

Cattle Raiding and Pastoral Economy of the Chengam Region as Reflected in Hero-Stone Inscriptions (6th–9th Century CE)

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Abstract: Hero-stone inscriptions from the Chengam–Thandrapet tract of present-day Tiruvannamalai district, palaeographically datable to the 6th–9th centuries CE, constitute a primary epigraphic corpus for examining cattle-related conflict in early medieval northern Tamil Nadu. Based on documented stones recorded in the publications of the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology, including the 1974 *Seminar on Hero-Stones* proceedings, the article analyses inscriptions written predominantly in early Vattezhuthu script that explicitly refer to deaths while protecting cattle or in the recovery of cattle (*āṇirai*). The recurrence of such formulae across multiple stones establishes cattle as a measurable category of property and a contested economic asset. The study demonstrates that these memorials are local commemorative records devoid of royal titulature, administrative designations or temple affiliations, thereby situating the commemorated individuals within lineage-based rural communities rather than state structures. Patronymic identifiers link cattle defence to household-level economic responsibility, while martial iconography depicting sword- or spear-bearing figures corresponds with inscriptional references to armed confrontation. Spatial distribution along village peripheries and movement routes near the Javadi hill interface aligns with zones of pastoral mobility, reinforcing the inscriptional evidence. Across the chronological span of three centuries, the persistence of cattle-specific memorialisation indicates structural continuity in pastoral practice despite concurrent agrarian consolidation in northern Tamil Nadu. The hero-stones provide verifiable evidence that livestock functioned as transferable wealth integral to subsistence, draught agriculture and social status.

Keywords: Hero-stones, Cattle raiding, Pastoral economy, Chengam region, Early medieval South India, Epigraphy, Rural society

INTRODUCTION

The Chengam region, located in present-day Tiruvannamalai district of northern Tamil Nadu, has yielded a significant number of hero-stones (*nadukal*) that are datable on palaeographic grounds to the period between the 6th and 9th centuries CE. These memorial stones, inscribed in early Tamil and Vattezhuthu scripts, constitute a primary body of evidence for reconstructing patterns of violence, livelihood and resource control in this micro-region. Unlike royal inscriptions that record grants and conquests, hero-stones are local commemorative records erected in memory of individuals who died in specific circumstances, frequently mentioning the cause of death in concise formulaic language.¹ In the Chengam–Thandrapet belt, several recorded hero-stones explicitly refer to deaths connected with cattle protection or cattle recovery. Phrases equivalent to “died while recovering cattle” or “fell in defence of cattle” occur in multiple inscriptions documented by the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology. These inscriptions typically provide the name of the deceased, occasionally his father’s name and the locality

with which he was associated. The brevity of the text is balanced by the clarity of purpose: the act commemorated is almost always linked to a concrete event, most often a violent encounter involving livestock. Such repeated references establish cattle as a measurable and central economic asset in the region during this period.

The geographical setting of Chengam further supports the inscriptional evidence. Situated near the Javadi hill ranges and intersected by traditional movement routes between upland and plain zones, the area was suitable for mixed pastoral and agrarian activity. The concentration of hero-stones along village boundaries, near pathways and at peripheral locations corresponds with zones where herding activity and inter-settlement contact were likely to occur. This spatial pattern, observed in archaeological surveys, reinforces the textual evidence that livestock management formed a significant component of local subsistence strategies.² The iconography of the Chengam hero-stones complements the inscriptional text. Many stones depict a standing warrior holding a sword, spear, or bow, occasionally accompanied by a shield. In certain cases, the posture of the figure suggests active combat. Although not all stones include carved cattle figures, the inscriptional reference to cattle raids provides explicit economic context. The combination of text and imagery allows for a cross-verification of the commemorated event and its socio-economic background.

Palaeographic analysis of letter forms particularly the characteristics of Vattezhuthu script places several of these inscriptions within the early medieval centuries. The absence of elaborate royal titlature and the dominance of local personal names indicate that these stones were commissioned at the community level rather than by state authority. This localised nature of commemoration makes them particularly valuable for reconstructing everyday economic realities rather than elite political narratives.³ The hero-stone inscriptions of Chengam between the 6th and 9th centuries CE provide concrete data on cattle-related conflict, personal identity and patterns of memorialisation. They offer direct epigraphic evidence that livestock formed a core element of wealth and that its protection could warrant public commemoration. The material and textual record thus anchors the pastoral economy of the region within a clearly defined historical and geographical framework.

