will form points of departure for this essay. First, the inscription provides a window into what might be called 'everyday violence' in early medieval south India. By 'everyday violence' I mean quotidien forms of violence arising regularly in a social formation that may be distinguished from what societies and social scientists designate as 'war'—large scale conflict between organized combatants. This essay will attempt to assess the scope and nature of such violence using a limited body of inscriptional sources that have come down to us. Second, it records a form of violence, that though everyday in its scale, was nevertheless premeditated and collective, but not undertaken by the royal court or the 'state' as it has been traditionally understood. In the received image of early medieval India dynastic states and royal armies formed the primary agents of armed conflict. Contemporary and earlier sources associated with royal courts, particularly those in Sanskrit, whether epigraphic or textual, rarely make visible the realm of violence treated in this paper.[2]

[2] See for example the comprehensive treatment in Upinder Singh (2017).

In one sense, the epigraphic archive is no stranger to representations of violence. The eulogistic portions of royal copper-plate and stone inscriptions, with their dramatic accounts of royal conquests emphasising the warlike prowess of the men of the court have provided the ballast for generations of dynastic historians reconstructing the political framework of early medieval India. Indeed, war had a central place in this writing, where history itself was conceived as the ever changing diplomatic relations between hostile states.[3] Subsequent scholarship, even as it has moved beyond the framework of dynastic history, has continued to highlight the importance of war for these polities, whether as the means of territorial expansion, the acquisition of new resource bases, or the enrichment of royal treasuries through plunder.[4] Few scholars have questioned the relationship between war and other forms of violence, particularly rural conflict. B. N. S. Yadava (1973: 201–233), in an important chapter from his neglected work on north Indian society in the 12th century, set the groundwork for an alternative approach, linking the ubiquitous emphasis on military violence in the sources to the rise of a chivalric code based on feudal social relationships, but his focus was at the 'ideological' level.

The problem of state violence and rural society is aptly captured in the historiography of a single, often-quoted, inscription from Hottur, near Dharwar, in northern Karnataka, dated to the reign of the same king as the copper plate inscription discussed at the start of this essay, Chalukya Irivabeḍanga Satyāśraya. It details the depredations of a large Chola army in the region under the orders of king Rājarāja I (r. 985–1014) that included the killing (*vadhe*) of women, children and brahmins, the "seizing" of women (*peṇḍiram piḍidu*) and the abrogation of caste order (*jātināśaṃ*) (*EI* XVI 1921–1922: 11a). Historians have debated the degree to which this description should be seen as accurate, representative, or rhetorical, but the assumption, implicit in most discussions of it, that the rural landscape formed a kind

[3] Historiography that A. L. Basham (1967: 71) deemed as "monotonous and uninteresting to all but the specialist".

[4] See, for example, Spencer 1983.

of 'backdrop' bearing the brunt of state-sponsored violence, from billeting and displacement to plunder, rape and abduction, has remained unquestioned. While the reality of these forms of violence is undeniable, it is also true that the overweening emphasis on royal armies and war, has had the effect of occluding a range of forms of everyday and occasional conflict that often shared several features with the 'organized' violence of the state.

Both the Bedkihal grant and the Hottur inscription are ironically themselves testament to this fact. Though both are dated to the reign of the Western Chalukya king Irivabeḍanga Satyāśraya, neither are in fact royal inscriptions, and neither, as far as we can judge, had anything to do with the royal court. The Bedkihal copper plates were issued independently of any representative of the royal court or its chancelry, containing both a distinct seal and formulaic eulogy unique to the Ayyavōḷe 500. And it was the merchant association in conjunction with locality leaders that commissioned the attack on the Bēḍa community—and rewarded the combatants, led by a man, Revaṇa, who was probably in their employment. The Hottur inscription, after praising Satyāśraya for having chased away the marauding Chola armies, naming him "Slayer of Tamils" (*tigulamāri*), goes on to recount the real purport of the inscription, the death of a watchman named Gojjiga while he was fighting thieves (*kaḷḷa*) attempting to steal oxen owned by local betel-sellers (*tāmbuligar*). The watchman was also likely in the employ of a corporate body of local betel sellers, and it is they who arranged for a gift in his honour and had the event inscribed in stone. While it is of course well-known that merchant associations, whether local, like the betel-sellers of Hottur, or pan-regional, like the Ayyavōḷe 500, maintained their own 'protection' personnel—private armies, as it were—to ensure the stability of their financial interests, the implications of this fact for thinking about the exercise of force in medieval South India have not been considered. Such corporate violence becomes particularly significant when juxtaposed with other rural and non-state collectives that were capable of organized killing.

A key problem in apprehending the extent and nature of this type of violence in medieval India is what might be called 'statism'—and

the related assumption that medieval Indian polities could be heuristically and practically divided into domains of either central or municipal governmental functions, what might be understood as the 'state apparatus' on the one side, and a kind of proto-civil society of subjects or citizens organized into variously isolated self-governing villages, on the other. This conception has a long colonial history, of course, from Henry Maine to Vincent Smith, which is beyond the scope of this paper. Relevant for the problem at hand, however, is the assumption that like their modern counterparts, medieval states possessed monopolies on force and that the mass of villages and towns contained within them were relatively docile. Evidence like the inscriptions cited above and others that we will examine below are assumed to be 'civil' matters of 'law and order' and are understood as categorically distinct from state-sponsored violence in the form of wars between kingdoms. This essay will argue that what has been understood as 'civil' violence in medieval epigraphic sources was instead continuous with, and sometimes indistinguishable from that which has usually been deemed as 'state violence,' a perspective that has serious implications for how we perceive both peasant society and warfare.

Focusing on a striking density of evidence in Southern Karnataka between the 9th and 13th centuries, relating to the so called later Western Ganga and Hoysala periods, this paper suggests that highly localized forms of organized violence seem to have been an endemic feature of rural life in lower Karnataka during this period. By focusing on epigraphic documents and other evidence from rural towns and settlements that were on the one hand well beyond the confines of royal courts, but at the same time often touched by 'state violence' in unexpected ways, the paper will recast the countryside as a space of open-ended belligerence and the peasant-landlord as an armed agent. It does not however, forward the idea of a 'military labor market' as has been suggested for a slightly later period in north India.

The Hottur inscription belongs to a larger category of epigraphs called 'memorial-stones' or 'hero-stones' that are found throughout the subcontinent, but in particularly large numbers in Southern and Western India. Despite a groundbreaking volume on the subject published

by Settar and Sontheimer (1982) some forty years ago and a handful of studies from that period onward (Nagaswamy 1974; Chattopadhyaya 1982; Chandrasekhara Reddy 1994; Thapar 1981, Thakuria 2008–2009; Trinco 2015; Kalhoro 2017; and Mahesh 2017), much remains to be understood about these somewhat ephemeral lithic records. Their form varies slightly across regions, and they overlap with other types of death memorials, but in south India they take the form of *stelae* with sculptured reliefs and sometimes inscriptions. The memorials relevant for this study commemorate the death of men in armed conflict, and are thus known as 'hero-stones '(*vīrakkal*, Tamil; *vīragallu,* Kannada).

