Tracing the Sacred Legacy: Queen Heo Hwang-ok's Pagoda Stones and Their Cultural Relevance in Ancient Tamil Nadu

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Abstract
The Samguk Yusa records the arrival, circa 48 CE, of an Indian queen named Heo, who traveled by sea to the Korean peninsula and married King Kim Suro of the Gaya kingdom. According to the chronicle, Queen Heo originated from a place called "Ayuta," the precise location of which remains the subject of scholarly debate. Linguistic, archaeological, and cultural analyses have variously identified Ayuta as Ay, an ancient kingdom situated in present-day Tamil Nadu, India. A significant material clue supporting the Indian origin hypothesis is the reported introduction of "pagoda stones" by the Queen upon her arrival in Korea. These sacred stones, traditionally believed to possess the power to calm turbulent seas, have elicited multiple interpretations regarding their cultural and religious significance. This study examines the etymology of the term pagoda and investigates contemporaneous religious practices in Tamil Nadu, around 48 CE. It further explores the cultural shift from non-institutionalized stone veneration to more organized religious systems in the region. Drawing on a multidisciplinary analysis of the pagoda stones, we propose informed hypotheses concerning Queen Heo's possible religious affiliation and geographic origins. The findings aim to provide an additional evidentiary layer to the historical and cultural reconstruction of Queen Heo's identity and her place of origin.

Keywords: Samguk Yusa, Queen Heo Hwang-Ok, Ayuta, Pagoda Stones, Tamil Nadu

Introduction

The transmission of cultural and religious practices through maritime exchange has long been the subject of scholarly enquiry in South and East Asian studies. *The Samguk Yusa* (*Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms*), compiled in the 13th century CE by the Buddhist monk Il-yeon, preserves one of the most enduring legends of such contact: the arrival, circa 48 CE, of Queen Heo Hwang-ok from a distant land called Ayuta, who journeyed across the seas to marry King Kim Suro, the founding ruler of the Gaya Kingdom on the southern Korean peninsula (*Tae Hung and Mintz 2008*). While the chronicle identifies Ayuta as the Queen's homeland, its precise location remains contested. Early interpretations associated Ayuta with Ayodhya in northern India, whereas more recent linguistic, archaeological, and cultural analyses suggested that it may have been a region in present-day Tamil Nadu, South India.

The historical plausibility of this account gains significance in light of long-distance maritime trade in the early centuries BCE and CE. The Tamil seaports of Korkai, Muziris, and Kaveripattinam functioned as prominent nodes in transoceanic networks, linking South India with the Roman world, Southeast Asia, and China (Verma 2022). Archaeological discoveries at Adichanallur and related sites further attest to the region's active participation in intercultural exchanges during this period (Suganya and Rajangam 2024). Such evidence supports the hypothesis that Queen Heo's voyage, although transmitted in a semi-legendary form, may reflect genuine maritime linkages between Tamilakam and Korea.

Despite the importance of this narrative, scholarly attention has seldom focused on situating *pasa pagoda stones*—sacred objects said to have been brought by Queen Heo—within the context of contemporaneous South Indian religious traditions. Previous research has concentrated primarily on textual transmission, maritime trade, or linguistic affinities between Tamil and Korean. For instance, Arokiyaraj et al. highlighted the linguistic, culinary, and cultural parallels between Tamil Nadu and Korea, suggesting that people of Mongoloid descent may have travelled to the ancient Tamil seaport of Korkai, whereas Tamils may have journeyed to Korea for trade or missionary activities (Arokiyaraj 2021). Their argument is supported by evidence from classical Tamil literature (Sangam period, 600 BCE–300 CE) and archaeological and anthropological discoveries at Adichanallur, a prehistoric harbour site. Such exchanges may account for linguistic and cultural affinities between the two regions.

In a comparative analysis of Tamil and Korean scripts, Tamil linguist V. Ra. Alagu observed striking parallels in both textual and grammatical structures, demonstrating notable literary and cultural resemblances, despite the wide geographical separation of the two peninsulas (Alagu and Priyalakshmi 2023). This study classified Tamil and Korean words and verbs into complete or partial matches, further strengthening the case for deep-rooted connections. In contrast, Tamil poet and Tamil Heritage Foundation founder Kannan Narayanan contested the identification of Ayodhya as Queen Heo's birthplace, a view advanced by some researchers (Kannan 2020). He refuted this claim on three grounds: (1) Ayodhya as a name did not exist during 48 BCE, when the city was instead known as Saketa, a term bearing no phonetic similarity to "Ayuta"; (2) unlike the southern kingdoms of the Chera, Chola, and Pandya, Saketa lacked a maritime history; and (3) archaeological evidence from South India strongly suggests that Queen Heo more plausibly sailed from one of the southern ports already familiar to Greek and Chinese sources.

Among the treasures Queen Heo is said to have brought were not only gold, jewels, and silks, but also sacred objects known as the pasa pagoda stones. Later enshrined in the Pasa Pagoda, these stones were revered for their ability to calm turbulent seas, protect travellers, and promote communal well-being. Korean dynasties continued to venerate these stones for centuries after the Queen's death, integrating them into cultural memories and ritual practices. The pagoda stone structure has been examined archaeologically and etymologically, with evidence pointing toward a South Indian origin (Thompson 2008; Kannan 2011). However, no prior research has systematically analysed these stones within the framework of South Indian religious traditions or considered their role in reconstructing Queen Heo's cultural and historical identity.

The present study addresses this gap by investigating the etymology of the term *pagoda* and examining the possible connections of the pasa stones with contemporaneous religious practices in Tamil Nadu around 48 CE. This analysis seeks to provide new perspectives on Queen Heo's religious affiliation and geographic origin, thereby contributing to the broader debate on her South Indian links. Specifically, this study addressed the following research questions:

- What does the etymology of *pagoda* reveal the possible religious or ritual significance of pasa stones?
- To which South Indian religious or cultural traditions—Buddhism, Jainism, Śaivism, megalithic funerary practices, or non-institutionalised cults—might these stones be plausibly connected?

- How might the veneration of these stones in Korea contribute to our understanding of cross-cultural religious transmission in the first century CE?

Through this approach, this article aims to contribute fresh perspectives to the study of Queen Heo Hwang-ok, situating her story within the wider landscape of early South Asian–Korean interactions.

Research Method

This study adopts an interdisciplinary methodology that integrates etymological, textual, archaeological, and cultural analyses to investigate the origins and religious significance of the pasa pagoda stones associated with Queen Heo Hwang-ok. The research design was structured as follows:

Textual and Historical Analysis – A close reading of Queen Heo's description in *Samguk Yusa* (13th century CE) was undertaken to evaluate the narrative's historical context, symbolic motifs, and references to material culture. Supplementary classical Tamil sources, including *Purananuru* and *Manimekalai*, were consulted to contextualise the maritime and cultural milieu of early historic Tamilakam (600 BCE–300 CE). Texts were selected based on their relevance to maritime exchange, ritual symbolism, and descriptions of sacred stones or seafaring traditions.

Comparative Religious and Cultural Framework – This component examines contemporaneous South Indian traditions—including Buddhism, Jainism (particularly *Tīrthakara traditions*), Śaivism, megalithic funerary practices, and non-institutionalized forms of ancestral veneration and deity worship—to situate the ritual and cultural role of sacred stones. The analysis draws on peer-reviewed archaeological reports, inscriptions, and ethnographic studies published by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and other scholarly sources between 1950 and 2025. Sites were included if they yielded stone markers, dolmens, or nāṭar worship artefacts dated to early historic or protohistoric periods, with documented stratigraphic or typological reliability.

