



The Hoysala Garuda system: Structure, function and cultural significance

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Abstract

The Hoysala Empire was a Kannadiga empire of Southern India that ruled present-day modern Karnataka from the 10th to the 14th century. The capital of the empire was initially established in Belur and was later shifted to Halebidu. Hoysala society reflected the emerging religious, political, and cultural developments of that era in various ways. In the history of the medieval South Indian Hoysala Empire, 'Garuda' is not merely the name of a bird; it is a symbol of supreme loyalty and sacrifice. This unique elite bodyguard force, which staked their very lives for the protection of the king, was the ultimate prestige of the Hoysala Empire. This paper analyzes the origin, structure, operational methodology, socio-political role, and cultural significance of the Garuda system against the backdrop of epigraphical evidence (inscriptions).

Keywords: Hoysalas, Garuda system, loyalty, medieval India, inscriptions, Velaikkarars, hero stones (Veeragallu)

Introduction

The Hoysala Empire, which achieved political dominance in South India from the 10th century CE to the 14th century CE, was renowned for its art, architecture, and administrative systems (Sastri, 1975). Among these, the "Garuda System" was a highly unique administrative-military tradition that reflected absolute, unconditional loyalty to the king.

The Hoysala kings were devout followers of Lord Vishnu. Just as Garuda the mount of Maha Vishnu remains ever vigilant in service to his master, these special soldiers were intensely close to the king, sharing intimately in his joys and sorrows. Upon the king's demise, they would willingly sacrifice their own lives; hence, they were called 'Garudas'. This pact of loyalty was known as 'Lenka-vali'. They came to be known as Garudas because they mirrored the absolute fidelity of Vishnu's celestial vehicle. The monuments erected in honor of such individuals were called 'Garudagamba' (Garuda Pillars).

This tradition of deep loyalty, which spanned several generations, cannot be dismissed or mocked through a modern lens as mere slavery or blind superstition. In those days, it was a revered cultural value, and the pillars erected during that era stand as historical testimony to it. If we analyze their actions solely from today's perspective and dismiss them as inhumane, we fail to document history accurately. Inscriptions are carved at the base of these sculptural panels, recording exactly who followed and fulfilled the vows of the Garuda tradition.

Meaning and Origin of the Word 'Garuda'

The Hoysala Garuda system refers to an elite bodyguard unit that was intensely loyal to the monarch, offering their very lives in service. Ever ready to protect their lord just like Vishnu's mount, they were also historically referred to as 'Lenkas' or 'Jolavaligalu' (those bound by the food/salt of the master) (Stein, 1980). Following the death of the king, or when he met a heroic death in battle, memorial pillars called 'Garudagamba' were erected to honor their memory.

Key Features of the Garuda System

- **Ultimate Loyalty:** Garudas formed the closest inner circle of the king. They were always prepared to sacrifice their lives to protect the monarch.
- **Self-Sacrifice (Entering the Fire):** Upon the king's death, to prove their ultimate fidelity, these bodyguards (Garudas) would commit ritual suicide or immolate themselves in fire.
- **Garuda Pillars:** In memory of these warriors, Garuda pillars (specialized hero stones or Veeragallu) were erected across the Hoysala Empire, most notably in places like Halebidu, Belur, and Agrahara Bachahalli.
- **Kuvara-Lakshma:** Kuvara-Lakshma, a deeply trusted Garuda of King Veera Ballala II, is one of the most famous historical figures of this system who sacrificed his life along with his family upon his king's demise.
- **Unique Social Status:** Garudas were not viewed as ordinary soldiers; they commanded the highest respect, honor, and status in medieval society.

This unique warrior tradition remains a profound symbol of extraordinary loyalty and ultimate sacrifice in the history of the Hoysalas.

Structure of the Garuda System

The Garuda force was an exceptionally stringent and highly disciplined organization defined by the following aspects:

- **Selection Process:** Recruitment was based not merely on raw valor and military prowess, but fundamentally on unwavering, absolute devotion to the royal lineage and high moral virtues.
- **The Sacred Oath:** Upon induction into the Garuda force, a warrior had to stand before the 'Garuda Stambha' (Garuda Pillar) and swear a solemn, binding oath to live for the king and to die alongside him.
- **Family Participation:** In many instances, this vow was not confined to the individual soldier alone; his wife and loyal servants were also deeply committed to this sacred 'Garuda' ritual.