Two features of hero-stones are notable for this study. First, despite attempts to date them to the antiquity of either Indo-European/Sanskrit or Dravidian megalithic or Cankam 'heroic' traditions, only a small but substantial localized tradition of such objects is available before the 6th century. These are the *stelae* and pillar memorials found at Nagarjunakonda, Kanaganahalli and other related sites in the northern Deccan. The vast majority of memorial stones, however, are found in later times, and seem to have consolidated themselves in different regions throughout the Deccan as discrete traditions, sporadically as early as the 6th century, but in substantial numbers only from the 9th and 10th centuries (Adiga 2006: 326–327). The hiatus and discontinuity in this chronology, in addition to the fact that later hero-stones seem to be from more restricted social contexts, suggests that more work needs to be done on understanding the relationship between earlier and later memorial traditions. This study suggests that the rise of the hero-stone tradition after the 6th century, with increasing pace toward the turn of the millennium, should be connected to agrarian change, and it makes sense to understand them as important features of rural society in medieval Karnataka rather than harking back to some earlier 'heroic tradition'. A second significant feature of hero-stones relevant for this study, which partly distinguishes them from the earlier stones in Satavahana and Ikshvaku times, is their almost exclusively non-courtly and local character. Whether they commemorate men killed in small rural conflicts, skirmishes, or larger battles between royal armies, they were typically erected by the relatives of the deceased in

an entirely local environment. This is almost exclusively the case with later hero-stones. A substantial number of hero-stones (approximately 40% in the region of focus) are uninscribed, a fact that underscores their local, rural, character, suggesting that they were only partially connected to social locales where the technologies of writing predominated.[5] Even among those that do possess epigraphs, there seems to have been little reliance on the royal chancelry and scribal apparatus, although in a small number of cases local lords or royal agents were involved in the provision of subsistence gifts for families of the deceased. Their spatial distribution also tended to be more dispersed than other inscriptions—they are found not only in temple precincts, but also near irrigation tanks, the gates of villages, and even in surrounding fields—but this remains a difficult matter to assess, given their moveability as objects and the demands of antiquity preservation in modern times. Hero-stones may thus be considered a distinctive type of epigraphic source and provide a very different perspective on armed conflict in medieval society than royal *encomia* and court poetry.

This essay is programmatic but it is also in many ways highly preliminary. It attempts to take a novel approach to the interpretation of hero-stones—not casting them as material embodiments of unique heroic traditions of South Indian culture or as the celebrations of the 'bravehearts' of regional or national identity, but instead as a window into everyday violence and conflict in rural society in medieval South India. Given even a cursory reading of hero-stones, it is striking that this approach has not been taken up by scholars to date.[6] The intention here is to suggest a new perspective that hero-stones may open up for historians. More detailed work integrating hero-stones into what can be reconstructed about local change in particular areas is needed.

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5 This estimate is based on a calculation from materials collected by Mahesh (2017: 356–381) in Appendix 1.

6 Notable exceptions here are the important works of R. N. Nandi (2000) whose study on the feudalization of society has explored social conflict extensively from a Marxist point of view, and Malini Adiga (2006, 2007), who has treated rape, suicide, and cattle theft, *inter alia*, as part of her ongoing research on the social history of the region.

Approximately 350 hero-stone inscriptions were examined in the current study, primarily from the districts of Hassan, Mysore and Chamrajnagar. This represents a more or less complete survey of inscribed hero-stones from these districts, but, as mentioned above, numbers of uninscribed hero stones are substantial (constituting perhaps as much as 40% of the overall number).[7] Uninscribed hero stones must be interpreted primarily based on visual analysis of the narrative panels, and while they often give us an idea of the type of conflict commemorated from the appearance of certain generic visual cues, they tell us little of the social context of these conflicts and the identities of combatants involved.

A typological survey of types of conflict found in hero-stones

From this rather general and surely inadequate contextualization, I would like now to turn to our primary body of evidence, the hero--stones of southern Karnataka. It remains highly significant that the prevalence of the hero-stone tradition commemorating the deaths of men in conflict can be correlated in a general way to agrarian change in the early medieval period rather than the somewhat ill-defined 'heroic' societies of Cankam or pre-feudalized South India, whatever their origins or the contentions of modern historiography. If, for example, hero-stone memorial practices had their origin in earlier pastoral societies and communities, with the death of the hero in the cattle-raid being the *locus classicus* of the tradition, then how do we explain that the earliest specimens of the genre do not fit this pattern and that the vast majority of surviving hero-stones relate to the agriculturally intensive regimes of early medieval South India? Clearly, once more of these

[7] For Hassan district, I have relied on the valuable work of Vrshub Mahesh (2017), which remains the only comprehensive district survey of hero-stones for any region of Karnataka, despite the late S. Settar's urgent plea some forty years ago for the documentation and scientific study of what he estimated (perhaps conservatively) to be some 6000 to 7500 remaining memorial stones from the state as a whole (Settar 1982: 193).

materials are properly documented, a more sophisticated historical approach needs to be developed in relation to their interpretation—one that is able to theorize their proliferation against the social changes of the period of their creation rather than seeing them as the expression of some timeless local or regional tradition.

Historians have typically divided hero-stones into different categories derived from the types of armed conflict that they record in their memorialization.[8] Most recently Mahesh has used the categories of "cattle raid," "skirmish" and "battle" to divide the impressive archive he has assembled from Hassan district. While such typologies are useful as an initial heuristic, the analysis that follows will suggest not only that the categories are hardly neat and self-contained, with many hero-stones sharing features of different categories, but they also, when interpreted together, tend to give both a more variegated and holistic picture of rural violence than the impression gained from the neatly discrete categorization of "cattle raid," "skirmish," and "battle," with its implicit assumption about the boundaries between state-sponsored and civil violence.

We may begin our survey with the category of 'cattle raid' which is seemingly the most clear cut. All scholars have noted that cattle theft (Kannada *tu̲ru̲go̲l*) is among the most distinctive conflicts recorded in hero-stones.[9] Hundreds of inscriptions record the deaths of men in conflict over cattle—in stealing, defending, or retrieving cattle (see Figs 1 and 2). Moreover, because of the distinctive visual cue of cattle, they are among the most easy to typologize among uninscribed hero-stones. Despite the fact that some have maintained that cattle theft was at the heart of the hero stone tradition, being rooted in pastoral highland traditions, it must be emphasized again that the vast majority of surviving memorial stones describing cattle raids are to be found in areas of intensive agrarian growth from the 8th century onwards. Cows and other livestock were maintained by both farmers and pastoralists linked to agrarian society. Cows were an integral

[8] For Settar's typology, see Settar 1982: 194–196.