Etymological Analysis: A comparative linguistic study of the term pagoda was conducted using philological data from Tamil, Sanskrit, and early East Asian texts to trace its historical development and semantic associations in South Asian religious contexts. Lexical and etymological data were collected from peer-reviewed linguistic publications. Terms were included based on attested usage related to sacred or ritual stone structures.

Analytical Approach – Textual, linguistic, cultural, and archaeological evidence was synthesised to reconstruct plausible hypotheses regarding the ritual significance of *pasa pagoda* stones and their potential origins in South India. This analysis prioritises the cross-verification of cultural motifs and linguistic correspondences to ensure interpretive reliability and historical coherence.

Textual and Historical Analysis

According to *Samguk Yusa*, on the 27th day of the seventh lunar month, the nine chief courtiers of the Gaya Kingdom approached King Suro, urging him to take a wife and establish royal succession. However, King Suro believed he was divinely ordained to rule the land and that his consort would descend from heaven in accordance with the divine will. Acting on this conviction, he instructed royal sailors to set a course for the southern region of Mangsan-do and watch for celestial signs or omens. One day, the sailors spotted a mysterious ship with a red sail approaching the coast. A red flag emerged on the horizon, signaling the arrival of something extraordinary. On board was a radiant young princess, accompanied by two courtiers, their wives, and twenty attendants—both male and female. They brought with them chests filled with gold, silver, jewels, silk brocades, ceremonial tableware, and the princess's trousseau (Figure 1). The sailors, awestruck, escorted the princess ashore, while a royal courier galloped on horseback to inform the King of this remarkable event. Delighted by the news, King Suro dispatched the nine senior courtiers to formally receive the princess and bring her to the palace. However, the princess humbly declined, stating that she could not follow strangers or enter royal premises without proper ceremonies. Moved by her dignity and modesty, the king ordered a ceremonial tent erected on a hill located 60 feet southwest of his detached palace and awaited her arrival with great respect.

Figure 1 Illustration of the Legendary Arrival of Queen Heo Hwang-Ok at the Seashore of the Ancient Karak Kingdom After her Long Maritime Voyage from Ayuta. The Image Symbolically Portrays the Princess Disembarking from a Ship with a Red Sail, Accompanied by Courtiers, Attendants, and Richly Adorned Chests Containing Diplomatic and Ceremonial Gifts. This Visual Interpretation Emphasises the Cultural and Historical Significance of her Arrival, as Recorded in *Samguk Yusa*

The princess disembarked and ascended the hill, where she changed from her brocade trousers and offered them as a gift to the mountain spirit—a customary act of piety. She then proceeded to the tent with her attendants meeting the king. King Suro warmly welcomed them, presenting native garments and ornaments to her suite, and provided them with rest in beds covered with embroidered quilts and fine pillows. Overwhelmed by the gracious reception, the princess introduced herself as a sixteen-year-old royal from Ayuta, an ancient region believed to be in southern India. Her family name was Heo, and her given name Hwang-Ok, meaning "Yellow Jade." She revealed that her parents had experienced a divine vision in which a deity instructed them to send their daughter to marry King Suro of Karak, a holy man whom was chosen to rule. Honouring divine command, she bids farewell to her family and undertakes a long maritime voyage to Gaya.

King Suro, deeply moved, declared that he had long awaited her arrival in accordance with his own divine belief and had rejected all other marriage proposals for this reason. When filled with joy, he accepted her as a destined queen. On the first day of the eighth lunar month, the King and Queen entered the royal palace in ornate palanquins, accompanied by noble carriages and a long procession of wagons carrying the princess's treasures. They ruled together in harmony and happiness for many years, and the royal couple was blessed with ten sons, two of whom bore the surname Heo (Kannan 2011). Queen Heo Hwang-Ok passed away at the age of 157 in the year of the snake (Kisa, 189 CE). Her passing was mourned deeply by the people, who grieved as though they had lost their own mother. She was buried on a hill northeast of Kuji. In her honor, the beach where she had first landed was renamed Chup'och'on, the hill where she changed her attire was named Nunghyon, and the coastal point where her red flag was first sighted was designated Kich'ulpyon—ensuring her arrival in Karak would be remembered forever. King Suro died ten years later, in the year of the Hare (Ki-myo, 199 CE), at the age of 158, having spent his final years in sorrow over the Queen's death.

Comparative Religious and Cultural Framework

In ancient India, people followed both institutionalised and non-institutionalised religions, which were distinctly different, revolving around the organisation, structure, and authority of the religious practice and belief system (Vanamamalai 1975; Shaw 2012). Institutionalised religions have often established hierarchies, with clergy, religious authorities, and governing bodies overseeing practices and beliefs. They usually have a codified set of beliefs, rituals, and religious texts that guides practitioners. These are passed down and interpreted by designated authorities such as priests and monks. Sramana religions including Jainism, Buddhism, and Saiva were some of the institutionalized religions in ancient times. In contrast, non-institutionalized religions or informal religions tend to be less structured and are often based on individual or small group practices. There is no central authority or hierarchical structure. Leaders, if any, may not have formal training, and the focus is on personal or community-led practices. Beliefs and doctrines can be more eclectic, flexible, or individualised, allowing for various interpretations. Religious practices may be carried out privately or within small community groups, and worship often takes place in homes or other informal settings rather than in

large, purpose-built temples. Megalith worship and Natar Deity worship are the best examples of non-institutionalised religions. In this context, the present discussion examines the possible connections between pagoda stones and these ancient traditional religious practices.

Institutionalized Sramana Religions

Sramana Religions Opposing Brahminism

Brahminism emerged during the Vedic period (1500–600 BCE) according to many western philosophers and Upanishads, closely linked to the arrival of Indo-Aryan-speaking peoples and the composition of the four Vedas—Rig, Yajur, Sama, and Atharva (Varghese 2008). Also known as the Vedic religion, Brahminism emphasised the authority of the Vedas, upheld the caste system (varna), and was rooted in fire rituals, animal sacrifices, and devotion to polytheistic Vedic deities. Society was structured hierarchically, with Brahmins (priests) at the top, followed by Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (merchants), and Shudras (laborers). Access to Vedic knowledge and rituals was strictly restricted to Brahmin males, while women and lower castes were generally excluded from religious learning and participation.

In contrast, the Sramana traditions including Buddhism, Jainism, and Ājīvikism, emerged as heterodox movements around the 6th century BCE. These traditions developed as counter-movements to Brahmanical orthodoxy, rejecting the authority of the Vedas, the caste hierarchy, and elaborate ritual sacrifices (Bronkhorst 2017). Instead, they emphasise personal spiritual discipline, ethical conduct, non-violence, renunciation, and the pursuit of liberation (moksha or nirvana) from the cycle of birth and death. While the Sramana religions share a common opposition to core Brahmanical principles, they also differ themselves in key philosophical and doctrinal aspects. The Śramaṇa traditions differ not only in their core philosophical tenets but also in their modes of depicting and venerating spiritual figures. Variations in iconography and ritual practice offer significant insights into the distinct religious identities of the period. Notably, Korean pagoda stones—often identified by researchers with the Indian sacred stupa or tri-umbrella structures—serve as a key material indicator for distinguishing among the various Śramaṇa traditions (Wong 2014; Lee 2009; Lee 2010). They also provide important clues regarding the extent to which pagodas may be associated with these traditions, a topic examined in the following sections.

