

Representing War Culture in the *Puranāṇūru*: Kingship, Valour, and the Making of a Tamil Heroic Ethos

Dr. K. Lakshmi Priya

Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
Shrimathi Devkunvar Nanalal Bhatt Vaishnav College for Women, Chennai.

Abstract: The *Puranāṇūru*, the last of the Eight Anthologies (Eṭṭuttokai) of classical Sangam literature, is the single most important Tamil corpus for understanding how an early historic South Indian society imagined, organized, and memorialized war. Composed by more than a hundred and fifty poets between roughly the first and fifth centuries CE, its four hundred poems construct war not as an aberration from ordinary life but as the very ground on which kingship, masculinity, poetic patronage, and communal memory were built. This article examines how the *Puranāṇūru* represents Sangam-era war culture through five interlocking lenses: its formal classification of war experience into *tiṇai* categories; the cattle raid as the structural origin of conflict; the fusion of sacred kingship with martial generosity; the ethical and aesthetic code of valour (*māram*) that prized death in battle over retreat; and the roles played by women and by hero-stone (*nadukal*) worship in transforming individual death into durable communal meaning. All together, these elements reveal war in the *Puranāṇūru* not simply as a historical record of conflict but as a total cultural institution, one sustained jointly by kings, bards, warriors, mothers, and stone.

Keywords: Sangam literature, *Puranāṇūru*, Tamil war poetry, *tiṇai*, heroic ethos, hero stones, ancient Tamil kingship

Introduction

Among the eighteen major works that constitute Sangam literature — the earliest substantial body of secular poetry in a Dravidian language — the *Puranāṇūru* occupies a singular position. Where its companion anthologies largely dwell in the interior world of love,



longing, and domestic sentiment (the *akam* mode), the *Puranāṇūru*, whose title literally means "four hundred poems of the exterior," turns outward to the public life of the ancient Tamil polity: kingship, war, generosity, mortality, and the ethical demands placed on rulers and warriors alike. It is this outward orientation that makes the anthology an unusually direct witness to how a pre-modern society represented, justified, and ritualized organized violence.

This article asks a focused question: how does the *Puranāṇūru* represent war — not merely as event, but as *culture*, encompassing the institutions, values, symbols, and social roles that made recurrent armed conflict a coherent and even valorised feature of Tamilakam, the ancient Tamil-speaking macro-region. Rather than treating the anthology's war poems as a simple chronicle of battles, the analysis approaches them as a structured cultural text: one that classifies war experience through inherited poetic convention, embeds it within a theory of sacred kingship, elaborates an ethics of heroic death, assigns women a specific ritual and emotional function in relation to the battlefield, and finally converts individual mortality into lasting communal memory through the practice of hero-stone worship.

The stakes of this inquiry extend beyond literary history. Scholars including George Hart and Hank Heifetz have argued that the *Puranāṇūru* offers a rare vantage onto Tamil society as it existed prior to extensive Sanskritic and Indo-Aryan influence, making its representation of war a valuable index of indigenous South Indian social organization rather than an import from northern epic or dharmic traditions. At the same time, the anthology's status as courtly, patronage-driven poetry — composed largely by professional bards dependent on royal generosity for their livelihood — complicates any simple reading of it as objective reportage. The article therefore also considers the poems' representational strategies as artefacts of a specific literary economy, in which praising a king's valour was inseparable from the poet's own material survival.

Historical and Literary Context

The *Puranāṇūru* belongs to the Sangam corpus, traditionally associated with academies of poets said to have flourished under Pandya patronage at Madurai. Modern philological scholarship, notably that of Kamil Zvelebil, situates the composition of most *Puranāṇūru* poems



between the second and fifth centuries CE, though the anthology's compilation as a fixed collection of four hundred poems (of which two are now lost) likely occurred somewhat later. The poems are attributed to more than one hundred and fifty named poets, including at least ten women, alongside a substantial body of anonymous compositions that scholars believe preserve an older oral heroic tradition predating individual authorship.

