

Fig.4.2 : Memorial Stone for a Hero, late 18th century
in and around Shree Eklingnath ji Temple, Rajasthan
h.780 mm, w.260 mm, d.270 mm, marble
The City Palace Museum, Udaipur

Photo courtesy: Maharana of Mewar Charitable Foundation, Udaipur



Memorial Stones of Mewar, Rajasthan : the collection of the City Palace Museum, Udaipur

Chelsea Alannah Santos

Texts including the *Garuda Purana* suggest that an unrealized soul is fickle and could cling. The ashes of the deceased were therefore required to be immersed in the holy waters of the Ganges, and all corporeal remains to be disposed off, before the prescribed twelve days of mourning were completed, in order to prevent the soul from associating and clinging to its former body.¹ The *Bhagwad Gita* in turn mentions that the indestructible soul could take on many forms until it was liberated. Practices that however developed in later course of time were in contrast to the scriptures. The scholar Alberuni, in his work *Tahqiq ma li al-Hind* of 1030, describes a North Indian Hindu mortuary practice that was prevalent at the time, of raising a monument similar to a milestone, plastered with gypsum, on the spot where the deceased was cremated.² This practice of memorializing the dead with a memorial stone, either freestanding or mounted on a low, whitewashed platform called *chabutra*,³ particularly amongst the Rajputs, predated the ambitious program of *chatri* building that seemingly had political undertones. Nonetheless, with the introduction of the *chattris* as an architectural element, and more so, as it took on a more permanent nature in around the 15th century, the two were often found in the same context. Prior to the permanent built forms, Rajput funerary steles were enshrined in structures built of ephemeral materials such as wood and thatch.⁴ These funerary markers would be located at a distant space, away from the inhabited area, as is the royal cenotaphs of Mewar, located at Ahar, away from the main city of Udaipur.

The commissioning of such steles undoubtedly would have been enabled by certain privileges such as possession of land, money and position in society, as was also the case with the building of the *chattris* amongst the royal and noble families. These steles are known by different names. Epigraphs record the use of terms such as *govardha*, *devali*, or alternatively *deuli* or *devakulika*⁵ in connection with these steles. Melia Belli Bose in her treatise references⁶ her interactions with locals including Sisodia Rajputs and Brahmins, who called these steles, particularly the four faceted ones as a *namuna* in Mewari, meaning "example or specimen". She also writes that her informants suggested the word *purvaj*, meaning ancestor, was a term used by the lower classes. The dearly departed were commemorated with visual narratives in stone that gave the viewer a sense of his or her religious affiliations, political standing in society, cultural nuances, and in certain instances revealed the cause of death, e.g. battle, theft, suicide etc.⁷ These ancestors are often deified and worshipped at different points of time during the year.

It is reasonable to believe that there was a thought put into the selection of the stone to be used especially since the carved images were believed to enshrine the deceased ancestor. Romila Thapar mentions about such a practice in *viragal*, hero stone, making in South India wherein the stone believed

to be embodying the soul of the deceased was selected, and cut on an auspicious day. It would be bathed, anointed and then inscribed.⁸ On occasions such as the death anniversary, *dag tithi*, and *shraddh* or sixteen-day period in the year for remembering the departed, these steles are bathed in a sacred concoction of *panchamrit*, anointed with vermillion, saffron, and turmeric paste, and silver foil is applied to their costumes.⁹ On site, one would see square receptacles, *jaldhari/sthandila*,¹⁰ for both the icon and the stele, indicative of the practice of making oblations. These benign ancestors could be appeased with song, dance, food and prayers, in return for boons and wishes. These acts summon the soul of the departed who are believed to inhabit the heaven for heros or one of the several intermediary heavens, accessible and on-call for five to seven generations; becoming more ephemeral and inaccessible over each successive generations until finally liberated, as suggested in the funeral hymn of the *Rig Veda*.¹¹

The steles could either be square in plan, Fig.4.2, or flat, Fig.4.6, with a *shikhara* like top resembling a temple. The former, typically referred to as *namuna* has been associated with royal funerary architecture of Mewar, as is seen at the cenotaphs at Ahar. Both types could bear inscriptions, and have figures carved in low relief. Whether housed in temporary structures, or more permanent forms of the *chattris*, the layout of the structure approximated that of a Hindu temple; the antechamber or hall, *mandapa*, housed the stele, while the sanctum sanctorum was reserved for the image of the deity.¹² The iconography on the steles, just as the *chattris*, remained largely unchanged to convey a smooth transition in power from one generation to the other, barring a few exceptions. These remained in position unless they were damaged for whatever reason; a new stele would take its place, and the old one would be immersed in flowing water, as is ritual.

In the context of a *chatri*, the east side of a four faceted stele would face the deity, which in the case of Mewar is the icon of Shree Eklingnath ji, a form of Shiva. It would typically sport the images of the deceased; the figure of Maharana and his consorts who became satis, paying obeisance with joined hands. They would thus be in perpetual attendance to their patron deity, thereby identifying themselves as *divans*, and reserving their right to offer prayers as head priest of the royal temple. In Fig. 4.1, the male figure can be seen sporting a sword in his right hand, and a flower, usually a lotus, in his left hand; an iconographic feature that was seen on the steles from the time of Maharana Jagat Singh I (r.1628-1652) onwards.¹³ A lot of attention was paid to the human form; the carved figurines sport elaborate headdress, attire and jewellery, typical of the region. Fig.4.1 could also denote funeral attire wherein the male would be dressed in ceremonial regalia, and the woman whether a widow or not at the time of her death, would dress up as a bride, in all finery, with the belief that they would join in union with their partner in heaven.¹⁴ It is interesting to note that iconographic representations of the women, and placement, also provide clues about their social status, of the concubines holding more sensuous postures and associated with certain tasks, e.g. using a fly whisk, as seen in Figs.4.3 & 4.4, while the queens held more of a coy or reserved stance.¹⁵

The other faces of the steles would show the Maharana and his consorts engaged in various other pursuits. The northern end that would face one of the entrances to the Chatri depicts the king and his satis worshipping the Shiva Lingam. In Fig.4.2, the king is shown seated on a low stool, in worship, while flying celestial beings or nymphs join in, with arched harp instruments. This scene is popularly

seen as the topmost register in viragals as a public testimony that the deceased has attained heaven, based on his meritorious deeds.