Sacred Stupa in Buddhism Tradition

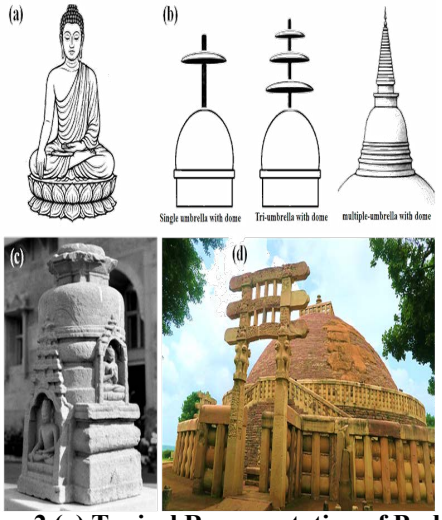

Figure 2 (a) Typical Representation of Buddha in a Meditative Posture (ChatGPT Generated) (b) Three Variations of Pinnacle Designs Incorporating Umbrella Structures (ChatGPT Generated). (c) Votive Stupa with Buddha Figures, 58.5 cm in Height, from the Sarnath Site Museum, Uttar Pradesh, India (Acquired 1969). A Multiple-Umbrella Structure is Depicted above the Head of the Buddha (Photograph by John C. Huntington, Courtesy of John C., and Susan L. Huntington Photographic Archive of Buddhist and Asian Art). (d) The Great Stupa at Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh, India (Image Courtesy of *Travel Miles With Smiles*, Wikimedia Commons)

Buddhism is a non-theistic religion and philosophical tradition that originated in India during the 6th–5th century BCE, founded by Siddhartha Gautama (Buddha) (Boeree 2003). The expansion of Buddhism across various regions occurred in multiple phases, driven by a combination of political influence, cultural exchange, and economic connectivity. Emperor Ashoka actively promoted

Buddhist teachings by dispatching missionaries across the Indian subcontinent and into regions such as Sri Lanka, Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and possibly the Mediterranean world (Kiron 2025). In its early devotional form, Buddhism expressed veneration for the Buddha through stupas, dome-shaped structures that enshrined relics, sacred texts, or other sacred objects (Figure 2). Thompson et al. identified three distinct umbrella forms characteristic of this period (Thompson, 2008). Stupas containing three circular disks were symbolic of the Three Jewels of Buddhism: the Buddha, the Dharma (teachings), and the Sangha (monastic community). The dome is often built on a square-shaped platform, sometimes enclosed by gates. Devotees typically enter through the eastern gate and walk around the dome in a clockwise direction, as a form of walking meditation. The artistic representation of the Buddha in human form emerged later, around the 1st–2nd century CE, marking a significant evolution in Buddhist iconography and devotional practice (McMahan 2004; Karlsson 2006; Huntington 1990).

In early non-figurative representations of the Buddha, his presence was suggested through symbols such as the umbrella, throne, footprints, Dharma wheel, and Bodhi tree. Buddhism later adopted the motif of the royal umbrellas as a metaphor for the Buddha's universal kingship and spiritual protectorate (Thepa and Suebkrapan 2022; Orzech 2002). Umbrella structures were designed in various geometric shapes, such as octagons and squares, to symbolically represent the Eightfold Noble Path and the Four Noble Truths (Thepa and Suebkrapan 2022; Cha and Kim 2019). These structures can appear singly or in clusters, vary in size, and be placed separately, above a figure's head, or mounted on a mound. Stupas evolved over time from simple earthen or clay mounds to larger, dome-shaped structures enriched with additional symbolic elements. Smaller stupa are often associated with tall trees or poles. Some scholars theorise that these poles commemorated the Buddha's enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, as early stupas were often depicted as crowned with an umbrella-shaped foliage (Harvey, 2019; Thompson, 2008; Harvey, 1984). However, due to their height and shape, these pole-bearing stupas were particularly vulnerable to lightning strikes and many were destroyed over time. While some stupas were free-standing monuments, others were integrated into temples or worship halls (Irwin 1982).

The terminology for Buddhist monuments varies by region and tradition. The term *stupa*, from Sanskrit, originally described a hemispherical mound containing relics. *Caitya* denotes a sacred shrine or a prayer hall often housing a stupa. In Sri Lanka, the term dagoba refers to a relic container, whereas *chedi*, used in Thailand and Southeast Asia, denotes a stupa with a more slender, bell-shaped profile. Other regional terms include *tope, ta, gorintō* (in Japan), and pagoda (Intongpan 2023; Kim 2024). Various theories have been proposed regarding the origin of stupas in East Asian culture. Liang Sicheng et al. emphasized the lasting architectural influence of the pagoda in China, describing it as a multi-storied tower topped with stacked metal disks (Liang 1986). He categorised Chinese pagodas into single-story, multi-story, and stupa-based forms. Ko Adachi et al. proposed that pagodas may have either drawn inspiration from Indian Buddhist multi-storied pavilions or evolved from ancient Chinese "divine towers" (Kim 2024).

Tri-umbrella Structures in Tirthankara Tradition

Jainism (*nirgrantha* or *nigantha*) and Ājīvikism (*Ājīvika* or *Ājīvaka*) are collectively referred to as the "Tīrthaṅkara traditions," as both inherited a shared set of monastic rules and venerated ancestral spiritual figures under titles such as Tīrthaṅkara, Arukar, and Siddhar (Johannes 2000). The Sāmaññaphala Sutta (DN 2) of the Dīgha Nikāya records six influential teachers, described as tīrthaṅkaras, who were renowned, respected founders of their own sects, widely regarded as saints, long-practising ascetics without fixed abodes, and advanced in age (Sarao, 2017). These included Pūraṇa Kassapa, Makkhali Gosāla, Ajita Kesakambalī, Pakudha Kaccāyana, Sañjaya Belaṭṭhiputta, and Nigaṇṭha Nāṭaputta, all of whom were contemporaries of the Buddha (Basham 1981).

According to the text, King Ajātasattu of Magadha engaged these six teachers—referred to as "heretical teachers" (Tīrthikas)—in debate, seeking to understand the fruits of a contemplative (ascetic)

life. He heard their doctrines in turn before finally consulting the Buddha (Figure 3a) (MacQueen 1984; Allon 2024). The philosophies of the six Tīrthikas, alongside the Buddhist perspective, as presented in the Sāmaññaphala Sutta, are summarised in Table 1. Based on their doctrines, the Tīrthikas may be broadly grouped into two main traditions: (1) Ājīvikism, represented by Pūraṇa Kassapa, Makkhali Gosāla, and Pakudha Kaccāyana; and (2) Jainism, as taught by Niganṭha Nāṭaputta. However, the teachings of Sañjaya Belaṭṭhiputta stand apart, representing a distinct philosophical position outside these two categories (Lokeswarananda 1997).

Table 1 A Comparison Table Between the Six Heretical Teachers' Doctrines and the Buddhist View as Explained by the Buddha in the Sāmaññaphala Sutta

Teachers	Doctrine	Key Tenets
The Buddha	Middle Path	Ethical conduct, meditation, and wisdom leading to cessation of suffering through the Eightfold Path.
Niganṭha Nātaputta (Mahavir)	Jainism – Karma as material & removed by asceticism	Karma is a kind of material bond; liberation achieved through severe self-mortification and non-violence.
Ajita Kesakambalī	Materialism	Denies afterlife, karma, or soul; human is just a body that dissolves at death.
Sañjaya Belaṭṭhaputta	Agnosticism/ Radical skepticism	Refuses to answer metaphysical questions; maintains uncertainty as philosophical principle.
Makkhali Gosāla	Fatalism/ Determinism	All experiences are determined by fate; no use in effort or practice.
Pūrṇa Kassapa	Amoralism	No moral consequences for actions; killing or generosity are morally neutral.
Pakudha Kaccāyana	Atomism/ Eternalism	The world is made of eternal, unchanging elements; no real interaction or causality.