Research Objectives

The study aims to document hero-stone inscriptions from the Chengam region dated between the 6th and 9th centuries CE that refer to cattle-raiding incidents, analyse the patterns and economic meaning of such conflicts, examine the link between pastoral activity and local livelihoods, assess the social identity of commemorated individuals and interpret cattle-raiding practices within the wider socio-economic structure of early medieval Chengam.

METHODOLOGY

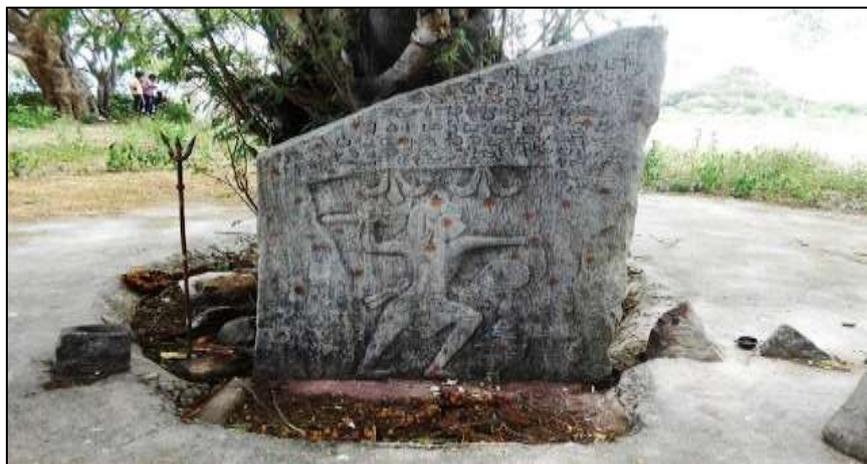
The study is based on a close epigraphic analysis of hero-stone inscriptions from the Chengam region dated between the 6th and 9th centuries CE. It involves examining inscriptional texts, palaeographic features and associated iconography, supported by archaeological survey reports and published epigraphic collections. The data is interpreted within its geographical context to reconstruct patterns of pastoral conflict and economic activity.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The identification and documentation of hero-stone inscriptions from the Chengam region dated between the 6th and 9th centuries CE must begin with the material record

itself rather than with later literary generalisations. Chengam, situated in the present Tiruvannamalai district of Tamil Nadu, has yielded a cluster of memorial stones (nadukal) recorded in publications of the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology, especially in the proceedings of the *Seminar on Hero-Stones* (1974) and in subsequent district-level surveys. These stones, inscribed predominantly in early varieties of Vattezhuthu script, constitute the primary epigraphic corpus for examining cattle-related conflict in the region.⁴ The inscriptions are characteristically brief. They usually record the name of the deceased, sometimes his father's name, occasionally the locality and most importantly, the circumstance of death. In the Chengam–Thandrapet belt, several inscriptions explicitly state that the individual “died while recovering cattle” or “fell in defence of cattle.” The Tamil phraseology found in comparable early medieval hero-stones elsewhere in northern Tamil Nadu includes expressions equivalent to *āṇirai kākki settaṅ* (died protecting cattle) or *āṇirai meṭṭi pōr settaṅ* (died in battle for cattle recovery). Where these formulae occur in Chengam-area stones, they provide direct textual confirmation that the event commemorated was linked to cattle raiding.⁵

The documentation of these stones rests on two secure foundations: palaeography and archaeological survey. The script employed on many Chengam hero-stones is Vattezhuthu, characterised by rounded letter forms and the absence of later Grantha-influenced features. Palaeographic comparison with securely dated inscriptions from the wider northern Tamil region places several of these stones within the broad chronological bracket of the 6th to 9th centuries CE. Although hero-stones rarely carry regnal years, their script style and orthographic features allow relative dating within early medieval parameters. This dating is consistent with the broader distribution of cattle-raid memorials in neighbouring districts such as Dharmapuri and Krishnagiri, which have been systematically surveyed and documented.



Hero-stone with Vattezhuthu inscription from the Chengam region, palaeographically datable to the early medieval period (6th–9th century CE).

The spatial distribution of hero-stones in the Chengam region is not random. Survey reports indicate that they are often located on village peripheries, near pathways, or at liminal spaces between settlements. This placement corresponds to the likely zones of pastoral movement and inter-settlement contact. The Chengam region lies close to the Javadi hills, an upland tract that historically supported mixed pastoral and agrarian subsistence. The ecological setting, combining upland grazing potential with access to plains cultivation, makes the presence of cattle-related conflict plausible within the material record. However, the argument does not depend on environmental inference alone; it rests on the explicit inscriptional reference to cattle in the memorial texts.



Hero-stones from the Chengam–Thandrapet region showing peripheral placement and martial iconography.