Geographically and politically, the poems map onto the three major ruling lineages of ancient Tamilakam- the Chera, Chola, and Pandya dynasties - together with numerous minor chieftains, or *vēḷir*, whose smaller domains clustered along the river systems of the Kaveri, the Vaigai, and the Periyar. Each poem in the anthology is traditionally accompanied by a colophon identifying its poet, its royal or chiefly subject, and the occasion of its composition, a paratextual apparatus that has made the *Puranāṇūru* an indispensable, if contested, source for reconstructing the political history of the period. Roughly a third of the anthology's poems are addressed directly to named kings — eighteen Chera, thirteen Chola, and twelve early Pandya rulers are praised across its verses — while the remainder address chieftains, poets, or general reflections on mortality and virtue.

Crucially, this was a world of near-constant, small-scale warfare among competing kingdoms and chiefdoms rather than the sweeping continental campaigns familiar from northern Indian epic. War in this context was frequent, localized, and deeply entangled with the pastoral and agrarian economy - a condition that shaped nearly every dimension of how the *Puranāṇūru* chose to represent it.

The *Tiṇai* Framework: Classifying War as Poetic Convention

Central to any account of how the *Puranāṇūru* represents war is the *tiṇai* system, the classificatory scheme inherited from the *Tolkāppiyam*, the foundational Tamil grammar and poetics treatise. Just as *akam* (interior) poems were organized into landscapes corresponding to emotional states of love, *puram* (exterior) poems were organized into stages of the martial process. The *Tolkāppiyam* names seven canonical *puramtiṇai*: *veṭci*, the provocation of war through a cattle raid; *vañci*, the invasion of enemy territory; *uḷṇai*, the siege of a fortress;



tumpai, the pitched battle itself; *vākai*, the celebration of victory; *pāṭāṇ*, the poet's formal praise of the victorious king; and *kāñci*, meditative verse on the impermanence of life and glory.

The *Puṛaṇāṇūru*, however, does not adhere strictly to this sevenfold scheme. Its colophons instead identify eleven distinct *tiṇai*, expanding the classical framework to include categories such as *karantai* (the recovery of stolen cattle), *nocci* (verses associated with the defenders of a besieged fort, named for the vitex shrub worn by its guards), and, notably, two *tiṇai* — *kaikkiḷai* and *peruntiṇai* — ordinarily reserved for *akam* love poetry. Their appearance within a war anthology is itself revealing: poems 83 through 85, classified as *kaikkiḷai* (unrequited love), describe a noblewoman's feelings for a captive Chola king, while poems 143 through 147, classified as *peruntiṇai* (unsuitable love), concern a king's abandonment of his wife. Their inclusion demonstrates that the boundary between the "interior" world of feeling and the "exterior" world of politics and war was, even within the *tiṇai* system's own logic, permeable: dynastic and military circumstance could generate intensely private emotional material, and the poets did not hesitate to annex the conventions of love poetry to represent it.

Each *tiṇai* was also associated with a specific symbolic flower - the vetchi blossom for the cattle raid, for instance — worn by warriors or invoked in verse to mark the stage of conflict being represented. This botanical symbolism reflects a broader pattern in Sangam poetics, in which the natural landscape is never a passive backdrop but an active participant in signifying human action, including violence. War, in other words, was not represented by the *Puṛaṇāṇūru* poets as a single undifferentiated event but as a structured sequence of ritually and poetically distinct phases, each with its own conventions, moods, and vocabulary — a taxonomy that speaks to how thoroughly warfare had been absorbed into the culture's aesthetic and ceremonial life.

The Cattle Raid as the Engine of War

If the *tiṇai* system supplies the formal grammar of war representation, the cattle raid supplies its narrative origin. Repeatedly across the anthology, conflict is figured as beginning with *veṭci*: the seizure of an enemy's cattle, followed by *karantai*, the counter-raid to recover it. This is not merely a poetic convention but reflects the underlying pastoral-agrarian economy of



ancient Tamilakam, in which cattle constituted a primary and highly mobile form of wealth. To raid an enemy's herd was simultaneously an economic act, an assertion of martial superiority, and a calculated provocation designed to draw a rival into open conflict on terms of one's choosing.