The Tradition of Self-Sacrifice

The most distinctive and defining feature of the Garuda system was the ritual of ultimate self-sacrifice. Upon the demise of the monarch, select Garudas would willingly end their own lives (Stein, 1980).

This act of devotion served to:

- Manifest and seal their ultimate personal fidelity to the king.
- Secure a highly revered and exalted status for their lineage within society.

To commemorate this supreme sacrifice, specialized monumental stones known as "Garudagallu" or distinct variations of "Veeragallu" (Hero Stones) were erected.

Epigraphical Evidence (Inscriptions)

The era of Hoysala rule represents a golden age in the epigraphical history of Karnataka. In terms of artistic craftsmanship, calligraphic beauty, linguistic depth, and literary richness, Hoysala inscriptions stand practically unparalleled. They hold immense historical value and remain indispensable to the study of the period.

Over the 300-year span of Hoysala sovereignty, more than 2,000 inscriptions were produced. Prior to the reign of King Vishnuvardhana, inscriptions lacked extensive detail and structural diversity, often carved in crude, thick lettering on rough trap-rock (black stone) with very brief records. However, during Vishnuvardhana's reign, a conscious effort was made to introduce a standardized format, stylistic variation, and artistic elegance to these epigraphs.

A unique characteristic observed in Hoysala epigraphy is their dual stylistic adoption: mirroring Chola patterns in certain regions while following Western Chalukyan models in others. After reclaiming portions of Gangavadi (comprising modern-day Kolar, Bengaluru, Mandya, Mysuru, and Chamarajanagar districts) which had been occupied by the Cholas, the Hoysalas continued to issue inscriptions in Tamil in those territories for a considerable duration.

Furthermore, akin to Chola architectural traditions, they utilized temple basements, walls, and pillars to engrave these edicts. For instance, following the defeat of the Cholas and the capture of Talakadu, King Vishnuvardhana commissioned the Kirtinarayana Swamy temple; its basement features several Tamil inscriptions documenting this conquest and subsequent land grants (datti). Hundreds of such Tamil epigraphs can be examined across various sites:

- The Agara Rameshwara, Narasimha, and Durga temples.
- The Narasimha temple at Marehalli.
- The basement of the Janardhanaswamy temple at Belagola.
- The Narayana, Gopalakrishna, and Narasimhaswamy temples at Tonnur.
- The walls of the Narasimhaswamy temple at Narasipura (located near Halebidu), which uniquely feature Tamil inscriptions.

These Tamil records are generally concise, objective, and prose-centric. In comparison to the vast corpus of Kannada inscriptions, their total percentage within the collective Hoysala epigraphical record remains relatively small.

Key Epigraphical Case Studies

1. **The Kuvvara-Lakshma Inscription (Halebidu, 1220 CE):** This prominent inscription explicitly chronicles the ultimate sacrifice of Kuvvara-Lakshma (the commander and elite bodyguard of King Veera Ballala II) along with his loyal Lenkas (followers) following the death of the king. The accompanying relief sculptures vividly depict the warriors ritually decapitating themselves.
2. **The Agrahara Bachahalli Inscription (Mandya District):** The inscriptions found in this region document the Garuda bodyguards belonging to the illustrious 'Mugilu' lineage. It records how they served successive generations of Hoysala monarchs and consistently performed ritual self-sacrifice upon their masters' deaths.
3. **The Araga Monument (Thirthahalli Taluk):** A granite relief sculpture measuring approximately two meters in length, titled "The Decapitation Memorial Sculpture of the Garuda Tradition," was discovered within the precincts of the Veerabhadra Temple in Araga.

This unique memorial sculpture is structured into two narrative panels:

- **The Lower Panel:** Depicts a Velaivali (Garuda warrior) mounted on a charging warhorse, holding a sword. A servant stands behind him holding a royal parasol (chhatra), signifying the warrior's elite or high-ranking status. A woman holding a sword is also depicted standing in the background.
- **The Upper Panel:** Depicts the heroic Garuda warrior seated in the Veerasana posture at the exact moment of decapitation. His right hand holds the sword, and his severed head is placed atop a shield-like plank held against his torso. Adjacent to this graphic scene, a woman is depicted holding the severed head in her hands.

This rare archaeological asset was discovered during extensive field research conducted by Dr. R. Shejeshwara, Director (Retired), Department of Archaeology, Museums and Heritage, Hampi.