One documented case from the Chengam area, discussed in the 1974 archaeological seminar proceedings, records a hero who died in connection with cattle. Although the text is short, its structure conforms to the standard early medieval Tamil hero-stone pattern: identification of the individual, statement of action and commemoration. The presence of such formulae in multiple stones suggests that cattle protection was not an isolated occurrence but a recurring cause of memorialisation. The repetition of similar phrases across stones strengthens the argument that cattle raiding formed a recognisable category of conflict.⁶ Iconographic evidence supports the textual reading. The carved figures on Chengam hero-stones typically depict a standing warrior holding a sword or spear, sometimes accompanied by a shield. The posture often conveys active combat rather than ritualised imagery. While not every stone includes carved cattle, the textual reference to cattle protection makes the economic context explicit. The consistency between inscriptional text and martial imagery reinforces the interpretation that these stones commemorate violent encounters over livestock.

It is important to distinguish between stones that explicitly mention cattle and those that merely depict a warrior. Only the former can be securely classified as evidence for cattle-raiding incidents. In the Chengam corpus, identification therefore depends on reading the inscription rather than relying solely on iconography. The methodological priority is textual verification. Where the inscription contains terminology referring to cattle (*āṇirai*) and protection or recovery, the stone is categorised as cattle-raid related. Stones lacking such reference are excluded from this specific dataset, even if they depict martial scenes.⁷ The documentation process also involves recording the physical characteristics of each stone: dimensions, condition, location, script type and any associated archaeological context. Such details are provided in state archaeological reports and museum catalogues. The Government Museum in Chennai and district-level museum collections preserve photographs and descriptions of several stones from northern Tamil Nadu, including the Chengam region. These institutional records form part of the evidentiary base for identifying and cataloguing the relevant inscriptions.

A significant point in the identification process is the absence of elaborate royal titlature in these stones. The Chengam hero-stones do not generally invoke kings, dynasties, or formal administrative structures. Instead, they focus on local individuals and immediate circumstances. This absence confirms that the cattle-raiding incidents recorded were not

state-sponsored military campaigns but localised conflicts. The stones therefore provide micro-level evidence of resource defence within rural society rather than macro-political narratives.⁸ Comparative data from neighbouring districts strengthen the identification of Chengam stones within a broader regional pattern. Surveys in Dharmapuri and Krishnagiri have demonstrated that a substantial proportion of early medieval hero-stones commemorate cattle-related deaths. While exact numerical comparisons must be made cautiously and with reference to specific survey counts, the recurrence of similar formulae across district boundaries suggests a shared cultural and economic context. The Chengam inscriptions fit within this documented regional pattern of memorialising cattle defence.

The chronological bracket of the 6th to 9th centuries CE is particularly significant. This period in northern Tamil Nadu corresponds to a phase of expanding agrarian settlements and increasing interaction between pastoral and settled communities. The hero-stones do not provide direct agrarian data, but their repeated reference to cattle protection indicates that livestock remained a central economic asset even as agricultural activity expanded. The inscriptions thus capture a moment in which pastoral wealth was sufficiently valuable to warrant armed defence and public commemoration. In documenting these inscriptions, care must be taken to avoid extrapolation beyond what the texts permit. The stones do not specify the number of cattle involved, the scale of the raid, or the identity of the attackers. They provide only the fact of death in connection with cattle protection or recovery. Nevertheless, the recurrence of this cause across multiple stones indicates that such incidents were neither rare nor incidental. The decision to erect a stone implies collective recognition of the act's significance.

The documentation of hero-stones from Chengam dated between the 6th and 9th centuries CE therefore rests on verifiable inscriptional content, palaeographic dating and archaeological recording. The stones that explicitly mention cattle constitute a defined subset within the broader hero-stone corpus. Their identification is grounded in textual evidence rather than conjecture. Through careful cataloguing of these inscriptions recording script type, formulaic language, location and iconography it becomes possible to establish a documented dataset of cattle-raid memorials within the Chengam region.

Cattle-Related Conflicts in Inscriptions

The cattle-related hero-stone inscriptions from the Chengam region dated between the 6th and 9th centuries CE reveal a specific and recurring pattern of conflict that can be analytically reconstructed from their textual structure, spatial distribution and epigraphic formulae. The inscriptions are characteristically concise, but the repetition of particular expressions allows patterns to emerge. In the stones documented in the Chengam–Thandrapet tract in the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology publications, the event leading to death is explicitly tied to cattle (*āṇirai*). The action verbs employed in comparable early medieval Tamil hero-stones terms equivalent to “guarded,” “recovered,” or “fought for” are not generic references to battle but are directly linked to livestock. The nature of these conflicts can be inferred from the distinction between defensive and retaliatory contexts embedded in the wording. Where the text indicates death “while protecting cattle,” the implication is that cattle were under active threat, most likely during grazing or movement. In contrast, inscriptions that refer to recovery suggest pursuit after seizure. This structural distinction points to a recognisable cycle: seizure, pursuit, confrontation. The presence of such differentiated expressions within the inscriptional corpus indicates that cattle-related violence followed identifiable procedural stages rather than being random skirmishes.