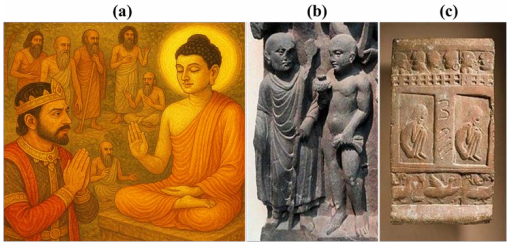

Figure 3 Traces of the Ājīvika Tradition. (a) Illustration of King Ajātasattu's Encounter with the *Tīrthikas* ("Heretical Teachers") Prior to his Consultation with the Buddha (ChatGPT Generated). (b) Gandhāra Sculpture of the *Mahaparinirvana* (2nd–3rd Century CE), Depicting Mahākāśyapa (Left) Meeting an Ājīvika Ascetic (Right) and Receiving News of the Buddha's *Parinirvana*. (c) Terracotta Tile, Possibly Portraying Ājīvika Ascetics in a Squatting Posture, Practicing Fasting from Both Food and Water (Images b and c Courtesy of Dr. Uday Dokras) (Dokras 2020)

Makkhali Gosāla was initially a follower of Jainism within the Pārśvanātha (23rd Tīrthaṅkara) tradition before founding his own distinct school, Ājīvikism (Shah 2011). Due to their common origins, scholars—particularly those examining Sangam literature—often conflate Ājīvikism with Jainism, creating interpretive challenges in linguistic and religious studies. While Ājīvikism shared many tenets with Jainism, it notably rejected the idea that ascetic practices could erase the karmic traces of past actions. Instead, karmic retribution was understood to follow its own immutable course, impervious to intervention (Bronkhorst 2007). The Ājīvika tradition attained its zenith during the reign of the Mauryan emperor Bindusara in the 4th century BCE. Although its prominence declined thereafter, Ājīvikism persisted for nearly two millennia, surviving until the 14th century CE, in the southern

Indian regions of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. This philosophy particularly resonated with the warrior, industrial, and mercantile classes of ancient Indian society (Dokras 2020). A distinctive feature of Tīrthaṅkara iconography is the nude, standing posture, exemplified in Figure 3b (Johannes 2000). Literary and archaeological evidence suggests that nirvana figures depicted in a squatting posture, such as those on certain terracotta tiles, relate to the post-Ājīvika tradition (Figure 3c) (Dokras 2020; Shah 2011). This squatting position is characteristic of ancient Tamil culture and is known as *Mudumakal Thazhi*, a burial practice wherein the deceased is placed in a squatting posture inside a pot (*Thazhi*) before interment. The *Manimekalai*—a classical Sangam text—also references the ritual of placing the dead inside a pot, termed *Thazhiyir kavippor*, as part of ancient Tamil funerary customs (Darsana 2012; Ganesh 2011; Ramanathan 2020). Based on these correlations, it can be posited that Ājīvika ascetics in advanced age performed penances in a distinctive squatting posture and were subsequently interred in the same position within a *Thazhi* upon their death.

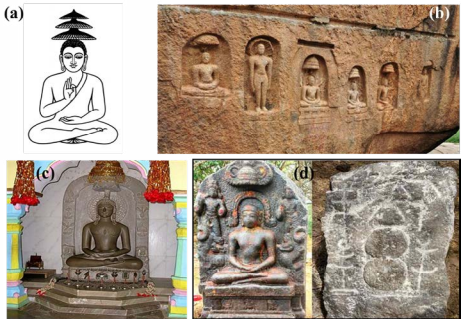

Figure 4 (a) Typical Tīrthankara Image with a Tri-umbrella Structure above the Head (ChatGPT Generated). (b) Jain Tīrthankara Sculptures at the Keelavalavu Cave, Madurai, Tamil Nadu (Courtesy of Priasai, Wikimedia Commons). (c) Bilahari Ādinātha Image Displaying the Eight Auspicious Symbols (Courtesy of Malaiya, Wikimedia Commons). (d) Left: 10th-century Mahāvīra Jain Sculpture Discovered in Sirukanur Village, Tamil Nadu; Right: 12th-century Stone Slab Documenting a Land Donation to a Jain Institution (Courtesy of *Nakkheeran* Publication)

Common symbolic elements of Tirthankara tradition include a triangular crown (known as *mukudai* or triple umbrella crown), as shown in Figure 4a-d. The triangular crown is formed by a series of stacked stone layers, decreasing in size from base to top, emerging directly from the head of the idol, which is an important feature of eight auspicious items, revered by all Sramana religions. It symbolises the Three Jewels—right faith, right knowledge, and right conduct—which together form the path to spiritual liberation (Thepa and Suebkrapan, 2022). Unlike Buddhism, which evolved its umbrella symbolism over time—modifying the shape and number of tiers—Tirthankara tradition retained a consistent form, which may serve as a key visual marker to distinguish them. The triangular umbrella structure is generally accompanied by various auspicious symbols on either side of the Tirthankara idol. To distinguish each Tīrthaṅkara, their images are marked by specific motifs beneath the pedestal, such as elephants, lions, bulls, or snakes (Krüger 2021; Hameed et al. 2024).

A significant archaeological finding from Sirukanur, located in Tirupathur Taluk of Sivaganga District, Tamil Nadu, includes a sculpture of Mahavira and a stone slab featuring a tri-umbrella symbol, believed to commemorate a land donation (Figure 4d). On either side of this slab are engravings of *kuthuvilakku* (traditional oil lamps). The upper left portion bears a plough symbol, possibly indicating that agricultural communities donated the land to a Jain monastery. The upper-right corner shows a fenced wooden structure, interpreted as a symbolic representation of farmland, although this portion is partially eroded and unclear. The artefact was estimated to date between the 10th and 12th centuries CE. The Mahavira sculpture, locally venerated under the name *Gundodi* Kali, is depicted in a meditative posture seated on a rare throne adorned with three lion emblems. Behind the head of the deity is a diagonal arch, and two attendant bodyguards—*Siddhakiya Iyakki* and *Iyakan Mathangan*—each holding a *samaram* (fly-whisk) in a gesture of veneration flank the main figure. It is important to note that the shape and stacking of the engraved triangular stones appear similar to pagoda stones brought about by the Queen Heo by appearance.

Non Institutionalized Religions

Worshiping Deities in the Form of Megaliths

Before the constitution of formal and institutionalised religions, ancient Tamils followed non institutionalized religious practices to hail the bravery deeds of famous people. Megaliths are considered the earliest monuments erected by humankind on the Indian subcontinent that have survived until the present time, with the possible exception of the enigmatic ash mounds of the South Indian Neolithic. Megaliths were popular over a larger geographical region, covering most of southern India at approximately 500 BCE. Megaliths exhibit great diversity in form and vary in scale and complexity from small, simple monuments to large, complex ones (Kumar 2012; Fuller et al. 2007).

There has been much speculation about whether the tradition of megalith buildings held the seeds of later monument-building practices. While closely observing the tradition of megalith buildings, it seems these structures could be fundamental to the emergence of later monumental traditions, such as the building of stūpas and stone temples, in Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain religious traditions. Stella Kramrisch et al. mentioned in her studies of the Hindu temple that the prototype of the small, flat roofed shrines that abound in Central and South India was the dolmen with its one large flat slab of stone, supported by three upright slabs set on edge so as to form a small chamber with one side open to serve as an entrance (Kramrisch 1976; Menon 2001). Megalithic burials include dolmen, cairn circles, burial urns, cist burials, and menhirs. Brubaker et al. illustrated the distribution of these megalithic burials across the Indian subcontinent using a series of maps, as shown in Figure 5 (Brubaker 2000).

