

Forest of Usilai trees in Madurai home to Nayak period hero stones

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Madurai: Deep in the forest of Usilai (Albizia amara) trees considered sacred by locals, two intricately designed memorial stones were found by a group of heritage enthusiasts in Maallaikadu, Usilampatti. Worshipped by the locals, the structures are treasure troves showcasing aspects of the Tamil culture and heritage dating back to the Nayak period.

It is said that Usilampatti, got its name due to the Usilai forests that were common in the area. At the site, four pillars mark the two hero stones. Members of a Yaadhum Oore Yaavarum Kelir, an organisation of history enthusiasts, accompanied by rock art expert and historian K T Gandhirajan had ventured into this forest of Usilai trees, which locals consider sacred. A member of the organisation V Parthiban says the forest has remained unchanged here. "Locals do not collect firewood, or even break a twig from these trees or pick flowers or leaves, it is considered a crime to do so and hence these trees flourish here," he said. Memorial stones are common in the state, most have two or three panels with information in writing or drawings about the person for whom the stone was erected, but this one is unique, says Gandhirajan. "The stones had nine layers of panels on them on all four sides, and they depicted stories in the small space with accuracy. Hero stones with many layers or panels are usually found in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, and it is possible that these stones were erected by people who migrated to this region from those states." From the drawings and stone structure, the expert said the stones belong to the Nayak period, about 400 years old. The bigger of the two stones is 10ft in height and one foot in width. There are nine panels on the unbroken stones, and the second one also would have had the same number of panels. On the last panel, there are drawings of a Shiva linga and Nandhi, which may refer to heaven and immortality.

One of the stories depicted is of goddess Petchiamman, the deity worshipped by the Pappampatti Nattar community, in Karumathur in the region. She is seen holding an infant.

There is another of a man with a bow and arrow, and one of a man taming a bull and then getting married. A man on horseback is another diagram on these stones.

A similar stone of a man on horseback is seen in Kongarpuliankulam in the neighbourhood and worshipped by the locals. These stones are referred to as Veerakambam and many such stones are found in the Cumbum region in Theni district, said Gandhirajan.

Source: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/madurai/forest-of-usilai-trees-in-madurai-home-to-nayak-period-hero-stones/articleshow/84388327.cms>