[9] For an informative discussion, see Adiga 2006: 58–65.

part of the rural economy as both sources of power and manure, and were easily moveable. Malini Adiga (2006: 9) has suggested that the importance of livestock in the semi-malnad and maidan regions was connected to the higher demands of animal labor in field plowing. The procurement of manures for both fuel (through oil and manure) and fertilizer was also surely important, and while we have few early medieval sources that illuminate precisely how such needs were met, later historical/ethnographic data suggests complex relations between pastoralists and agriculturalists (Dandekar 1991: 313–317). Whatever the case, it is clear that the cattle raiding referred to in the great majority of hero-stones must be connected intimately to the tensions of agrarian life. The protagonists of cattle raids were sometimes 'thieves' or forest-dwelling *bēḍa*s, as in the hero-stone in Fig. 2, which bears an inscription informing us that it commemorates Nāgaṇṇa, son of Sūri-gāvuṇḍa, who died defending the cattle of Amruthapura when *bēḍa*s attacked (*EC* XII 2003: Tk 15). More often than not, however, men taking cattle came from neighboring villages, typically *gāvuṇḍa*s and their associates, or *daṇḍanāyaka*s, and occasionally, suprisingly, even men sent by royal courts. A hero-stone from Kembalu in Channarayapattna Taluk, for example, dated to the reign of Hoysala Ballala II, records the death of a man named Ketamalla, whose ancestors were both *gāvuṇḍa*s and *daṇḍanāyaka*s, in a battle to retrieve cattle. The inscription includes some context—a Hoysala queen named Colamahādevī, presumably from the Chola family, who was ruling in Kembalu, heard some calumny or harsh words against her, and ordered the attack and capture of cows in the village, and Ketamalla, who repulsed and killed many of the queen's retinue, succumbed to wounds suffered in the fight (*EC* X 1997: Cp 72). In this case we have a cattle-raid deputed by a member of the royal family against a local village, and our record of the event was drawn up by local men of the village who resisted the attack. Local lords and chiefs (*nāyaka*s) were also involved in cattle-raiding. Two hero-stones from Chikkole in Belur Taluk of Hassan district (Figs 3 and 4) record the death of two men, one Bamacha, son of Bamava-gāvuṇḍa, and Nāgayya, son of Mādi-gāvuṇḍa, who fought against the men of one Sovideva Daṇḍanāyaka who was

involved in a dispute with another lord by the name of Bhageya Daṇḍanāyaka (*EC* IX 1990: Bl 501, 502). In the course of this dispute, Sovideva sent his men to attack his opponent's villages and carry away their cattle. Likewise we find a 12th-century hero-stone from the village of Chikka Hanasoge in Krishnarajanagara Taluk of Mysore District that records the death of a man recovering cows when all the *nāyaka*s of Koṅganaḍ carried them away from Hanasoge (*EC* V 1976: Kn 44). Another agent in cattle raids were men of surrounding villages. A cluster of inscribed hero-stones at the village gate of Channenahalli in Belur Taluk record the deaths of various men from the village in a series of conflicts during the first half of the year 1245 AD that included the death of one Bommaya, son of the Halaveggaḍe when the people of Andanuru came and stole cattle from the village (*EC* IX 1990: Bl 496; see also *EC* IX 1990: Bl 498).

The group of hero stones at Channenahalli make clear that cattle raids, far from being an entirely distinct mode of conflict, actually formed part of a *spectrum* of rural violence that could take a variety of forms and involve a diversity of types of agents, both individual and corporate. The fact that some hero-stones clearly celebrate the death of men *participating* in cattle raids, rather than defending against them, underscores the fact that the cattle-raid was viewed as a socially acceptable form of conflict (rather than an aberration). Two 9th-century Gaṅga period hero-stones from Alattur in Gundlupete, Mysore District, for example, record the deaths of men in cattle raids at the village of Attiya, when they had been raiding Colanāḍu on the orders of a local notable by the name of Amanaseṭṭi (*EC* III 1974: Gu 36, 37).[10] The cattle raid could be an end in itself, or could also be part and parcel of other acts of violence. The cattle raid, as Settar and Kalburgi (1982: 27–29) pointed out some time ago in their study of contemporary Kannada literature, was seen as an "incitement" to belligerence. It was equated with other acts, like sexual violence against women (usually expressed through the euphemism of the "loosening of women's

[10] At least two of the Channenahalli hero-stone group celebrate men who died while participating in the destruction of other villages. See *EC* IX 1990: Bl 497, 499.

garments," *peṇḍir udeyulcal*), and village destruction (*ūr aḷivu*), that were all deemed legitimate pretexts for the exercise of further retaliatory violence.[11] Not surprisingly, all of these acts appear regularly in hero-stones. A hero-stone from the modern village of Sogalli in Heggadadevankote taluk, Mysore District, dated to 1107 AD during the reign of a local Kadamba ruler, commemorates the death of Sovayya, the *nāḍu-seṭṭi* of Sōgepalli (Sogalli) when several villages in the region, known in medieval times as Bayalnāḍ, were besieged and attacked (*mutti eṟivāgaḷ*) by one Hariya Baṅkiyarasa. In connection with this raiding campaign, Sovayya is said to have rescued both cows and captives from the neighboring village Belturapaḷḷi (*EC* III 1974: Hg 135). Cattle theft was thus one element of wider localized rural conflict that included the raiding and siege (where fortifications were in place) of settlements, and capture of people. When we read in a terse Hoysala-period hero-stone from Halakuru in Arsikere district that Mallaya, son Mallaguru, died simply "fighting at the [village] gate" (*bagilalu kādi*) we may be justified in guessing any of these contexts (*EC* X 1997: Ak 100).

The scope of such conflict is significant. Conflicts arose not only between villages, but villages and localities and corporate organizations, or between local men and lordly courts. A 10th-century hero-stone from the village of Bharuturu in Alur Taluk, dated to Ganga times, records the death of one Nibhalka, a powerful man known as the "Elephant of Kaggalūr," along with fifteen other persons, when the Mahārāja-gāvuṇḍa of Biratur attacked his village and raped women (*EC* VIII 1986: Al 32). Notable is a hero-stone from Halathore, in Belur Taluk, dated to 1230 AD, during the reign of Hoysala Narasiṃha II, which records the death of Maraya Peraya, son of Harimāra-gāvuṇḍa. In this case the *gāvuṇḍa*s of a village came together and refused to cooperate with the order of Narasiṃha that the village of Haltore be turned into an *agrahāram* (*EC* IX 1990: Bl 505).[12] The king led an

[11] For an insightful discussion of sexual violence in this context, see Adiga 2017: 207.

[12] Nandi (2000: 125–129) cites a number of such examples which he classifies as Brāhmaṇa-Peasant and Brāhmaṇa-Sāmanta conflicts.

expedition against the village with mounted men, plundered it, "loosened the waists of women," and took cattle, until they were beaten back by the determined *gāvuṇḍa* Māraya, son of Harimāra-gāvuṇḍa, who perished in the fight. A more ambiguous Hoysala period hero-stone from Huvinahalli in Holenarsipur taluk simply speaks of the death of one Bammeya-nāyaka when Vīraballāḷa I raided his village. The hero-stone was set up by his sons in memory of their father (*EC* VIII 1986: HN 100).