Dolmens are mostly located on the hilly areas. These are used as burial chambers or ceremonial spaces. Stones in the cairn circle were often arranged in an oval or circular arrangement. The diameter and circumference of these structures may differ depending on the interior. In Tamil Nadu, burial urns were a prevalent method of interment throughout the megalithic era (Rajan 2013; Dayalan 2017). The cremated ashes and bones of the deceased were placed in burial urns, often accompanied by artefacts, such as beads, pottery, iron spears, or weaponry. Artefacts indicate a belief in the afterlife and the provision of goods for the journey. At places like Adichanallur, Sivagalai, and Talaivasal, urn burials have been found; these discoveries provide important insights into the customs and cultural practices of the era. In the preceding section, we highlighted the possibility that the burial urn known as *Mudumakal Thazhi* is associated with the Ājīvika tradition. The cist burial, characterised by a stone slab box grave, typically consists of one orthostat stone on each side and topped with a cap-stone (Aristo 2024). Some cists feature an aperture—trapezoidal, semicircular, or circular—cut into one orthostat; these are referred to as "port-hole cists." The simplest megalithic structure is the menhir, composed of a single massive stone or monolith, usually erected at or near the burial site. Menhirs vary widely in size, with their bases embedded in the ground. Representative images of megalithic burials from various regions of Tamil Nadu are presented in Figure 6. The Sangam literary work *Manimekalai* enumerates five prevalent modes of disposing of the dead in ancient Tamil society: cremation (*suduvor*), exposure or cist abandonment (*iduvor*), pit burials (*thodu-kuzhi paduppor*), underground cist burial (*thazhvayin adaippor*), and burial urns covered with lids (*thazhiyir kavippor*) (Darsana 2012; Ganesh 2011; Ramanathan 2020).

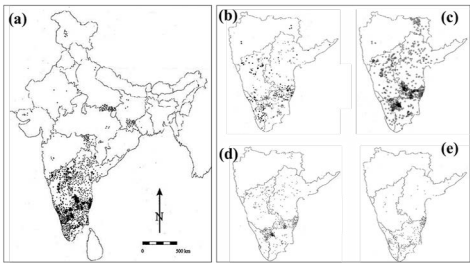

Figure 5 (a) Map Illustrating the Distribution of Megalithic Sites Across the Indian Subcontinent, with Each Point Representing a Single Site. Distribution Maps of Sites Featuring (b) Cist Burials, Dolmens, and Dolmenoids; (c) Stone Circles; (d) Cairns; and (e) Urn burials (Images Courtesy of Dr. Robert Brubaker) (Brubaker 2000)

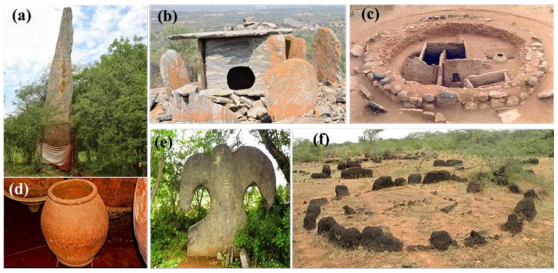

Figure 6 Megalithic Sites Across Tamil Nadu: (a) A Menhir from Thirumalvadi, Dharmapuri; (b) An Intricately Constructed Dolmen at Mallachatiram, Near Krishnagiri; (c) A Cist from Kodumanal; (d) A Burial Urn from Adichanallur; (e) An Anthropomorphic Figure from Mottur, Vellore; and (f) A Cairn with Periphery Boulders at Adichanallur. (Images Courtesy of Raj Panneerselvam, Software Engineer, Tiruvannamalai Heritage Organization)

Practice of Worshiping Hero Stone (Nadukal) in Sangam Literature

The majority of megalithic monuments located in South India evolved as herostones (*nadukal*) in later periods. In ancient times, Tamils had a profound belief in the soul and afterlife. Therefore, herostones are strongly linked to historic Tamil battles, loyalty, and community defense in Tamil Nadu (Aswani and Kumar 2018; Menon 2001; Rajan 2013). The gradual transformation of the megalithic cult into the heroccult is reflected in Sangam literature. *Tolkappiyam*, the earliest extant grammatical treatise in Tamil, explicitly enumerates six different stages involved in the ritual ceremonies connected with the erection of hero stones to commemorate the death of heroes (Figure 7) (Ramanathan 2020; Jeyaprakash 2024). It describes how to worship and inaugurate a herostone using the following processes. (1) The search for the stone (*Katchi*): People looking to erect a hero stone in honour of a fallen warrior look for a suitable stone. (2) Invitation and fixing up of auspicious time to erect the selected stone (*Kalkol*): The stone is first decorated with garlands, and then liquor is served. They move the stone with drum music playing in the background; (3) Cooling the stone and inscriptions (*Neerpadai*): The stone is placed in a water body in order for it to cool after being transported. The name, clan, and cause of death of the departed are engraved on the stone once its heat is gone; (4) Building the stone (*Naduthal*): A goat is sacrificed, the stone is carved and inscribed, and then it is decorated with flowers and peacock feathers. A ceremonial alcohol offering will be made; (5) Creating a shelter and worship (*Perumpadai*): The stone is erected, and a shelter is built over it, and it is worshipped; (6) Respect and transformation into a temple (*Vazhthal*): The descendants and the erectors of the stone worship it. The cover over the hero stone eventually becomes a temple.

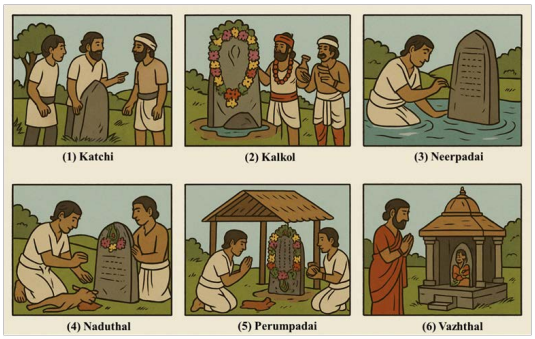

Figure 7 Sequence of Hero Stone Practices from *Katchi* to *Vazhthal*, as described in the *Tolkappiyam* Sangam Literature (ChatGPT Generated)

Hero stones may feature inscriptions, sculptures, or both. Many depict heroes armed with bows and arrows or swords and daggers, and some show combat with wild animals such as tigers or boars. These stones provide valuable information about the hero's name and the circumstances of their death (Ramanathan 2020). In Sangam classics, such sculptured stones are referred to as *kadavul eluthia kal* (stones inscribed by the divine). Most herostones commemorate the valiant deaths of kings and generals. For example, *Purananuru* poem 231 records the death of Athiaman Netuman Anji from spear wounds sustained in battle, while poem 243 refers to the herostone erected in his honour. The poet Auvai composed an elegy in Purananuru, mourning her patron's death. Her poem metaphorically describes Athiaman as becoming a stone, nourished with sacrificial food placed in a small bowl. The stone itself is described as adorned with a peacock feather, an indication that it must have

been unsculptured. The peacock feather adornment and food and drink offerings were part of sacrificial rituals (Vanamamalai 1975)

Stone Worship at Current Time

By preserving memories of bravery and sacrifice, these megalithic stones help communities stay connected to their history and uphold values such as bravery and protection (Kapp 1985; Ramanathan 2020). As formal worship practices developed over time, the commemoration of slain soldiers became included in the regional cultural system, showing respect for them as gods or community guardians. Still, we can witness many people in Tamil Nadu worshipping hero stones in the name of "*Kula Deivam*". For instance, Karuppasami and Sudalai Madan are considered "*Natar*" deities (village deities) embodying local guardian spirits and the worshiping stones with their figures emphasize the Tamil folk community's connection to nature, divinity, and ancestral traditions. It remains a living, vibrant ritual that reinforces communal bonds and spiritual identity (Jeyaprakash 2024)

Formal rules do not bind folk deities Unlike institutionalised religious deities, whose images are shaped based on associated myths or epics, folk deities may appear in full human-like forms, such as relief sculptures or paintings. Mostly the male and female deities are called "*Madan*" and "*Isakki*", respectively (Xavier 2009; Ramaswamy 2010). Female deities usually appear in burden-bearing postures or as pillarstones. In the case of paired deities, the female who joins the male Madan often takes a form that complements the general form of Madan. The deities are typically made from materials such as stone, clay, wood, or metal. They possess symbolic representations and are worshipped according to traditional customs specific to the people themselves. They are sometimes anointed with turmeric or adorned with cloth according to the tradition. When people migrate from one village to another for some reason, they take with them the deity they worshipped in their native village. As a symbolic act, they take a handful of soil from the open space in front of the temple, wrap it in a white cloth, and bring it along. In the new settlement, they place this soil at a chosen spot and build a temple there. When constructing this new temple, they often shape the deity in a form similar to the one they worshipped earlier.