Epigraphically Attested Titles

In the text of various inscriptions, the Garudas are honored with the following specific titles:

- **Lenka:** Implying a heroic warrior of exceptional valor.
- **Jolavali:** Meaning one who is absolutely loyal and indebted to the provider of their food/sustenance (the king).
- **Velavali:** Referring to a steadfast companion who stands securely by the master's side during times of critical crisis or adversity.

The Hoysala Administration

The administrative framework of the Hoysala Empire (spanning roughly the 10th to the 14th century CE) operated as a centralized monarchy that heavily adopted and adapted earlier operational models from the Western Chalukyas and the Western Gangas. While the sovereign held absolute executive authority, governance was effectively carried out with the strategic assistance of a council of ministers and high-ranking military commanders (Dandanayakas). The

empire was systematically sub-divided into Nadus (districts), Vishayas (sub-divisions), and Gramas (villages). Land revenue constituted the primary source of state income, while the specialized elite bodyguard unit known as the 'Garudas' strictly safeguarded the royal family and internal stability.

Salient Features of Hoysala Governance:

- **The Monarchy:** The king functioned as the supreme commander-in-chief of the armed forces, the ultimate judicial authority, and the chief administrator. Royal successors were often identified and prepared for statecraft from their childhood.
- **Council of Ministers:** An elite advisory body known as the 'Pancha Pradhanaru' (a council of five senior ministers) assisted the monarch in day-to-day administrative affairs.
- **Provincial Administration:** The kingdom was divided into administrative territories called Nadus (districts) and Vishayas (sub-divisions), which were governed by appointed Dandanayakas and regional governors.
- **Village Administration:** The village (Grama) formed the smallest unit of administration. Local assemblies and councils managed local taxation, resource management, and primary dispute resolutions.
- **Military Infrastructure:** The Empire maintained a robust standing army. At its absolute core stood the 'Garudas'—the elite bodyguard corps fiercely bound by personal loyalty to the person of the king.
- **Revenue and Taxation:** State revenues were drawn primarily from agrarian land taxes, alongside specific irrigation tariffs and commercial trade levies.
- **The Role of Women:** Royal queens (most notably Queen Shantaladevi) actively participated in political governance, provincial administration, and the extensive patronage of arts.

The Hoysala monarchs are globally renowned for their unparalleled patronage of art and intricate architecture, as structurally exemplified in the monumental temple complexes of Belur and Halebidu.

The Garuda system played an indispensable structural role within the broader framework of Hoysala governance. It unequivocally guaranteed the physical security of the monarch, fostered a deep-seated cultural ethos of absolute loyalty, minimized internal rebellions or dynastic betrayals, and consolidated the long-term stability of the administration. Such systems of institutionalized personal loyalty were vital mechanisms in the historical process of medieval state-building (Stein, 1980).

Socio-economic Conditions

During this period, the kingdom was prosperous and self-sufficient. The bulk of the state's revenue was derived from agricultural and commercial trade sectors. The subjects were liable to pay various types of taxes. In addition to land revenue and trade levies, there were professional taxes, caste-specific taxes, and taxes levied on social celebrations and ceremonies. Coins of various denominations and values were in circulation, including the Gadyana, Hana, Haga, Adda, and Bele. The standard units of measurement included the Khanduga, Salage, Kolaga, Kamba, Balla, and Mana. Land surveys were conducted systematically at regular intervals, and fresh surveys were specifically ordered whenever land disputes arose.

A strong ethos of religious tolerance prevailed across the kingdom, with all faiths receiving equal patronage and encouragement from the state. There are historical examples of inter-religious marriages and harmonious co-existence during this era. For instance, a high-ranking official named Chandramouli was a devout Shaivite, whereas his wife, Achiyakka, was a dedicated follower of Jainism. Brahmins, Jain ascetics, and Srivaishnava Acharyas occupied highly revered positions in society. Tamil scholars frequently migrated to the Hoysala territory (Hoysalanadu) and actively engaged in the propagation of Vaishnavism. Intellectual debates on religious and philosophical matters were organized routinely. Reflecting this inclusive religious policy, the monarchs bore the epithet 'Chatusamaya Samuddharan' (the uplifter/protector of the four religious systems).