The centrality of the cattle raid to the *Puranāṇūru*'s war imaginary is corroborated by the archaeological record: early hero stones (*nadukal*) recovered from sites such as Pulimankombai bear Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions explicitly commemorating warriors killed while seizing or recovering cattle, confirming that this was not merely a literary trope but a lived and frequently fatal social practice. The raid-and-recovery cycle thus functioned as a kind of ritualized escalation mechanism: a relatively small, almost customary act of provocation could rapidly draw two polities into the fuller stages of invasion, siege, and pitched battle catalogued by the *tiṇai* system. In representing war's origin this way, the *Puranāṇūru* frames organized violence not as the rupture of an otherwise peaceful order but as an expected, cyclical feature of a competitive pastoral economy — one with its own recognized rules of initiation, escalation, and resolution.

Sacred Kingship, Generosity, and the Agricultural Metaphor of War

The *Puranāṇūru*'s representation of war cannot be separated from its theory of kingship. The anthology consistently attributes to the king powers that exceed the merely political: poets describe rulers as possessing quasi-magical influence over rainfall, the fertility of the land, and the success of harvests, such that the moral and martial conduct of the king was believed to have direct consequences for the prosperity of his territory. War, within this framework, becomes an extension of the king's sacred responsibility to protect and nourish his people, rather than a separate or exceptional domain of activity.

This sacral conception of kingship is fused, throughout the anthology, with an insistence on royal generosity (*kodai*) as the necessary complement to martial prowess. The ideal king represented in the *Puranāṇūru* is not merely a successful warrior but a lavish patron who redistributes the wealth won in war - including captured cattle - to his poets, his warriors, and his subjects. Indeed, many of the anthology's most celebrated poems are less concerned with



describing combat itself than with praising a king's boundless liberality, suggesting that within this culture, martial success and generous redistribution were understood as two faces of a single virtue rather than distinct qualities.

Scholars have also noted the *Purāṇāṇūru*'s recurring use of agricultural metaphor to characterize war: kingship and battle are figured as a kind of harvesting, in which the chaos of conflict is transformed, through the king's valorous action, into order and productivity for his realm. This metaphorical structure does important representational work. It naturalizes war as a productive, almost seasonal activity analogous to farming, rather than as destructive or exceptional violence, and it reinforces the king's role as a figure whose martial and agrarian responsibilities are ultimately continuous with one another. The war drum (*muḷavu*), sounded before battle and during royal ceremony alike, similarly marks the seamlessness between the king's martial and civic functions: the same instrument that summons warriors to the field also announces the ruler's court, binding the two domains within a single register of authority.

The Ethics and Aesthetics of Valour (*Māram*)

At the heart of the *Purāṇāṇūru*'s war culture lies a demanding ethical code centered on the concept of *māram*, or heroic valour, which the anthology elaborates with a clarity and intensity that has led scholars such as George Hart to treat it as one of the text's defining preoccupations. The code's central proposition is stark: death in battle, facing the enemy, is honourable, while retreat — and above all, being wounded in the back while fleeing - is a source of enduring shame, both for the warrior and for his lineage. One frequently cited verse captures this logic directly, contrasting the sweetness of dying with a wound on the chest against the mockery a coward invite from women garlanded for celebration.

This code was not simply an abstract ideal; it structured concrete social practices. Scars, particularly chest wounds, functioned as visible proof of a warrior's courage and were displayed with pride, while poets frequently catalogue a hero's or a king's wounds as a form of biographical résumé, evidence supporting the praise the poem confers. The warrior who had never been wounded is, in several poems, depicted as regretting the years of his life spent without proof of



his valour — an inversion of ordinary risk-aversion that only makes sense within a cultural logic in which physical harm sustained in battle was itself a form of social capital.

The poets who composed and performed these verses — figures such as Kapilar, Auvaiyar (Avvaiyar), and Parānar among the most celebrated — were themselves integral to sustaining this ethical economy. Dependent on royal and chiefly patronage for their livelihood, bards had a direct material stake in celebrating, and thereby reinforcing, the valorisation of martial death. The relationship was reciprocal: kings required poets to transform their martial deeds into lasting fame, since valour that went unsung risked being forgotten, while poets required kings' generosity to sustain their own position within the social order. This mutual dependency helps explain both the intensity of the anthology's celebration of *māram* and the occasional scholarly caution — voiced by critics such as Sivaraja Pillai — that some *Puṛaṇāṇūru* poems may reflect the exaggerated flattery of poets anxious to secure patronage as much as an objective record of heroic conduct.