The frequency of cattle-specific references, when compared with hero-stones commemorating deaths in other contexts (such as territorial defence or unspecified warfare), is notable in northern Tamil Nadu surveys. While exact counts vary by district,

archaeological documentation consistently shows that a substantial proportion of early medieval hero-stones in this region commemorate cattle-related deaths.⁹ The Chengam stones fit within this established pattern. The recurrence of cattle terminology in the inscriptions demonstrates that livestock disputes were not peripheral but formed a recurring cause for memorialisation. The economic significance becomes clearer when considering what is absent from the inscriptions. They do not refer to land revenue, irrigation disputes, or temple endowments. Instead, the recorded conflict revolves around a movable asset. This focus on livestock rather than immovable agrarian resources indicates that cattle represented a primary and immediately transferable form of wealth. The decision to commemorate individuals who died in cattle-related encounters suggests that the loss or recovery of herds carried measurable economic consequences for the community.¹⁰

The iconographic programme of the Chengam hero-stones reinforces the interpretation of direct armed confrontation. The carved figures typically display weapons suited to close combat short swords, spears, or bows. The absence of elaborate regalia or royal insignia indicates that these were not formal military campaigns but local engagements. The weaponry depicted corresponds with small-scale armed encounters rather than organised battlefield warfare. This material evidence supports the conclusion that cattle raids involved immediate, physically direct confrontation over specific economic assets.¹¹



Sculpted warrior figure depicting armed defence associated with cattle-related commemoration in the Chengam region.

The geographic clustering of the stones also provides data relevant to the nature of conflict. Archaeological surveys place several of the Chengam hero-stones at village margins and along movement routes. Such placement corresponds to transitional zones where herds would have been most vulnerable during grazing beyond settlement cores or while being driven between locations. The spatial context therefore aligns with the inscriptional reference to cattle-related violence, indicating that conflict occurred at economically sensitive points in pastoral activity.¹² The palaeographic dating of these inscriptions to the 6th–9th centuries CE situates the documented conflicts within a phase of early medieval rural consolidation in northern Tamil Nadu. The persistence of cattle-raiding memorials across this chronological span indicates continuity rather than episodic disruption. If cattle-related conflict were exceptional, one would expect isolated examples. Instead, the repeated formulae across multiple stones suggest that such incidents formed a recurring feature of economic life over several centuries.

Another pattern evident in the inscriptions is the individualisation of commemoration. Each stone records a named person and a specific event. There is no indication of mass casualties or collective military units. This pattern suggests that cattle raids involved small groups or individuals rather than large-scale organised armies. Economically, this points to raids aimed at limited herds rather than expansive territorial conquest. The scale implied by the inscriptions aligns with the logic of pastoral raiding, where rapid seizure of livestock yields immediate material gain without the logistical demands of sustained warfare. The economic logic underlying these conflicts can be further deduced from the nature of livestock as a resource. Cattle provide draught power, dairy products and social status within agrarian-pastoral societies. Their loss would directly affect agricultural productivity and household subsistence. The inscriptional emphasis on cattle defence therefore reflects protection of productive capacity rather than symbolic property alone. The memorialisation of those who died in such defence reveals the material consequences of cattle loss.¹³ The inscriptions do not describe negotiated settlements or restitution. They record fatal outcomes. This indicates that cattle disputes were resolved through violent confrontation rather than institutional mediation. The absence of reference to adjudication or royal intervention reinforces the interpretation that these were locally managed conflicts embedded within everyday economic interaction.¹⁴

Pastoral Activity and Local Livelihood Structures

These stones, documented in publications of the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology and regional survey reports, preserve short but precise statements linking named individuals to cattle-related action. When analysed collectively, their content reveals that pastoral practice was not marginal but structurally integrated into the economic organisation of the region. The inscriptions identify individuals by name, occasionally with patronymics and specify that death occurred in connection with cattle. The reference to cattle (*āṇirai*) is not metaphorical; it is a concrete economic marker. The repeated use of this term in multiple hero-stones from the Chengam–Thandrapet area indicates that livestock formed a recognised category of property. Since hero-stones commemorate deaths deemed socially significant, the repeated memorialisation of cattle-related fatalities demonstrates that pastoral assets were directly tied to the subsistence and productive base of the community.¹⁵