Along with the worshipping practice of the megalithic stones and hero stones, the practice of stacking stones, either heaped up to a mass (*karkuviyal* or stone mound) or staking one on another one linearly at a perpendicular direction (*aduku karkal* or pagoda-like stone piles) are observed at some religious places of modern Tamil Nadu. Stone stacking symbolises the connection between the earthly realm and divine. It may represent a spiritual ladder or bridge between humans and gods. Koreans traditionally worship mountain gods by stacking stones one on another one, possibly influenced by the worshiping practice of stone pagodas. They believe that building stone pagodas on mountain or beach shores makes their wishes take place by the gods. In modern times, this tradition has continued among people as a light act of praying for good luck, health, and happiness (Figure 8a). A similar practice was observed in different places in southern India. Figure 8b shows the practice of stone-stacking worship near the Sitheswaran temple atop Palamalai, a reserve forest region located near the city of Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu.

Figure 8 Comparative Practices of Stacked Stone Worship in Modern Tamil Nadu (India) and South Korea: (a) Traditional Stone-stacking Practices near Hyeopjae Beach, Jeju Island, South Korea (Photographed by the Author, Iruthayapandi Selestin Raja); and (b) A Similar Practice at Sitheswaran Temple, Palamalai (Near Mettur Dam), Tamil Nadu (Image Courtesy of Image Courtesy of Periyasamy Jeganathan, Bannari Amman Institute of Technology, Sathyamangalam)

Etymological Analysis

The term pagoda embodies a rich tapestry of architectural, religious, and linguistic influence across Asia, challenging the notion of a singular origin. Scholars have proposed various etymologies that reflect the complex interplay between culture and language. Liang Sicheng et al. suggested that pagoda may derive from the Chinese term *bājiǎotǎ*, meaning "eight-cornered tower," a hypothesis grounded in phonetic resemblance and the architectural prominence of octagonal towers during the Tang dynasty (Liang 1986). Other scholars have proposed that the word may trace its origins to tumulus-like structures associated with ancestral veneration traditions (Kim 2024). Thompson et al. further argued for a South Asian derivation, linking pagoda to the Tamil *pagavadi*, itself connected to the Sanskrit *bhagavatī*, a goddess often identified with *Kāli* (Thompson 2008). This etymology underscores the linguistic and religious interconnections across South Indian cultures. In the following sections, we explore the religious significance of pagoda stones in light of their possible etymological origins. Figure 9 presents digital images of the reverent pagoda stones brought by the Queen, placed at her tomb alongside her statue, located at the Royal Tomb of King Suro.

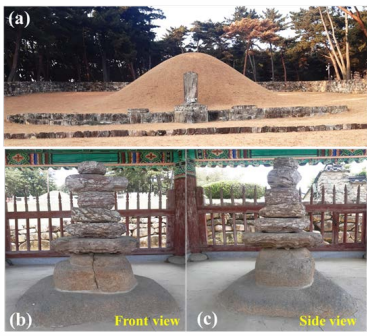

Figure 9 Heritage Sites Related to the Royal Tomb of Queen Heo. (a) Burial Mound of Queen Heo. (b, c) Front and Side Views of Pagoda Stone Piles, Believed to have been Brought by the Queen from Ancient India (Photographed by the Author, Iruthayapandi Selestin Raja)

Pagoda- Fusion Term of Bhagavan and Kudai

The earlier research report proposed that '*pagoda*' can be related with 'pagavadi' due to their phonetical similarities and religious values (Thompson 2008). Building upon this perspective, we propose that the fusion of *bhagavan* and *kudai* could conceptually signify a "divine umbrella," metaphorically representing a sacred structure. This interpretation aligns with the symbolic architecture of pagodas, which often feature tiered roofs resembling umbrellas and serve as sanctuaries for divine presence. The phrase of 'bhagavan kudai' may have drifted to 'pagoda' by the passage of time used by devotees. While this hypothesis is speculative and not widely endorsed in academic circles, it offers an intriguing lens through which to view the cultural and linguistic evolution of the term pagoda.

The term "*bhagavan*" is traditionally used to denote God, a divine entity, or a deeply revered spiritual figure, particularly in the Śramaṇa traditions. In Jainism, this title is attributed to the 24 Tirthankaras, such as Bhagavān Mahavira, Bhagavān Parshvanatha, and Bhagavān Rishabhanatha, underscoring their spiritual authority and enlightenment. For instance, in the Kalpa Sūtra, the life and teachings of Bhagavān Mahavira are narrated using this honorific (Lalwani 1999). In Mahayana Buddhist texts, such as the Lotus Sutra, the Buddha is frequently referred to as Bhagavān, emphasising his divine wisdom and supreme insight (Apple, 2012). In Hinduism, deities like Bhagavān Vishnu, Bhagavān Shiva, and Bhagavān Krishna are among the most widely venerated, with the title highlighting their sacred stature (Weightman 2017). The phrase "Bhagavan' was indeed adopted by the ancient Tamil religious tradition to signify the divine. A notable example is found in the opening couplet of the Thirukkural, where God is praised as Bhagavan: "Just as 'A' is the first of all letters, so too is the Supreme Bhagavan the First Cause of the universe" (Oorkolil 2025; Parthasarathy 2013). This verse establishes bhagavan as the ultimate source of all existence, just as the letter 'A' forms the basis of the Tamil alphabet. It is remarkable that the Thirukkural, one of the most profound works in Tamil literature, was composed by the great Tamil poet-saint Thiruvalluvar (circa 450–500 CE). It serves as a universal guide for ethical living and promotes integrity, justice, and compassion. One of its most remarkable qualities is its universality—it

refrains from referencing specific religions or castes, making it a timeless manual for righteous living. Due to this religious neutrality, Thiruvalluvar's own religious affiliation has remained a subject of scholarly debate for centuries.

Figure 10 (a) Devotees Carrying Umbrellas and the Nallaravan Deity in a Procession during a Festival at Nallaravan Temple, Mankudi Therkkuvadi, Sivagangai District, Tamil Nadu (Photographed by R. Ganeshan, Sivagangai). (b) Royal Emblem of the Cholas Featuring an Umbrella, Found on a Ring Connecting Copper Plates Documenting a Land Donation by Emperor Rajendra Chola (Image Courtesy of the Artwork of the Chola Royal Seal, as Presented in Ungal Anban Hemanth's Research-based Video *Anaimangalam Copper Plates | Leiden*, YouTube, 2025). (c) Statue of the Tamil Scholar Agathiyar, Featuring an Umbrella at Pothigai Mountain (Image Courtesy of Ckbmohankumar, Wikimedia Commons). Dashed Arrows Indicate the Umbrella Structure in All Images