Village disputes over boundaries and tanks were also common occasions of rural violence mentioned in hero-stones. Boundaries (*sīmā*, *gadi*) are crucial flashpoints in any agrarian society, but perhaps particularly so in the context of settlement growth and the consolidation of land rights. Boundary disputes could be highly isolated and individual in nature, as in an early, 11th-century Hoysala inscription from Uppavalli village in Chikmagalur, in which it is recounted that one Būva-gāvuṇḍa of Indavara, on account of a dispute about a bamboo copse adjoining a field, killed one Biṭṭiyaṇṇa, son of Biṭṭi-gāvuṇḍa, and grandson of Bāsa-gāvuṇḍa, who in turn killed Būva-gāvuṇḍa.[13] More often the conflicts seem to have involved more than one individual, and are described as disputes between villages, even as hero-stones typically commemorate the death of a single individual. A hero-stone from the Bucheśvara temple in Koravangala commemorates the death of two brothers, Bammoja and Masaṇoja, in a boundary dispute between the village of Koravangala and the adjacent settlement of Dudda, some five kilometers to the northeast (see Fig. 5) (*EC* VIII 1986: Hn 127). Another inscription dated to the reign of Ballāḷa II from the village of Kusavara in Belur Taluk commemorates the death of one Kavuraṇa, son of Honna-gāvuṇḍa, who died "along with others" in a boundary dispute over a military service estate (*asiya-māniya*) that lay between the villages of Tagare and Kusavara (*EC* IX 1990: Bl 528).[14]

[13] This is recorded on a slab inscription (not a hero-stone) accompanying several other hero-stones placed at the village gate. See *EC* XI 1997: Cm 34.

[14] I would like to thank Malini Adiga for clarifying the meaning of *asiya-māniya* in this inscription. The implication of this record is interesting, and may represent a local dispute or resistance to the status/boundaries of a service tenure bestowed

A remarkable set of hero-stones from two adjacent villages approximately twelve kilometers from Belur, record the deaths of men in ongoing hostilities between the settlements at the end of the 12th century over boundary lines (see Figs 6 and 7).[15] Surviving inscriptions from the two villages, Airavalli and Aggadalu (some three kilometers apart), unfortunately give us little context for the disputes.[16] One of the hero-stones from Airavalli, dated in 1188 AD, during the reign of Ballāḷa II, mentions that in the boundary dispute (*gaḍiya kālaga*) between Aggadalu and Airavalli, Bamagāvuṇḍa, Amma and Bidiga fought with the people of Aggadalu and Kālaya, Guḍa-gāvuṇḍa and others (presumably from Airavalli) died in the course of the fighting. Whatever the outcome of this conflict, some eight years later one among the several hero-stones at Aggadalu refers to another conflict, saying that when the people of Airavalli and Aggadalu fought at the border land of Dali-gāvuṇḍa of Ballaguppe, "Dāli-gāvuṇḍa fought and died" (*EC* IX 1990: Bl 209).[17] Judging from these and other inscriptions, both villages seem to have been large enough to contain hamlets and their border disputes were ongoing over a period of at least eight years, if not longer. At least one of the conflagrations centered around the boundary of a hamlet named Ballaguppe, associated with Aggadalu, and was perhaps caused by Airavalli's encroachment into rights protected by Aggadalu.

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by the Hoysala court. See also hero-stones at Honnavara (*EC* VIII 1986: Hn 97) and Ugane (*EC* VIII 1986: Hn 48).

15 For Aggadalu, see *EC* IX 1990: Bl 209 and for Airavalli, *EC* IX 1990: Bl 22.

16 Besides hero-stones detailing the death of men from the villages in various types of conflict, Aggadalu has three short fragmentary inscriptions *EC* IX 1990: Bl 212, 208, 210) referring to taxes on animal oils (10th c.) and land grants (13th/14th centuries). While Airavalli has no such records, the village of Agasarahalli, one kilometer east of Airvalli, contains an inscription recording the purchase of the village of Agasarahalli and its hamlets, which must have been a satellite settlement of Airavalli, by one Vāsudeva-nāyaka as a fixed tenure, along with stipulations concerning irrigation coming from surrounding tanks held by Airavalli (*EC* IX 1990: Bl 222).

17 Another inscribed hero-stone, now too effaced to make sense of, but dated paleographically to the twelfth century, refers to the death of an unnamed individual at Ballaguppe, and thus may refer to this same conflict (*EC* IX 1990: Bl 211).

In rare cases hero-stones give us a window into the resolution of these boundary conflicts. An unusual hero-stone from Indavara in Chikmagalur district, dated in 1190 AD during the reign of Ballāḷa II, speaks of a boundary dispute between the villages of Indavara and Uppavalli (mentioned above) in which one Chaṇḍa-gāvuṇḍa fought and died, but adds that men of the decision making body of the *nāḍu,* including Dekaṇa-heggaḍe of Kennegil, proclaimed that "neither party should perish" and examined the boundaries, deciding that while lands around an important (unnamed) tank mostly belonged to Indavara, that Uppavalli had some (unspecified) claim to these lands and should thus be compensated by the men of Indavara for Uppavalli men killed in the conflict. The inscription, set up by the men of Indavara, served as both a hero-stone and a *śāsana,* or legal order. This is a rare inclusion of the adjudicatory process that must have sometimes accompanied local violence, but it is notable that the case was brought before the men of the locality only *after* blood had been spilled on both sides, with the matter unresolved, and presumably the threat of more violence in the offing. So prominent were boundary disputes to the sensibility of the *gāvuṇḍa* class that we find a hero-stone from Hunsur Taluk in Mysore commemorating the death of Rājendraśola-seṭṭi, son of Varalakṣma-gāvuṇḍa, described as a "Champion of Boundary Disputes" (*gaḍiyaṅkamalla*) (*EC* IV 1975: Hu 4).

The centrality of the water tank in the boundary dispute between Indavara and Uppavalli underscores the significance of irrigation tanks as defining landmark features of the rural landscape. Tanks themselves, however, were also sources of dispute. Hero-stones record the deaths of men in disputes between both individuals and villages over the rights to take water from tanks.[18] An 11th-century hero-stone from Holahalli, for example, tersely records the death of one Karikanna,

[18] The history of social violence and water tanks in medieval Karnataka is yet to be written. Like village gates and temples, tanks were also a favorite repository of hero stones (Mahesh 2017: 166), the preponderance of which may indicate many more tank dispute deaths than are noted explicitly in the inscriptions. We know that tanks were also the sites of intensive labor struggle and social violence as their vulnerability to drought led to severe social anxiety. This often precipitated various forms

who was fighting for water at the pond (*EC* VIII 1986; Al 10). Another hero-stone from not too far away in the village of Madabalu refers to the death of a local chief while fighting with the people of Kerehalli for the sake of a tank at Maḍabala (Madabalu) in Nele-nāḍu (*EC* VIII 1986: Al 11).

Villages and localities of course had multiple and complex relations with surrounding settlements that could evolve into either antagonism or solidarity.[19] Villages were often part of larger disputes between localities, chiefdoms and regions that could involve numerous settlements. Substantial numbers of hero-stones record the deaths of men in these wider disputes. Another hero-stone inscription from Kusavara, mentioned above, dated to the reign of Hoysala Vīranarasiṃha in 1234 AD records the death of one Harada-nāyaka, son of Mukuri-gāvuṇḍa, in a battle in the environs of Tagarenāḍu, explaining that the Gorava community of Anapale in Maisanāḍu could not face men from Balla-nadu and took refuge with the men of a locality (cluster of villages) known as Tagaranāḍu 70 (*EC* IX 1990: Bl 527). Likewise an inscription dated some forty years later from the village of Tagare notes the death one Nāraṇa deva, son of Cavuḍa--gāvuṇḍa, belonging to the militia of Tagare, in a battle where the people of Bekkenāḍu offered assistance and defense to the people of Nemanāḍu in their "tussle" (*mallegālega*) with people of Malige-nāḍu (*EC* IX 1990: Bl 532). We do not learn the origins of these disputes, but they very clearly indicate that conflict could involve entire localities (*nāḍu*s) drawing on men from numerous villages organized into *ad hoc* territorial militias.