The anthology's battlefield imagery reinforces this ethical framework through a consistent material vocabulary: the spear (*vēl*) thrown or planted in the ground, the sword drawn in close combat, and the war elephant and chariot that signalled royal command of the field all recur as markers not merely of military capacity but of moral standing. Kings are frequently compared to Death itself in the intensity of their battlefield presence, a comparison the poets deploy admiringly rather than as censure, since within this ethical universe the capacity to inflict death in open combat was inseparable from legitimate rule. Even drink finds a place within this martial vocabulary: toddy, consumed before battle to steady the nerves and after it in celebration, appears repeatedly as an accompaniment to the warrior's courage, described in one poem with a potency likened to a scorpion's sting. Such details, incidental as they may appear, contribute to a densely coherent representational world in which every object - weapon, animal, drink, drum - is enlisted in the service of the anthology's larger argument about what a warrior's life, and death, should mean.

Women and the War Culture

Although the *Puranāṇūru* is, in its surface content, overwhelmingly a literature of kings and warriors, its representation of war culture assigns women a role that is neither marginal nor passive. Mothers, in particular, are repeatedly figured not as opponents of their sons' martial risk but as active enforcers of the heroic code. In one of the anthology's most striking poems, attributed to the poet Kāḱkaipāṭiṇiyār Naccellaiyār, a mother reacts to the false report that her son fled the battlefield by declaring she would cut off the very breast that suckled him were the report true; on learning instead that he died fighting nobly, she is described as happier than on the day she bore him. Another poem, attributed to Auvaiyar, describes a warrior's mother whose grief on hearing of her son's heroic death is so intense that it is said, in a striking bodily image, to cause her aged breasts to give milk once more. A further poem, by Okkūr Mācāṭṭiyār, describes a mother sending her young son into battle even after both her husband and her father had already died in combat on consecutive days - a testament to the code's demand that valour be reproduced across generations regardless of personal cost.

This maternal role reflects a broader structural function: women in the *Puranāṇūru* serve as the ethical guardians of the heroic code, holding warriors - including, implicitly, their own sons - to its uncompromising standard even at the cost of profound personal grief. Alongside this active enforcement role, the anthology also attends to women's suffering as war's consequence, particularly through poems addressing widowhood and the ideal of *karpu*, or feminine chastity and fidelity, which the *Puranāṇūru* treats as a value of comparable cultural weight to martial valour itself. The anthology's incorporation of *kaikkiḷai* and *peruntiṇai* poems - nominally love-poetry categories, repurposed here to represent women's longing for warrior-kings and their grief at abandonment - further demonstrates that the emotional costs war imposed on women were not simply excluded from this "exterior" poetic mode but were folded into it, even if always in relation to a male warrior or king who remains the poems' ultimate subject.

Memorializing Death: Hero Stones and the Afterlife of Valour

The *Puranāṇūru*'s representation of war extends beyond the battlefield into the practices by which a fallen warrior's death was memorialized and given lasting communal meaning.



Central to this practice was the *nadukal*, or hero stone, planted at the site where a warrior died - most commonly in the course of a cattle raid or its recovery - and subsequently worshipped as a sacred object. Several *Puranāṇūru* poems describe this worship in concrete ritual detail: the stone was garlanded with flowers and peacock feathers, offered food and toddy, and sheltered beneath a temporary canopy, in a practice the anthology's commentarial tradition terms *nālvalipātu*.

The cultural significance of this practice is difficult to overstate. One widely cited verse from the *Puranāṇūru* asserts that a community recognized no gods beyond the warriors represented in its hero stones - a claim that positions martial death, memorialized in stone, as the foundational religious as well as social institution of the community. Archaeological evidence corroborates the *Puranāṇūru*'s testimony: inscribed hero stones dating to the early centuries CE, bearing Tamil-Brahmi script, have been recovered at sites across the Tamil region, several explicitly naming warriors killed in cattle raids in terms that closely echo the anthology's own vocabulary. Over subsequent centuries, many such hero-stone sites evolved into full-fledged local shrines, with warrior figures such as Maduraiveeran eventually absorbed into a broader Tamil pantheon of guardian deities - a long durational process for which the *Puranāṇūru*'s battlefield elegies represent an early textual anchor.