The economic relationship becomes clearer when the inscriptions are read in conjunction with their archaeological context. The Chengam region lies at the interface of upland and plain zones, with proximity to the Javadi hills. Survey records show that hero-stones are often located near settlement margins rather than in central temple precincts. This peripheral placement corresponds with zones of grazing and movement. Such positioning indicates that cattle management was spatially integrated into village life. The economic structure was therefore not confined to fixed agrarian fields but extended into mobile pastoral circuits. The inscriptions do not identify the commemorated individuals as royal officers, tax collectors, or temple functionaries. They are recorded simply by personal names. This absence of formal administrative designation implies that pastoral responsibility was not restricted to a specialised professional class but distributed within the rural community. The defence or recovery of cattle was undertaken by members of the settlement itself. This suggests that livestock ownership was embedded within household-level economic activity rather than monopolised by elite institutions.¹⁶

The presence of patronymic identifiers in certain inscriptions indicates lineage continuity. When a hero-stone records the father's name alongside the deceased, it anchors the pastoral event within a familial framework. This linkage demonstrates that cattle defence was not an isolated act of individual bravery but connected to family-based economic interests. Livestock, as movable wealth, could be inherited and transmitted across generations. The

memorial inscription thus reflects not only an act of violence but the protection of intergenerational economic assets. The materiality of the stones further reinforces this relationship. The hero-stones are carved in durable stone and erected in visible locations. The investment of labour and resources in producing such a monument indicates collective recognition of the economic importance of the act commemorated. In rural contexts where stone carving required skilled workmanship, the decision to memorialise a cattle-related death demonstrates that the event had tangible economic implications for the settlement.

The palaeographic dating of these inscriptions to the 6th–9th centuries CE situates them within a period of expanding agrarian settlements in northern Tamil Nadu. While land grants and temple inscriptions from later centuries provide evidence of structured agrarian administration, the hero-stones of Chengam reveal that pastoral activity remained central during this earlier phase. The coexistence of agriculture and livestock management is implied by the region's ecological setting, but the inscriptions provide direct proof that livestock defence was sufficiently vital to merit commemoration.¹⁷ The inscriptions' emphasis on cattle rather than land or irrigation disputes is analytically significant. Land conflicts in early medieval Tamil inscriptions typically involve boundaries, irrigation tanks, or tax assignments and are recorded in formal epigraphic contexts. In contrast, the Chengam hero-stones record deaths specifically linked to livestock. This distinction suggests that, at the local level during this period, movable wealth may have been more immediately contested than immovable agrarian resources. The pastoral component of livelihood was therefore not secondary but economically competitive.

The economic integration of pastoral activity is also evident in the implied labour organisation. Cattle herding requires regular supervision, seasonal movement and coordination among community members. The occurrence of fatal confrontations indicates that herds were substantial enough to attract raiding and to justify organised defence. The inscriptions do not quantify herd size, but the fact that recovery efforts are mentioned implies collective mobilisation. Livelihood structures therefore included coordinated action to protect economic assets. The iconography of the stones, depicting armed individuals with swords or spears, reflects the necessity of martial capacity within pastoral life. Weapon-bearing was not confined to formal warfare; it was integrated into everyday economic protection. The visual representation of the hero aligns with the inscriptional reference to cattle, linking subsistence practice with armed readiness. This combination suggests that pastoral livelihood in Chengam required the capacity to defend herds against external threats.¹⁸

The absence of religious formulae in many of these inscriptions further emphasises their economic orientation. While later temple inscriptions often begin with invocations or royal titles, the Chengam hero-stones focus on the event and the individual. The commemorative act centres on economic defence rather than ritual context. This secular emphasis indicates that pastoral livelihood was valued in its own right, independent of institutional religious frameworks. The chronological continuity of cattle-related hero-stones across several centuries indicates stability in pastoral practice. If pastoral activity had been marginal or temporary, one would expect isolated examples. Instead, the repeated appearance of cattle references across palaeographically dated stones suggests sustained economic reliance on livestock. This persistence implies that pastoral activity was not supplanted by agrarian expansion but remained structurally integrated into the local economy.¹⁹

The geographic distribution of the stones across multiple villages within the Chengam region suggests that pastoral livelihood was not confined to a single settlement. Rather, it was a regional pattern. The recurrence of similar inscriptional formulae across different localities indicates shared economic practices. The livelihood structure therefore extended

beyond individual households to encompass inter-settlement interactions shaped by livestock management. The inscriptions do not indicate compensation or mediation after cattle-related deaths. The absence of reference to fines or adjudication implies that conflict resolution was direct and immediate. This pattern suggests that pastoral livelihood operated within a framework where defence was a primary mechanism for protecting economic interests. The community's response to loss was not bureaucratic but commemorative.