In addition to village and locality disputes, usually categorized by the scholarship as "skirmishes," numerous hero-stones depict presumably larger conflicts that involved what might be called, ambiguously, 'political actors'—powerful *gāvuṇḍa*s, *nāyaka*s, *seṭṭi*s and others,

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of community violence, including the human sacrifice of young women to tanks to ensure their utility. See the fascinating discussion of Shah (2012: 513–519).

19 To take one example, see the village of Sogalli in Bayalnāḍ, which hero-stones depict being in solidarity with nearby villages in the 12th century and in conflict with other villages in the 14th. See *EC* III 1974: Hg 135, 137, 140.

who were involved in conflicts that took place in a world 'beneath' the seemingly more expansive mosaic of dynastic conflict recorded in the royal eulogies of major dynasties of the region. Many such conflicts may be considered indistinct from the inter-village and inter--regional disputes discussed above that involved village raiding and cattle lifting. The dividing lines between cattle-raid, skirmish and battle are difficult to establish, and may partly be one of scale—a matter we will come to shortly. Hero-stones like those at Bharuturu or Chikkole cited above, commemorate the deaths of men in conflicts between *daṇḍanāyaka*s and *mahārāja*s, who otherwise acted as part of Ganga and Hoysala armies. A group of some seven hero stones dated to the 10th century from the village of Varuna in Mysore District (Mysore Taluk), the heart of Gaṅgavāḍi, commemorate the deaths of several retainers of one Goggi, a man described as a *sāmanta* (vassal) and "one who had attained the five great sounds" (*pañcamahāśabda*), in a series of petty conflicts, one of which seems to have been a dispute between two rival brothers, Uttavagaḷḷa and Eḍevari fighting over inheritance (*dāyaga saṃnanda*) and another between two unidentified rivals, Polakesi and Butiga, involving mounted men (*EC* V 1976: My 173–179).[20] A late Hoysala period hero-stone from Kattesomanahalli in Belur Taluk dated to 1299 AD records the death of a man (name unclear, perhaps Mariyaṇṇa, "champion over those who have mustaches") who fought on the side of the *mahāpradhāna* Aṅkiya--daṇḍanāyaka in a battle at Kadaba against Siṅgeya-daṇḍanāyaka (*EC* IX 1990: Bl 427). The activities of Goggi and his retainers in the battles between Uttavagaḷḷa and Eḍevari in the 10th century, or the conflict between Aṅkiya-daṇḍanāyaka and Siṅgeya-daṇḍanāyaka at the end of the 13th century, like that between Soviyya-daṇḍanāyaka and Bhāgeya-daṇḍanāyaka fifty years earlier—all of which would

[20] The precise identity of the *sāmanta* Goggi and several of his relatives that appear in Varuna inscriptions remains a matter of debate, but they seem to have been members of a local subordinate family identifying themselves as Chalukyas active for a short time in the 10th century. See the learned remarks of the editors in their Introduction (*EC* V 1976: lxxxvi–lxxxviii), and more recently, Adiga (2006: 152–154).

have involved armed contingents of small to moderate size, and took place at the heart of the Ganga/Hoysala kingdoms, in each case without any involvement of royal forces or reference to the royal court.

In addition to these more elaborate hero-stone inscriptions which tell us of the protagonists of the conflicts in which men died, are large numbers of hero-stones from the Ganga and Hoysala periods that record the deaths of men in battles at various locations with few other details, mentioning neither local disputes nor imperial campaigns. An 11th-century hero-stone from Chikkanayakanahalli in Sakleshpur Taluk dated to the rule of the Ganga king Nīti-maharāja, for example, records the death of Chikka Kāṭaya, "who conquered the enemy force and died in battle" (*EC* VIII 1986: Sk 32). A Hoysala-period record from Hanchuru in Alur Taluk announces simply that Kāḷeyya son of Bōrayya Baleyya, who was son of Saṇa-gāvuṇḍa, died in a battle fought at Halevāgilu (*EC* VIII 1986: Al 19). Or finally, an 11th-century hero-stone outside a forest settlement near Ningahalli, in Heggadadevankote taluk (medieval Bayalnāḍ) announces that one Vīra of the Adhaṭura clan, died while fighting with his sword in the capture of a fortified settlement (*sthāna*) (*EC* III 1975: Hg 121). That these types of more terse inscriptions record the deaths of men in local conflicts independent of the royal courts is partly suggested by the comparatively more elaborate hero-stone inscriptions recording the death of men in royal campaigns. If a local *gāvuṇḍa*, *seṭṭi* or *nāyaka* died in imperial military campaign, it is usually announced with great pride and honour. These comparatively modest claims should also perhaps be placed alongside large numbers of uninscribed hero-stones as recording violent encounters that somehow did not merit the more grandiloquent claims found in inscriptions recording the death of men in imperial campaigns.

The scale of any of these conflicts is difficult to know. The vocabulary of inscribed hero-stones tends to use a range of words interchangeably for conflicts of obviously different proportions. Occasionally hero-stone epigraphs give us more specific details. These include rather modest encounters, as in when a hero-stone in one of the border

disputes between Airavalli and Aggadalu mentioned above, notes that 'Bāma-gāvuṇḍa, Amma and Biḍiga fought against the people of Aggadalu in a fight in which "Kālaya, Guḍagāvuṇḍa and others" perished (*EC* IX 1990: Bl 220). Likewise in the Ganga-period hero-stone noted above from Bharuturu it is said that Nibhaḷkha, the "elephant of Kaggalur," died in the conflict along with fifteen other persons (*EC* VIII 1986: Al 32). Yet some conflicts could be considerably larger. A hero-stone from the village of Magge in Mysore District, Heggadadevankote Taluk, speaks of the death of a *nāḍu-seṭṭi* when one Koṅguṇigāvuṇḍa of Maṇali attacked with 300 men (*EC* III 1975: Hg 142). In the hero-stone from Sogalli discussed above, Sovayya is said to have defended women and cattle against the forces of Hariya Banki-arasa, comprising 100 horsemen and 1600 foot-soldiers (*EC* III 1975: Hg 135). A strong distinction is made here between mounted warriors and foot-soldiers, with high value placed, as we noted earlier, on cavalry. That a village *gāvuṇḍa* could raise a contingent of 300 men on foot to attack villages in a neighboring *nāḍu* and a local *nāyaka* receive a land grant from the royal court to maintain ten horsemen, as we saw above in the Kamapalapura inscription, seems consistent with the fragments of numbers we encounter in other hero-stones. If the figures cited above are to be believed, it may be concluded that small scale conflicts could vary quite considerably from a few score of men to several thousand. Conflicts between *daṇḍanāyaka*s like Sovvideva and Bhaṅgeya would presumably have been on the larger end of this continuum, with numbers similar to those of Hariya Baṅki-arasa's attack on Bayalnāḍ, or even more.