In Tamil Nadu's rich cultural tapestry, the ceremonial umbrellas known as kudai holds profound significance, symbolising various aspects of royalty, divinity, and tradition. Tamil literary sources reference the white umbrella (*venkudai*) as a symbol of royal victory and fame (Nivetha 2024; Subbiah 1983). The tradition of umbrella worship and its associated rituals continues to flourish in South India today, particularly in Tamil Nadu and Kerala (Figure 10a). In Tamil Nadu, the ritual of honoring deities during temple festivals is termed *kodai*, phonetically akin to *kudai*. The worship of Bhagavati Amman (*kali*), a feminine manifestation of Bhagavān, remains deeply rooted in several regions across modern Tamil Nadu and southern India. Notably, Kanyakumari, Mandaikadu (near Nagercoil), and Attukal (in Thiruvananthapuram) stand as prominent centers of feminine spirituality and devotion. During the Pari Vettai festival in Kanyakumari, devotees carry an umbrellas in procession as a key ritual practice. The *Kudai Thiruvizha* celebrated at the Sudalai Madan temple in Karisulandamangalam village (Tirunelveli district, Tamil Nadu) in the Tamil month of *Chithirai* (April–May) showcases traditional art forms such as *thappattam* (rhythmic drumming), *kaniyan koothu* (also known as *maguda kacheri*), and *villupattu* (musical storytelling with a bow), reflecting the region's rich folk heritage. Similarly, Isakki Amman temples across southern Tamil Nadu—in places like Sathankulam, Kayamozhi, Ramanathapuram, Kallupalam, and Muppandal—host their own kudai Thiruvizha, marked by ritualistic holy baths, ornate temple decorations, and community feasts. These festivals not only deepen the spiritual devotion of the participants, but also act as vital expressions of rural cultural identity, artistic tradition, and communal unity.

In Indian traditions, the ceremonial umbrellas symbolises reverence and is prominently honoured as royal emblems of sovereignty. Eminent figures, such as emperors and revered saints—often regarded as divine during their lifetimes—are frequently depicted with umbrellas in their statues. The number of umbrellas displayed during dignitary processions indicates social rank: the greater the number of umbrellas, the higher the individual's status (Gokhale 1966). During the reign of Emperor Rajendra Chola (r. 1012-1044), the King donated an entire village's revenue and land to construct a Buddhist vihara (shrine) in Nagapattinam, a coastal port town in the 21st year of his reign (Menon 2000). The event inscriptions were meticulously engraved in a bunch of copper plates that are held together by a massive ring as shown in Figure 10b, which is now being protected in Leiden University Library for exhibition. The ring is sealed with the distinguished royal emblem of King Rājendra Chola's dynasty. The seal features a tiger, the emblem of the Cholas; an umbrella and two fly-whisks symbolizing

royalty; and two lamps representing auspiciousness. Additionally, it displays two vertical fishes and a bow, denoting the royal emblems of the Pandyas and the Cheras, respectively. Figure 10c shows a standing statue of the sage Agathiyar at Pothigai Hill, also adorned with an umbrella. Saint Agathiyar (Agastya in Sanskrit) is among the most revered sages in Tamil and pan-Indian spiritual traditions. Agathiyar and the Pothigai Hills hold profound significance in Tamil culture, literature, and Siddha medicine (Jeyavenkatesh et al. 2023).

Based on the aforementioned literary evidence and contemporary religious practices, the interpretation linking *Bhagavathi/Bhagavan*—denoting God or divine beings—with Kudai, symbolizing the sacred umbrella, is both valid and meaningful. Over time, these terms may have undergone phonetic evolution, gradually transforming into the word pagoda while retaining their original spiritual significance.

Pagoda- a Drifted Word of Pagadu

In Tamil linguistics, the term *pagadu/pagatu* encompasses multiple meanings, often referring to the symbolic act of designating or adorning an object through a series of ritualistic or combinatorial processes. The line from Sangam literature, *Oliru ilanku neduvel mazhavar perumagan kathirvidu nunpoon am pagatu marbin* (Purananuru 88), can be translated as: "The noble chief of the *Mazhavar* clan, who bears a shining, radiant long spear, possesses a broad and beautiful chest adorned with delicate, light-emitting ornaments." This verse signifies grandeur and strength, underscoring the chieftain's regal splendour and martial valour (Herbert, 2015). As discussed previously, according to *Tolkāppiyam* and other Sangam texts, the ritual of erecting a hero stone to honour fallen warriors involved six ceremonial stages: adorning the chosen stone with garlands, immersing it in water for cooling, engraving inscriptions, performing goat sacrifices, decorating with flowers and peacock feathers, and constructing a protective shelter over it. The entire sequence of rites may be collectively described by the term *pagadu*, as the stone undergoes ceremonial transformation and distinction through these traditional practices.

Pagadu is also associated with prestige, often symbolised by figures such as the elephant and bull, both representing honour and status in Sangam literature (Purananuru 161; Kural 63:4). In religious contexts, particularly within Tīrthaṅkara traditions, these animal symbols hold profound significance (Dowrick 2016). Accordingly, it is plausible that ancient Tamils adopted the term pagoda to distinguish their sacred stones from ordinary, untransformed stones. Notably, the Samguk Yusa refers to these sacred stones as "Pasa Pagoda." The term Pasa is believed to derive from the Sanskrit *pasasa*, meaning rock or stone (Rao et al. 1998). Within a religious framework, *pasasa* may be interpreted as "stones to be revered." Considering both linguistic and ritualistic dimensions, the expression "Pasa Pagoda" can be understood as "venerable stones adorned through sacred rites."

Karpaga Vinayagar is a revered form of Lord *Pillaiyar* worshipped at the village of Pillayarpatti, located approximately 14 km from Karaikudi, Tamil Nadu. The deity is believed to grant devotees' wishes much like the mythical Karpaga tree (*Kalpavriksha*), which fulfills all desires (Manikandan 2020; Rashford 2023). Carved from stone, the idol is also known as Pāṣāṇa Vinayagar, meaning "Vinayagar in stone form." Linguistically, the term Karpaga may be dissected into *kal* (stone) and *pagadu* (elephant), thus interpreted as "a sacred stone carved in the form of an elephant," consistent with the iconography of Lord *Pillaiyar*. This interpretation raises the possibility that the Pillayarpatti deity may have originally been venerated as a symbolic representation aligned with Tīrthaṅkara traditions. Moreover, the elephant-headed deity is traditionally associated with problem-solving and is often depicted with tri-umbrella structures, motifs observed in Tīrthaṅkara iconography (Figure 11). Tīrthaṅkaras were renunciants, philosophers, or rationalist figures revered almost as divine beings. Historical accounts describe King Ajātasattu seeking spiritual counsel from his six ministers, who directed him to consult their respective *Ācāryas* (teachers). While both Pāli and Sanskrit use the term *Ācārya*, the Tamil phonetic equivalent *Asiriyar* is believed to be the root of the term *Ājīvika*. In the rock-cut caves of Sittanavasal, the 23rd Tīrthaṅkara, Pārśvanātha, and a Jain *Ācārya* are depicted in meditative postures. The *Ācārya* is shown beneath an umbrella with an

inscription reading Tiruvasiriyan, meaning "great teacher" in Tamil (Pasupathi 2022). However, the connection between Tīrthaṅkara traditions (Jainism or Ājīvikism) and Karpaga Vinayagar (or *kal pagadu* deity) remains inconclusive and warrants further investigation.

Figure 11 Bas-relief of the Karpaga Vinayagar Statue Inside the Pillayarpatti Cave (Image Courtesy of Polkajunction.com, a Travel Blog by Independent Journalist and Writer Meenakshi J). The Arrow Highlights the Tri-umbrella Structure above the Deity's Head, Evocative of *Tīrthankara* Iconography

Analytical Approach

The pagoda stones purportedly brought by Queen Heo Hwang-Ok during her maritime voyage to the Korean Peninsula serve as key artefacts for tracing her cultural and religious origins. This study explores multiple dimensions of this narrative: Queen Heo's journey to Korea; etymological interpretations of the term "*pagoda*"; the symbolic significance of umbrella-shaped stone structures within institutionalized religions such as Buddhism, Jainism, and Ājīvikism; and the continuity of stone worship traditions from the megalithic era to contemporary Natar deity veneration in South India. Furthermore, we propose that the term *pasa* pagoda may be interpreted as "venerable stones adorned through religious rites," based on an analysis of *Nadukal* worship practices. Nonetheless, several important questions remain open to scholarly debate, particularly in light of the *Samguk Yusa*—the 13th-century historical chronicle compiled circa 1281 by the Buddhist monk-historian Il-yeon (Singh and Kumar 2019).