Social Identity and Socio-Economic Context

These memorial stones document named individuals whose social status should be deduced based on the structure of the inscription, the patterns of naming and commemoration as opposed to the royal or temple inscriptions which pre-empt the names of kings, officials or donors. A critical interpretation of epigraphic evidence available shows that these people were not members of high-end political structures but were instead localized social structures and that even the very practice of memorialisation served as a form of community memory as well as a status marker.²⁰ The inscriptions usually start with the personal name of the dead person with some references of patronymics in some cases. Patronymics is an important mark of identity. The inscription places the individual in a lineage by mentioning the individual as the son of a named father. This shows that social identity was relative and hereditary. The act that is being commemorated is the death in the cattle protection or recovery, thus obtaining meaning in a family-based structure. The hero is not some unidentified defender but one of a familiar kin group. Inclusion of lineage markers indicate that pastoral defence was linked to responsibility at the house level and that honour was not vested on an individual but the family.

The lack of royal designations, military offices or government positions in the Chengam hero-stones is also telling. During the same general era, other contexts, especially those relating to state authority often feature elaborate titulature. In comparison, the cattle-based hero-stones limit identification to individual names and family or kinship. This exclusion suggests that the celebrated persons were not direct agents of the royal that were under official directive. Their position was based on recognition by the community and not the state office. The hero-stone as such indicates a local system of hierarchy where status in society was associated with the need to defend the economic means more than the political appointment.²¹ Even participation in the commemorative act is a type of indicator of status. When a hero-stone was erected, the resources were material, labour was needed and the monument had to be placed by the people. Archaeological records indicate that these stones were not buried items, but rather placed in open areas, especially at the edges of the villages or in roadways. The durability of such positioning was that the name and action of the dead person should be a part of the collective consciousness. The fact that the community chose to invest in stone memorialisation suggests that the action of the individual was appreciated by communities beyond the family set ups. This civic aspect of commemoration acted as a social uplift system by changing a fatal event into a permanent piece of honour.

This process is further revealed by the language used to make the inscriptions. Despite their shortness, the formulae all the time document the action that caused death. The textual organization puts the cattle protection or recovery in the centre of identity of the person. This event characterizes the hero. By doing this, the inscription forms a lasting correlation between social status and economic defence. The lack of further elaboration of the narrative is an indication that the very fact that cattle-related defence was mentioned was enough to transmit honour within that social environment.²² The message of the inscription is strengthened on iconography. The sculpted form of the dead man as a warrior sends a message of warrior-hood. The graphic focus on the weapons like swords or spears is not a decorative one; it is an indication of a social role that is linked to the

armed defence. Nevertheless, the picture does not have royal signs and ceremonial garments. The character comes out as a town fighter instead of a noble soldier. This visual interpretation coincides with the textual data, which shows that the status of the hero was based on the activity on the community level. The iconography thus helps in the identity development by physically entrenching the deceased in a martial but non-elite group.

Their repetitive pattern of similar memorials in the Chengam region indicates that these people were a socially recognised people in the rural society. The implication of the recurrence of similar inscriptional forms is that similar standards of commemoration existed. Hero-stones were only commemorated on some deaths. The fact that cattle-related defence had been chosen consistently as a qualifying act suggests that the form of economic defence provided some recognised status. In that sense, the hero-stone was an institutionalised tool, that is, community norms on honour were expressed and kept. The durability and placement of the stones is also a manifestation of community memory. Archaeological surveys note that hero-stones frequently were left in place over long periods of time, either becoming part of later buildings or being kept in a local shrine. Their onward presence guaranteed the passing on of the proclaimed identity over generations. The stone in itself was a kind of mnemonic, which stabilized the personal identity in a predetermined scenery. The community marked its place in space by writing down the name and action, thus making an event that was temporary into a lasting one.²³

A connection between the social status and the economic role can be better understood in terms of what kind of people are not present in these inscriptions. The agricultural labourers or daily routine non-conflict jobs are not depicted as being memorialised. The commemoration of individuals who perished in cattle-related encounters also implies that status was not evenly family since it depended on the performance of a protective role pegged on economic assets. The hero-stone therefore traces a hierarchy where some of the actions earned permanent fame. The chronological relationship of these memorials between the 6th and 9th century CE suggests that this system of status recognition did not change with time. The fact that inscriptions of the same type of formula could be found on palaeographically dated stones proves that the standards of heroisation were not different. The continuity here indicates that there was no momentary connection between cattle defence and social honour, but rather it was a structural component of local culture. The fact that many of these inscriptions do not have sectarian or religious labels is also important. Though subsequent medieval inscriptions tend to predict the affiliation of religion, the Chengam hero-stones concentrate on the action and the person. The kind of social status offered by memorialisation is thus economic defence based and not ritual identity based. This focus is indicative of a value system where safeguarding of community resources was a main indicator of value.²⁴