The final category of hero-stones, used deftly by some dynastic historians, are those that commemorate the deaths of men who fought in the military campaigns of Ganga and Hoysala kings and their political subordinates.[21] This is because they often give more on the ground

[21] Much of the rich political detail in J. M. Duncan Derrett's account (1957) of the Hoysala dynasty is derived from a judicious reading of the hero-stone archive (though almost entirely uncited) along with (and sometimes against) the eulogistic narratives of royal inscriptions.

details about particular conflicts than royal accounts, which deploy a more ornate style deriving from the conventions of court poetry. The men who appear in these hero-stones are from the same social strata that appear in "cattle-raid" and "skrimish" hero-stones. They were for the most part men who took the title *nāyaka* (less frequently *daṇḍanāyaka*) who may have come from *gāvuṇḍa* or *seṭṭi* ancestries, and joined royal forces on local, regional and distant campaigns as part of contingents under *daṇḍanāyaka*s or others participating in royal campaigns. Two simple examples of men that were part of local militias serving royal courts may be taken from the village Nerlige in Arsikere Taluk, Hassan district. The first, dated 972 AD, records the death of Aṇṇāvasayya in a battle against the Nolambas, on behalf of the Ganga king Mārasiga, who granted the village as *kalnāḍ* (service tenure) to his son Būtuga (*EC* X 1997: Ak 284). A little more than a hundred years later, the regional dynastic situation had changed, and we find another hero-stone, this time commemorating the death of a *perggaḍe* (royal appointee) in Nerlige, one Ālamayya, now pledged to the Hoysala king, in a battle at Nolambanakere, where he distinguished himself by killing the Nolamba's head servant (*EC* X 1997: Ak 281). Many of these types of hero-stones, particularly those of upper ranking *nāyaka*s and members at court detail specific military acts of courage and service to their lords. An example of this kind of hero-stone can be found in Kembālu, which records the death of Honnaya, son of Yirigi-seṭṭi of Kembālu in an elephant battle fought between Hoysaḷa Narsiṃha and Rāmanātha, based in Kannanur, for the throne (*EC* X 1997: Cp 73). A hero-stone from Kattesomanahalli in Belur Taluk records that when the general of the Yādava king, one Sāḷuva Tikkama, was camped at Belavadi and when his commanders Vijayadeva and Haripāla along with the army of Irungola marched on Dorasamudra, thinking that they could take it quickly, laying siege to the town with a huge army, Aṅkeya-nāyaka, son of Keteya-daṇḍanāyaka, fought with valour, driving the enemy to Dummi (*EC* IX 1990: Bl 431). Another hero-stone found in a field near the fort of Dorasamudra, now housed in the Archaeological Museum at Halebid, describes how in April of 1220 AD in a battle against the Kalachuri

Bijjala, the Hoysala king, having lost the previous encounter, ordered his ablest soldiers to advance into battle, including one Dasadeva, who entered the fray, captured Bijjala's horses, decapitated their riders and returned with the horses and their heads to present to the king, before returning to field where he was killed (*EC* IX 1990: Bl 332). These royal campaigns on occasion were internal and we have a number of hero-stones commemorating the deaths of men who fought in the war for succession between Narasiṃha and Rāmanātha in the late 1270s and early 1280s AD.

Though such hero stones are not the focus of this paper, several points should be noted about them. First, in various ways they embodied the 'mentality' of service. Not only are they the most likely of hero-stones to contain land grants to the families of the deceased, but some, particularly those of higher ranking *nāyaka*s, contain small genealogies and/or eulogies of the deceased with florid descriptions of their careers, an array of colorful titles, noting their superiority over their peers—all of which would have been in keeping with aristocratic culture centered on the royal court. Their descriptions often (but not always) contain more general information on the battles fought (place and opponent) and sometimes include other details like rituals of service, orders and honors given by the king, and particular actions on the battlefield, most notably the killing or capture of horses, or the killing of particular individuals of the enemy force. Perhaps expectedly, the individual action of the protagonist is most centrally dramatized in these inscriptions, but they also give cause to think about how battles and campaigns were conducted and took shape. The emphasis seems to be on the individual agency of combatants. Typical is a hero-stone from Marusu (Fig. 8) which records the death of one Bammeya, son of Mareya, who perished in a battle when Koṇḍanāyaka marched against Rāmanātha (*EC* VIII 1986: Al 3). We know from other sources that the Hoysala prince Rāmanātha, based in Kannanur, was involved in a struggle for the throne with his half-brother Narasiṃha III, ruling from Halebidu. Yet the hero-stone from Marusu gives us no context, either military or political, for understanding the circumstances of Bammeya's death—only that he died in the service of Koṇḍanāyaka,

a low ranking country lord. It would seem that discrete struggles involving individuals and groups of men over the course of some wider conflict was how warfare was imagined, rather than as one unified army acting in a coordinated movement against another. Combat was conceived as the exhibition and triumph of individual prowess, rather than as the victory of a collective, even when lateral solidarities were immanent and obvious. Now this may, of course, be an effect of the particular emphasis and perspective of our sources—hero-stones commemorate individuals, and one would expect a heroic narrative to foreground the struggle of the individual warrior over the collective. Imperial *praśasti*s tend to be the same, and typically imagine royal campaigns and wars as one king's victory against another. Keeping in mind how complex the agencies would have been in any medium to large scale conflict, the incessant and ubiquitous representation of these conflicts in an individualized mode becomes significant, to say the least. What is interesting, once again, is the dispersed and segmented nature of this 'heroic discourse.' The hero-stone at Marusu, for example, makes no reference to service of the reigning Hoysala monarch, but instead to Koṇḍanāyaka, who was in turn presumably a partisan of Narasiṃha. Importantly, these hero-stones, like others, seem to have been erected by family members, often in the locality from which the deceased hailed, with little or no involvement of the royal court or its satellites.[22] This localized tenor shows both the reach and adoption of the values outlined above into the mentality and practices of dominant groups in the rural environment, but also the absence of a state-driven management of military and casualty protocols for many of those that fought in its armies.

[22] The prevelance of hero-stones for men in the retinues of high ranking royal--military officers around the environs of Dorasamudra, most of which are now housed in the Archaelogical Survey of India site museum at Halebid, suggests their continued presence in that location.