The south side, particularly associated with rest or stillness, often shows the male figure reclining on a swinging dais, Figs.4.3 & 4.4, an iconographic feature seen on the memorials from Maharana Karan Singh (r.1620-1628) onwards. Attending to him are a pair of satis, possibly low ranking ones. One is shown with a fan. Water pots can be seen at floor level, to quench the thirst of the sitter. The body is rendered as stiff in both the panels; the male figure is shown either resting on a cylindrical bolster, Fig.4.3, or holding the rather uncomfortable position, balancing his weight on his elbow, Fig.4.4, the hands and legs forming perfect right angles. The depiction conveys an underlying wish to enjoy the same privileges, and have people perform the same duties, for all perpetuity.

The western side of a stele could showcase the satis bearing lotus in hand, Fig.4.4, or as in Figs.4.5 & 4.6, a male figure mounted on a horse. Fig.4.5 shows the central figure accompanied by two male insignia bearers, holding the *chanwar*, flywhisk, and *meghdamber*, sun-screen, that are indicators of royalty. The scene could possibly be a portrayal of death by battle. Often found etched on these steles are symbols of the sun and the moon, as in the topmost register of Fig.4.6, a wish for the deceased's name and deeds to be remembered as long as the two exist.

Closer observations and further research on the iconographic depictions on these steles, and their links with life, as much as with death, can be explored, this tradition particularly being a living one.

References:

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12. *Ibid.*, p.18.
13. *Ibid.*, p.271.
14. *Ibid.*, p.24.
15. *Ibid.*, p.270.



Fig.4.1 : Detail of Four-Faceted Hero Stone: Fig.4.5, early 19th century, in and around Shree Eklingnath ji Temple, Rajasthan
h.1000 mm, w.550 mm, d.480 mm, marble, The City Palace Museum, Udaipur
Photo courtesy: Maharana of Mewar Charitable Foundation, Udaipur



Fig.4.4 : Detail of Memorial Stone for a Hero, late 18th century, in and around Shree Eklingnath ji Temple, Rajasthan

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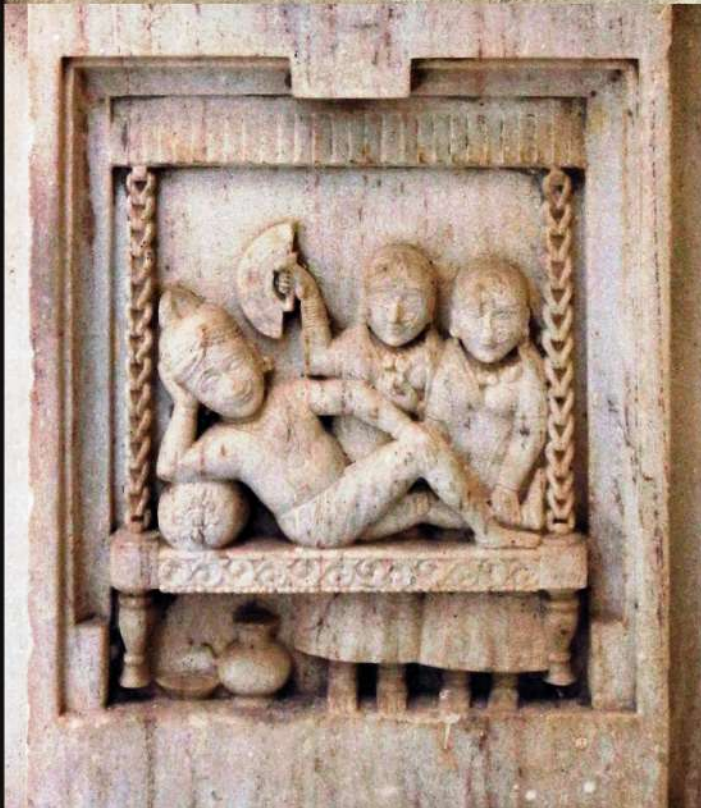


Fig.4.3 : Detail of Four-Faceted Hero Stone: Fig.4.5, early 19th century, in and around Shree Eklingnath ji Temple, Rajasthan

h.1000 mm, w.550 mm, d.480 mm, marble,
The City Palace Museum, Udaipur

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Fig.4.5 : Four-Faceted Hero Stone, early 19th century
in and around Shree Eklingnath ji Temple, Rajasthan
h.1000 mm, w.550 mm, d.480 mm, marble

The City Palace Museum, Udaipur

Photo courtesy: Maharana of Mewar Charitable Foundation, Udaipur



Fig.4.6 : Horse Rider, memorial stone, early 19th century
in and around Shree Eklingnath ji Temple, Rajasthan
h.490 mm, w.260 mm, d.110 mm, marble
The City Palace Museum, Udaipur
*Photo courtesy: Maharana of Mewar
Charitable Foundation, Udaipur*