The vernacular writing and language place these memorials into the realm of the local communication. The texts were to be read and interpreted by the immediate society. This linguistic availability confirms the fact that the stones were used as tools of communal recall and not elite propaganda. The identity formed on the stone was the common reference point in the settlement. The territoriality in the location of the hero-stones in particular areas inside the Chengam area indicates that memory was localized. The identity of the deceased was inserted into the economic landscape by erecting the stone around the place of pastoral movement or conflict, which the community believes in. The thing that the stone marked was a person as well as a place that was connected with pastoral life. The unity of identity and territory reinforced collective possession of resources and roads.²⁵

When examining social status, it is of great importance to mention that the hero-stones do not portray the social unit of a collective, or personalized clans, other than through the patronymic. Status is both personal and social. The personal names with the markers of

lineage reveal that the society had an individual and family honour. Hero-stone lifted the dead up the hierarchy of the community and strengthened the identity based on a kinship.²⁶ The accrued information shows that those who were celebrated as protecting and rescuing cattle held a recognised role in the rural society. Their status in society was not acquired through their positions in office but through the work they did in protecting economically important assets. The markers of identity saved in the inscriptions, names, patronymics, martial images, create a portrait of local embedded actors whose authority was based on economic defence.

These inscriptions lack statistical and revenue information, as well as administrative information. Nevertheless, their constant mentioning of cattle-related deaths, carved in stone and dateable by palaeography, give tangible evidence on the evaluation of the structural role of livestock on the regional economy. The consequences are not just limited to isolated cases of violence, but to reflect on the distributions of wealth, movement, territoriality and local power relations. The initial implication is the material foundation of the wealth. The inscriptions of death which are specific to cattle show that livestock was a major and a highly competed economic good. Cattle unlike immovable land can be transferred and instantly transformed into subsistence and productive power. In a pre-modern setting cattle served as draught power to ploughing agriculture, manure to fertilize soil and dairy products to be consumed and traded. The inscriptional focus on the cattle related defence is repeated, suggesting that the loss of herds would have had a direct impact on the agrarian productivity and domestic stability. Consequently, cattle-raiding activities should not be viewed as marginal pastoral raid actions but as acts of interference with the very structure of the economic system.²⁷

The frequent appearance of cattle-related memorials in several decades speaks to the fact that this conflict was not outburst. The palaeographic ages of Chengam hero-stones dating to a range between the 6th and 9th centuries CE show that the existence of the practice of memorialising deaths linked to livestock continued. Structural integration is suggested by continuity. Had the cattle raiding been infrequent, one would find the inscriptional record consisting of individual instances rather than of formulae which are repeated over the generations. The fact that this trend continued indicates that the process of contesting livestock was part of the normal economic exchange between neighbouring settlements or groups. This interpretation is strengthened by the geography of Chengam. The area being close to upland tracts and transitional ecology areas would have sustained mixed subsistence patterns. Hero-stones are deposited in peripheral settlements during archaeological surveys and usually along one of the routes between upland and plain areas. Such spatial structuring coincides with areas of pastoral journey and communication. The larger meaning is that the Chengam economy cannot be reestablished as only sedentary form of agriculture, it has to consider their mobility and circulation of resources. The economic relevance of movement corridors and grazing areas in terms of the regional economy is indicated by cattle-raiding practices.

The other implication is related to the size of economic organisation. The inscriptions personalise the event being commemorated; they are not about big armies and official campaigns. This implies that cattle raiding was done on a local level whereby there was a small number of people involved instead of a centralized power. Lacking the involvement of the royal side in the texts means that these conflicts were resolved at the community level and not by the state. The implication of this decentralised conflict model is that at the micro-regional level, economic regulation was based on the self-help mechanism and the reciprocal deterrence. The socio-economic structure thus encompassed a recognized standard of military defence associated with the defence of resources.²⁸ The cattle-related deaths also suggest the presence of common ground rules when it comes to economic

rights with regard to the memorialisation of those who are killed. The hero-stone was officially placed in place to legitimize the right of the deceased to protect livestock. This verification implies that there was a consensus among the people that cattle made valid property and that their defence was well-grounded. The socio-economic system thus encompassed not just production and exchange but also normative systems of ownership and retaliation. The inscriptions on the hero-stones give physical support to the idea that the property rights over livestock were socially recognised and publicly in defence.