Discussion and conclusions

The presentation of the foregoing materials, I believe, suggests several points worth consideration and further exploration. Before coming to these however, it will be worth reviewing some of the basic findings of this study. On the whole, the overwhelming majority of men commemorated in hero-stones from the 9th to 13th centuries were *gāvuṇḍa*s, *nāyaka*s and *seṭṭi*s. Of all social categories mentioned in hero-stones as belligerents (or relatives of belligerents), men with the title *gāvuṇḍa* or one of its epigraphic variants, form the largest group by far, appearing in approximately 30–35% of all inscriptions examined.[23] Men with the title *nāyaka* follow next in frequency, comprising some 10–15% of aggregate totals. The title *nāyaka* is complex, however, as it was sometimes taken by men whose relatives bear the title *gāvuṇḍa,* suggesting that it was added to or replaced that designation. In other cases it seems to have no connection at all to *gāvuṇḍa*. It thus seems to have been a higher title held not only by *gāvuṇḍa*s but other groups. Smaller still in number are hero-stones mentioning involvement of men with the title *seṭṭi*, constituting 5–10% of materials examined. And finally we have a miscellany of other types of individuals, including watchmen, goldsmiths, artisans and men without title and even, rarely, forest dwelling hunters. Importantly, a substantial portion of these latter categories of men are explicitly connected to the service of *gāvuṇḍa*s, *seṭṭi*s and *nāyaka*s or those above them. On the other hand, hero-stones are never found for members of royal family and only occasionally for *daṇḍanāyaka*s, high-ranking military retainers, although these men are sometimes mentioned in imperial conflicts described in the hero-stone archive. The demographics of the men commemorated in

[23] On the origin of the term *gāvuṇḍa*, see Veluthat (1989: 120). Epigraphic variants of the term include *gāvuḍa, gauḍa, gāmuṇḍa*. In the interest of consistency, they have been standardized to *gāvuṇḍa* throughout. The percentage remains low because a substantial minority of inscriptions are either too damaged, illegible, or ambiguous to warrant proper interpretation of the names and titles of combatants. Excluding these inscriptions would elevate the percentage.

hero-stones, thus, suggest neither a subaltern nor fully aristocratic social location, but a 'middling' social status.

The *gāvuṇḍa* has long been known as an important social identity in early medieval southern Karnataka. Men with the title *gāvuṇḍa* appear in the epigraphic archive across the region from the 7th century as locality leaders and peasant proprietors favored and ennobled by royal courts. Their increasing profile in the epigraphic archive, along with the recipients of religious gifts, signaled substantial agrarian change, as the system of communally owned land prevalent in the countryside gradually disintegrated under the pressure of private landholding. Malini Adiga has shown that early references in the 7th and 8th centuries to *gāvuṇḍa*s describe them as "clean *śūdra*s" (*satśūdras*) and tenants (*okkal*) involved in a series of agricultural activities, but by the 10th century, most epigraphic references clearly distinguished them from tenants, and they often appear as a land-owning class (Adiga 1997 and Veluthat 1989).[24] This transition brought with it complex social functions that are noted in inscriptions, including boundary demarcation, rent and tax collection, irrigation works, witnessing, and village and locality leadership. From the outset, however, it seems they were involved in fighting, and they have a consistent connection to local families claiming royal and lordly status, often taking on the titles the lords with whom they associated.[25] The term *seṭṭi*, or trader, has a similar trajectory in the epigraphy, with *seṭṭi*s being associated with tank construction, temple patronage and courtly service as well as military activity. The rise of both *gāvuṇḍa*s and *seṭṭi*s to social dominance across the villages and towns of southern Karnataka was in part predicated on their skill and use of arms to protect their social and economic interests. Their prevalence in the hero-stone records suggest that they were not only familiar with the arms but inclined to

[24] This transition was not spatially or chronologically uniform, and we find *gāvuṇḍa*s as tenants in various places as late as the 13th century. See, for example, Uppavalli in Chikmagalur, *EC* XI 1998: Cm 36.

[25] Adiga (1997: 139) points out that among early 8th-century references to *gāvuṇḍas* are records of their deaths in battle in the service of Ganga kings.

use them. Hero-stones describe such violence in the aristocratic idiom of "heroism" (*vīra*).

Though historians have argued that *gāvuṇḍa*s formed a crucial element of polity by the 10th century, it is important to note that many of these men moved 'in' and 'out' of the so called political sphere. While they regularly served in the retinues of local lords who pledged their loyalty and allegiance to the royal courts of families like the Changalvas, Gangas, Chalukyas, Pandyas and Hoysalas, this service was temporary and contingent. Evidence suggests that these kingdoms themselves did not maintain standing armies, but instead maintained small coteries or corps of loyal men, what M. G. S. Narayanan (1977) once called "companions of honour," and beyond this relied upon troops provided by fiefholders and local landed magnates who often maintained their own armed retinues, and who were able to mobilize local men. So while *gāvuṇḍas* surely fought in royal armies, they were not permanently 'enlisted' in them. This is underscored by the fact that they appear routinely in conflicts recorded in hero-stones that transpired in villages that make no reference to the courts of regional lords. Men with the title *gāvuṇḍa*, *nāyaka* and even *seṭṭi* populated an entire spectrum of localized power that operated independently of the royal court. So while they were a crucial element of polity, their power base was firmly grounded in the land economy of the rural environment and trade networks that rested upon it. They on the one hand could form integral elements of the 'state-machinery' of regional polities and on the other act in an entirely localized capacity, as rural power-brokers, moving well below the political firmament.

Reviewing the chronological distribution of hero-stones and the actors depicted in them, it is clear that they were connected to the rise of these rural classes of *gāvuṇḍa*s and *seṭṭi*s. It follows that one important function of making hero-stones was to construct the self-image of this class. The particular forms of commemoration that they embody—the visualization of conflict, the recounting of heroic acts and the marking of local heroism—were profoundly connected to the rural aspirations of this class. Less than being the immemorial expression of an 'heroic' pastoral or warrior ethos, nor the intrinsic possession of

a single caste/class, they should be understood instead as the embodiment of a class formation, dominated by landed men and traders, in early medieval Karnataka.

In terms of conflict and violence, a review of scenarios described in the hero-stones suggests, firstly, and perhaps somewhat trivially, that there were no neat and clear dividing lines between the so-called genres of conflict—"battle," "skirmish," and "cattle-raid." It is not being suggested that these categories are therefore meaningless. Quite the contrary, they remain quite useful as heuristic devices and initial descriptors. But the further into the material one delves, the more complex the picture becomes, as we encounter numerous examples of conflicts that seem to blur these boundaries and raise serious questions. But this observation leads on to another, more significant point. The fact that cattle-raids and village depredations could involve participation of what might be called, for lack of a better term, elements of the 'state' apparatus—royal troops dispatched from the imperial court and its satellites—suggest that a different framework is necessary to understand such phenomena. They cannot be conceived of as what might be described as purely 'civil' disputes in the modern sense—the protection of property and individual or collective well-being by subjects of the realm in a kind of organically formed self-governing regulatory function of society formed 'below' the state, against anti-social and lawless social elements.

One way to approach the problem is to understand the conflicts mentioned in hero-stones as falling across a spectrum, with the battles of Ganga or Hoysala kings situated at one end of a continuum and entirely local disputes standing at the other. The middle was occupied by large numbers of inscriptions involving 'political actors' of one variety or another operating in highly localized conflicts. However, the prevalence of such actors in the 'in between' zone of the continuum between the state and the local, as it were, gives us cause to question the logic of the spectrum itself. Indeed, the men commemorated in dynastic armies came from the same class background and were often the same actors as the men commemorated in local disputes between villages and localities. The conceptualization of the state operating at one

'level' and local society existing at another simply does not account for the types of conflict that appear in the hero-stone archive. From a traditional state-centered historiographical perspective, the state's involvement in conflict at the 'village level' in the core areas of the empire, as we find in numerous inscriptions from Hassan district, would suggest weakness or decentralization, some kind of failure of sovereignty, and would be expected at moments of imperial collapse. Yet the examples from Huvinahalli, Halathore and other locales mentioned above, do not fit such a pattern. Understanding these conflicts requires a different perspective. If we appreciate that the 'state apparatus' itself was from the outset deeply imbricated in 'civil society'—where in the words of Marx thinking about feudal Europe "the elements of civil life were directly manifested as the offices of political life in the form of seignurial estates and trading guilds"—what R. N. Nandi has aptly called "the domains of private governmen"'—then such phenomena become more explicable.[26] They were parts of the vast spectrum of conflict that one might experience in a society and political realm dominated by a panoply of private estates.