Philanthropic acts and charitable endowments (dana-dharma) were an integral part of social life. Constructing and restoring temples, Jain basadis, and irrigation tanks (kere-katte) were considered acts of supreme spiritual merit. Similarly, making grants of land (bhū-dana) and monetary donations (dhana-dana) to support temple rituals and food offerings (naivedya) were highly favored religious practices. Historical evidence shows instances where dense forests were cleared to establish new villages and irrigation reservoirs. Rigorous Vedic studies and the fine arts received continuous encouragement. The king, administrative officials, prominent merchants, and private citizens were all deeply involved in these charitable endeavors.

The administrative officials and the general public exhibited absolute loyalty to the sovereign. Ordinary citizens seldom hesitated to sacrifice their lives for the protection of the king and the state. Several forms of ritual self-sacrifice were prevalent during this period, among which the Garuda system stands out as particularly noteworthy. The state granted land and monetary allowances to the families of fallen soldiers and deceased Garudas. The practice of Sati was also prevalent.

In many parts of the kingdom, cattle-raids (gograhana) occurred frequently. The cattle lifters could be from neighboring villages or external territories. Land grants and monetary compensation were institutionalized for the families of heroes who died fighting to protect the village and its livestock. Furthermore, border skirmishes over territorial boundaries broke out periodically. Commercial trade was highly vibrant, and merchants frequently sponsored major charitable works. Local weekly markets (sante) were central to economic life. Items such as textiles, sandalwood, betel nuts, mangoes, spices, and forest produce were regularly exported. Conversely, horses, elephants, pearls, cotton, salt, gold, and silver were imported. Pack animals were the primary mode of transporting goods. The commercial guild known as the 'Ayyavole Ainurvaru' (The Five Hundred of Ayyavole) served as a dominant force in maritime and domestic trade.

Women received special encouragement in various public spheres, particularly in the fine arts. King Vishnuvardhana's queen, Shantaladevi, was highly celebrated and held the title 'Sangeetha Natya Saraswati' (The Saraswati of Music and Dance). Some women also served as administrative officials. Epigraphical evidence suggests that a householder required the formal consent of his wife and sons before making public charities or land endowments. The attire and ornamentation of women were generally elegant yet simple,

and they placed high importance on traditional cosmetics and body unguents (angaraga). The Devadasi system was also an existing institution of this era.

Prominent learning centers of this period included Somanathapura, Belluru, Sarvajnapura, and Kellangere. Temples functioned as vital micro-social hubs, providing socio-cultural guidance to the community. Agrahara settlements served as the residential enclaves for scholars well-versed in the Vedas. Mirroring Chola practices, the Hoysalas designated certain Agraharas as 'Chaturvedimangalams'. For example, Maddur was known as Narasimha-Chaturvedimangalam, while Nagamangala was hailed as Veeraballala-Bhatta-Ratnakara. (H.M.N.R.)

Cultural and Ethical Dimensions

The Garuda system closely mirrors the core values of medieval Indian society: Dharma (righteous duty), Bhakti (unwavering devotion), and Veerata (martial heroism). Analyzing this institution provides deep insights into the ethical, moral, and cultural frameworks governing medieval society.

Comparison with Other Traditions

The Hoysala Garuda system shares strong structural parallels with the **Velaikkarar** tradition of Tamil Nadu. The Velaikkarars were also bound by an absolute vow of loyalty unto death (Sastri, 1975). This demonstrates the presence of a shared, pan-South Indian military culture centered on institutionalized personal fidelity.

Decline of the Garuda System

Concurrently with the political fragmentation and eventual collapse of the Hoysala Empire, the institutional framework of the Garuda system steadily declined. With the emergence of new geopolitical structures and altered military systems in the subsequent eras, this unique tradition gradually lost its functional relevance.

Conclusion

The Hoysala Garuda system remains an extraordinary historical example of institutionalized loyalty, ultimate sacrifice, and medieval political culture. Through a rigorous analysis of epigraphical sources, we can reconstruct its profound socio-cultural significance. It stands as an indispensable primary source for studying the value systems of medieval India. The Hoysala Garuda system represents one of the rarest organizations of absolute allegiance in world history. Far from being a standard military regiment, it was a profound convergence of valor, spiritual devotion, and supreme self-sacrifice. Even today, the surviving Garudagambas (Garuda Pillars) scattered across the Malenadu and Bayaluseeme (plains) regions of Karnataka silently proclaim the unmatched saga of these warriors. This comprehensive study has been compiled on the basis of historical chronicles and epigraphical data. For further specialized field research, the inscriptions etched upon the definitive 'Garuda Pillar' at Halebidu serve as the foundational primary source.

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