Lack of transactional data in the inscriptions does not decrease the value of their interpretation. Quite the contrary, they are concise and they emphasize what was viewed to be self-evident in the local context. The fact that cattle was mentioned was enough to give the seriousness of the incident. This means that livestock is taken to be the same in terms of its economic importance. Had the cattle been marginal, the inscription must have been elaborated. The very structure of the economy of language speaks of the centrality of livestock.²⁹ Also, pastoral holdings were widespread enough to produce community-wide interests, which is indicated by the recurring celebration of people participating in cattle defence. Had cattle ownership have been limited to a thin elite, the focus of memorialisation would have tended to be on titles or positions of the elite. Rather, the names of people depicted in the inscriptions do not have detailed titles. The implication of this trend is that livestock was part of household economic systems and not aristocrat property. We are therefore able to learn of a socio-economic structure whereby wealth is entrenched into the daily subsistence as opposed to centralised structures through cattle-raiding.

The iconographic uniformity of military men on these stones highlights the incorporation of warfare ability into the economic life. The higher meaning is that the socio-economic structure of early medieval Chengam demanded the ability to defend oneself with arms as a normal part of living. The possession of weapons was not limited to professional soldiers but was related to the people who were involved in the guarding of livestock. Such a combination implies that economic survival and martial preparedness were linked together instead of being compartmentalised within the society.³⁰ The chronological distribution of these inscriptions within the early medieval era could be correlated with the gradual agrarian colonisation in the north of Tamil Nadu. The fact that cattle-related memorials continued to play a leading role in this period implies that pastoral components were still economically relevant together with agriculture. The socio-economic model thus should be theorized as hybrid as opposed to being agrarian. The cattle-raiding activities reveal that mobility and wealth of livestock were always part of the process despite the development of agricultural activities.

The other implication is due to the visibility of hero-stones to the people. Their location in the landscape changed personal economical defence to the collective memory. This institutionalised some of the economic values. Cow protection has been an occasion or ceremony through which the community strengthened the value of taking care of productive resources. The hero-stone was used to remind the people of the price that had to be paid when it comes to being economically vulnerable. This memorial aspect has to be included in the re-creation of the socio-economic framework, which determined the communal property and risk attitudes.³¹ Several of the inscriptions do not mention compensation or mediation, implying that the economic conflict of livestock was not resolved by any form of adjudication, but rather by direct conflict. This lack means that the socio-economic environment was such that property right enforcement was decentralised. The hero-stone is a historical record of more than an economic phenomenon, it is a means of control: defence and retaliation. This kind of structure is an indicator of minor bureaucracy and dependence on community policing.

The Chengam evidence is further contextualised in the wider regional trend of cattle-associated hero-stones in northern Tamil Nadu. Similar inscriptional formulae are recorded in surveys in the neighbouring districts. This local uniformity implies that cattle-raiding was not a localized behaviour of Chengam but rather a more broad-based economic trend. The Chengam corpus however offers the micro-regional precision, which enables one to recreate the way these practices had been practiced in a given geographical location.

CONCLUSION

The hero-stone corpus from the Chengam region establishes the fact of cattle-related fatalities, yet it leaves several historically verifiable dimensions undocumented and these silences themselves are analytically significant. None of the inscriptions record the numerical value of herds involved, the quantity of cattle recovered, or the proportional economic loss sustained by a household or settlement. This absence prevents quantification of livestock wealth within the regional economy. Likewise, no inscription specifies whether the deceased acted independently, as part of a kin-based contingent, or under a locally recognised chieftain. The lack of institutional titles restricts precise placement of these individuals within formal political hierarchies. The inscriptions also omit reference to settlement names in many cases, limiting reconstruction of inter-village conflict networks. Without clear identification of opposing parties, it is not possible to map raiding circuits or determine whether the conflicts were intra-regional or linked to upland groups beyond Chengam. Furthermore, the stones do not record legal consequences, restitution, or negotiated settlement, leaving unclear whether retaliatory cycles stabilised or escalated local tensions. There is also no inscriptional evidence indicating integration of livestock into temple endowments, taxation, or tribute structures during this phase. These omissions do not weaken the historical value of the corpus; rather, they define its evidentiary boundaries. The hero-stones document acts of defence but not systems of redistribution, exchange, or administrative control. A fuller reconstruction of Chengam's early medieval economy therefore requires correlation with settlement archaeology, faunal remains and contemporaneous non-memorial inscriptions.

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