That landed men came together in association for the protection of mutual interests, and were inclined toward the exercise of violence, is perhaps not surprising—and has been a leitmotif in agrarian society in India, as elsewhere, throughout history. But unlike modern times, in early medieval south India, the so-called state apparatus of force, the royal army, was almost exclusively constituted by these men. So when the Hoysala king had to dispatch his own soldiers to implement an imperial land grant resisted by land owing *gāvuṇḍa*s just sixteen kilometers from his capital, this is not the state quelling 'civil' unrest, but the Hoysala king exercising superior force against a segmented rural ruling class from which he would draw his own military contingents. I am not, by this proposition, as Burton Stein was once accused of, attempting to *limit* the power of the state. Quite the contrary, I suggest that violence was endemic to this society and exercised by a vast array of agents within and beyond what one might consider the 'confines'

[26] See Marx and Engels 1975: 165. See Nandi 2000: 29–32.

of the state—in fact 'the state' was in a sense embodied in such rural conflicts. On the ground, this meant that feudal society was saturated with violence. Violence was endemic to this society for several reasons. It was a necessity, as rent-taking was ensured through the threat of violence and trading networks protected through force. But judging from the hero-stones, competition for agrarian resources—cultivable land, water, livestock—among middling and upper land owning groups, was fierce. Violence was also an aspiration, as hero-stones suggest that *gāvuṇḍa*s, *nāyaka*s, and *seṭṭi*s both individually and corporately, variously sought to embody the concept of *vīra,* with its various courtly and ethical accoutrements. It was the foundation of rural nobility, and was the bedrock of social hierarchy as much as a practice through which individuals and groups sought their own aggrandizement. While the evidence marshalled through the hero-stone archive examined here supports Dirk Kolff's (Kolff 1990) now famous contention that the Indian peasant was always armed, and the rural environment always potentially belligerent, it does not lend itself to his further contention of the existence of a 'military labor market' through which peasants sought upward mobility through part time soldiering. Local and regional lords did indeed enlist local men from dominant and perhaps aspiring peasant groups to fight for them, but these enlistments, as far as we can see from hero-stones, are represented as either local solidarities or service relationships between peasant and lord, not attempts at fortune by a peasant soldiers at large. Many hero-stones record the struggle and competition for local agricultural resources, and the conflicts represented in them do not appear to be a means of gaining status in a 'market environment.' Collective violence in the countryside was the instrument through which rural dominance was asserted against both equals and subordinates as the situation demanded.

As far as we may judge from hero-stones, the distinction between 'warfare' and 'rural violence' in this society was a matter of degree rather than kind. Royal armies, as noted above, were large assemblages of lords and their subordinates that came together for collective action on the basis of service relationships and lordly obligations. The problem with the focus on the larger battles of royal campaigns,

which has been the obsession of nearly two centuries of scholarship, is that it distracts historical attention from a vast world of conflict not recorded in the royal *praśasti*s but very present in the hero-stone archive. These conflicts, where cattle were stolen, villages razed, towns pillaged and forts taken, and where men, women and children were killed, were not conducted by royal armies, but instead collectives of local men acting to a large extent in an independent capacity. As we have seen, these struggles could involve the fighting men of entire villages and wider localities, and reveal a host of low level political actors and armed landed men. Rural society in early medeival Karnataka was indeed a world of remarkable belligerence and autonomy, a condition that survived well into the 19th century.[27]

The presentation and analysis above suggests that hero-stones provide a unique window into everyday violence in medieval Karnataka which blurs the neat boundaries between 'state' and 'civil' violence implicit in many treatments of medieval society. Further research is needed to shed light on specific historical dynamics which elicited such levels of rural conflict. For such a task a greater attention to the general (non-hero-stone) epigraphical archive would be necessary. The degree to which the observations made in this essay may be applied to other regions with different source configurations is an open question, and one that merits extended consideration. But it is the contention of this paper, however, that the evidence from lower Karnataka, suggests a reconceptualization of the nature of violence itself in relation to state and society in medieval South India.

[27] Lewis (2009) has argued that an environment of continued internecine hostility at the village level is suggested by the widespread evidence of village level fortifications from the period of 1600–1900. Writing about central and southern Karnataka at the end of the 19th century, Lewis Rice observed that many villages had some form of fortification, deriving from former "troublous times, when every *gauḍa* aimed at being a *palegar* and every *palegar* at becoming independent" (Rice 1897: I, 263).

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Fig. 1. Kulambadahalli, Hoskote Taluk, Bangalore Rural. Nolamba c. 900 AD. A hero stone commemorating the death of one Nelmalla in a cattle raid, (published in EC X 1905: Hk 110). Photo courtesy of Chetan Lahulkar

Fig. 2. Amruthapura, Tarikere Taluk, Tumkur District. Hoysala. 1287 AD. Hero-stone in precinct of Amritesvara temple recording the death of Nāgaṇṇa, son of Sūri-Gauḍa (*gāvuṇḍa*), when Bēḍas raided the settlement and took cows. Photo courtesy of Sarada Natarajan

Fig. 3. Chikkole Dore, Belur Taluk, Hassan District. Hoysala 1244 AD. Two hero stones near the Añjaneya temple recording the deaths of men in a conflict between Sovideva-daṇḍanāyaka and Bhageya-daṇḍanāyaka. Author's photo

Fig. 4. Chikkole Dore, Belur Taluk, Hassan District. Hoysala 1244 AD.
Hero-stone detail. Author's photo

Fig. 5. Koravangala, Hassan Taluk and District. Hoysala. 12th c.
Hero-stone in the precincts of the Buchesvara temple commemorating
the death of two men, Bamomoja and Masanoja, sons of Biṭṭiyoja,
in a boundary dispute between Koravaṅgala and Dudda. Author's photo

Fig. 6. Airavalli, Belur Taluk, Hassan District. Hoysala. 1188 AD. Hero-stone near Īśvara temple commemorating death of men of Airvalli in conflict with men of Aggadalu. Author's photo

Fig. 7. Aggadalu, Belur Taluk, Hassan District. Hoysala. 1194 AD. Hero-stone near Someśvara temple commemorating death of Dāḷi-gavuṇḍa in conflict with men from Airavalli. Author's photo

Fig. 8. Marusu, Alur Taluk, Hassan District. Hoysala. 1282 AD.
Hero-stone commemorating the death of Bammeya, son of Mareya,
in a battle fought when Koṇḍa-nāyaka marched
against Rāmanāthadeva. Author's photo