The first issue concerns the association between the pagoda stones and Buddhist stupas. In early Indian Buddhism, stupas were constructed to enshrine the relics of the Buddha or other enlightened monks. Therefore, stone structures devoid of relics would not qualify as stupas according to doctrinal requirements of the Buddhist tradition as it stood around 45 CE. Mostly, stupas were associated with poles, which are not found in pagoda stone structure. Furthermore, there is a lack of textual or archaeological evidence supporting the notion that stupas—especially in portable stone form—were transported across regions. Given that *Samguk Yusa* was composed over a millennium after the events it describes and within the context of firmly established Korean Buddhism, it is plausible that Il-yeon's account may reflect retrospective interpretations or religious bias favouring Buddhism. Thus, linking the pagoda stones with Buddhist traditions must be approached with caution and critical scrutiny.

A second question pertains to the number of stones Queen Heo may have brought with her. The *Samguk Yusa* does not explicitly state the number of pagoda stones. Interpretations vary, ranging from three to six, or even an arbitrary count. Jain traditions emphasise triadic symbolism rooted in the concept of the *triratna* (three jewels), typically represented by the deity's head. If Queen Heo were aligned with such traditions, the six stones displayed at her royal tomb in Gimhae might symbolically represent three stones for each member of the royal couple, as shown in Figure 12. Supporting this interpretation, a mural near King Suro's tomb depicts three stones alongside twin fish symbols, reinforcing the theory of a triadic stone representation. However, there is insufficient evidence to conclusively determine whether adherents of the Tīrthaṅkara tradition were involved in the translocation of triadic umbrella-shaped stones across regions of the Korean peninsula, leaving this question open to scholarly debate.

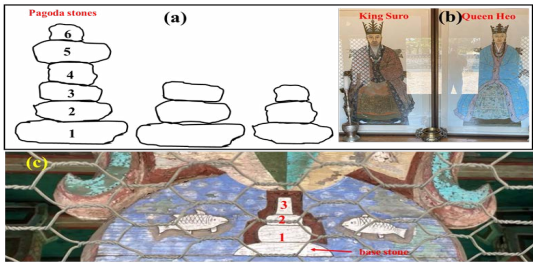

Figure 12 (a) Line Drawing of Pagoda Stones at Queen Heo's Tomb. (b) Portraits of Queen Heo and King Suro. (c) Pagoda Stone Mural at the Site of King Suro's Tomb (Images b and c Courtesy of SPS Royei Ramesh, Gimhae, Korea Tamil Sangam)

Another interpretive possibility situates the pagoda stones within the framework of non-institutionalized ancestor worship practices, which span from megalithic traditions to the enduring forms of Natar deity worship in South India. In such traditions, ancestral stones are not fixed in number and may be dismantled, relocated, and reassembled by migrating communities. These stones, anointed with turmeric and *kumkum*, are venerated as repositories of ancestral valour and clan identities. The ritual simplicity and flexibility of such worship practices contrast sharply with the formalised structures of institutionalised religions. This mode of stone worship demonstrates remarkable parallels with early Korean religious and funerary practices (Figure 13a-g). Archaeological evidence reveals a widespread distribution of megalithic burial markers and commemorative stone structures throughout the Korean peninsula, particularly in the Gaya region. Notably, a dolmen has been discovered in proximity to the Royal Tomb of Queen Heo. In addition, a significant number of burial urns and other funerary artefacts have been excavated and are currently housed in the Gimhae National Museum. These findings closely correspond to the megalithic and memorial stone traditions of ancient South India. Of particular interest are archaeological remains, including burial urns and skeletal remains arranged in a squatting posture, which bear notable parallels to funerary customs associated with the Ājīvika tradition (Figure 13f).

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Figure 13 (a) Stone Worship Practices Still Observed at the Gimhae National Museum Campus. (b) Close-up of a Stone Carved with a Human Figure in a Meditative Posture. (c) Dolmen AtopGujibong Hillock near the Royal Tomb of Queen Heo. (d, e) Burial Urns Displayed at the Gimhae National Museum. (f) Human Remains in a Squatting Posture with Folded Legs and Arms (Gimhae National Museum); (g) Outline Illustration of (f) (ChatGPT Generated). Figures a–c and f: Photographed by the Author, Iruthayapandi Selestin Raja; Figures d and e: Courtesy of Gimhae National Museum

When synthesising the evidence—from the nature of Buddhist stupas, the numerical and symbolic dimensions of pagoda stones, etymological enquiries, and the parallels in ancestor worship practices—one is led to a plausible conclusion: pagoda stones are more likely rooted in non-institutionalised traditions of ancestral veneration rather than formal religious systems such as Buddhism, Jainism, or Saivism. While this hypothesis aligns with comparative cultural and archaeological data, further interdisciplinary research is required to substantiate these claims and more definitively trace the religious and cultural origins of pagoda stones associated with Queen Heo Hwang-Ok.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study is subject to several methodological constraints. First, the Samguk Yusa, though invaluable as a cultural record, was compiled more than a millennium after the events it recounted, blending historical details with mythic embellishments. Second, the archaeological record from both South India and Korea in the first century

CE remains incomplete, and no direct material evidence currently links Queen Heo's pasa stones to identifiable South Indian sites. Third, cross-linguistic comparisons among Tamil, Sanskrit, and Korean are challenged by phonetic shifts, loanword adaptation, and interpretive uncertainty. Finally, reliance on translated classical texts may introduce semantic nuances absent from the originals.

To advance this line of inquiry, future research should focus on (1) primary philological analysis of early Tamil and Korean manuscripts; (2) collaborative Indo-Korean archaeological surveys targeting coastal and port sites; (3) maritime network reconstruction using geoarchaeological and historical data; and (4) comparative iconographic studies of stone veneration practices. The development of an open-access digital database documenting inscriptions, lithic artefacts, and textual sources related to Queen Heo and Ayuta would also facilitate a systematic cross-disciplinary analysis. Such efforts can yield a more empirically grounded understanding of early transoceanic cultural exchanges between South India and Korea.

Conclusion

This study examines the cultural and religious significance of the pasa pagoda stones attributed to Queen Heo Hwang-ok, situating them within the broader framework of sacred South Indian traditions around the first century CE. Comparative textual, archaeological, and etymological analyses suggest that these stones are more plausibly linked to non-institutionalised practices of ancestral veneration than to organised systems such as Buddhism, Jainism, or Śaivism. The etymological evidence further indicates that the term pasa pagoda may be understood as "venerable stones consecrated through ritual."

While most scholars concur that Queen Heo's origin was likely in South India, the exact location of Ayuta and her clan affiliation remain unresolved. Addressing this question requires a multidisciplinary approach that integrates linguistic, archaeological, and cultural evidence. Finally, given that the Samguk Yusa blends myth with history, its narratives must be critically evaluated to avoid misinterpretation. Future research in historical linguistics, archaeology, and religious studies will be essential to refine our understanding of Queen Heo's origins and the enduring cultural legacy of the *pasa* stones.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, I.S.R.; methodology, I.S.R.; writing—original draft preparation, I.S.R.; writing—review and editing, I.S.R., and A.R.S.; All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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