This memorial apparatus reveals something essential about the *Puranāṇūru*'s war culture as a whole: individual death in battle was never represented as an endpoint but as a transformation, converting a warrior's mortal body into a durable object of communal reverence, and his individual valour into a resource - moral, religious, and even meteorological, given the belief that such spirits could influence rain and fortune — available to the living community. The anthology's elegiac poems, several of which are addressed directly to a *nadukal* or describe the mourning rites surrounding a warrior's death, thus function as a literary complement to an actual, archaeologically attested ritual practice, each reinforcing the other's claim that heroic death, properly honoured, achieves a form of permanence denied to ordinary mortality.



Poetic Realism, Historical Value, and Scholarly Caveats

The *Puranāṇūru* has long been prized by historians precisely because of the vividness and apparent immediacy of its war poetry; unlike much of classical Indian literature, it largely avoids theological or philosophical abstraction in favour of direct engagement with observable social and political life. George Hart and Hank Heifetz, whose translation remains the standard English edition, have argued that this quality makes the anthology an unusually reliable window onto a Tamil society still substantially unshaped by the large-scale Indo-Aryan cultural influence that would later transform the region — a claim supported by the anthology's distinctive vocabulary of kingship, its indigenous pantheon (including the war goddess Korravai, associated with victory and the *tuṇaṅkai* dance), and its comparatively limited reference to Brahmanical ritual relative to later Tamil literature.

At the same time, historians of the period, including Sivaraja Pillai, have cautioned against treating the *Puranāṇūru*'s war poems as neutral historical documentation. These were, after all, poems composed largely by professional bards materially dependent on the goodwill of the kings and chieftains they praised; the anthology's celebratory hyperbole regarding royal generosity and martial invincibility may as plausibly reflect the rhetorical needs of patronage-seeking poets as an objective record of events. The genre's own gnomic *kāñci* poems - meditating on the fragility of glory and life - arguably represent an internal acknowledgment of this tension, tempering the anthology's celebratory register with a recurring awareness that fame, however loudly sung, is itself impermanent.

Taken together, these considerations suggest that the *Puranāṇūru* is best approached neither as a straightforward chronicle nor as pure literary fantasy, but as a richly mediated cultural representation: one that simultaneously reflects genuine social practices - the cattle raid, hero-stone worship, the maternal enforcement of martial honour- and actively constructs, through poetic convention and patronage-driven praise, the very heroic ideology it appears simply to describe.



Conclusion

The *Puṛaṇāṇūru* represents war in Sangam-era Tamilakam not as an isolated military phenomenon but as a total cultural institution, woven inseparably into the period's understanding of kingship, economy, ethics, gender, religion, and poetic practice. Its *tiṇai* framework classifies the stages of conflict with the same formal precision Sangam poetics applied to romantic love; its narrative logic traces war's origin to the cattle raid, an act rooted in the pastoral economy of the region; its theory of kingship fuses martial success with sacred responsibility for the land's fertility and with the ethical obligation of generous redistribution; its code of *māram* demands and rewards death over dishonour, sustained by a reciprocal economy of warriors and patronage-dependent poets; its women serve not merely as war's mourners but as active custodians of its uncompromising honour code; and its hero-stone tradition ensures that individual battlefield death is converted into lasting communal and even religious meaning.

What emerges from this composite picture is a society in which the boundary between poetry and social institution was remarkably thin: the *Puṛaṇāṇūru*'s poets did not simply record a pre-existing war culture but actively participated in constructing and perpetuating it, their verses functioning as one of the mechanisms — alongside cattle raids, hero stones, and maternal exhortation — through which valour was continually produced, rewarded, and remembered. For this reason, the anthology's lasting significance lies not only in what it tells modern readers about the historical fact of war in ancient Tamilakam, but in what it demonstrates about how a literary tradition can itself become one of the primary instruments through which a culture teaches itself what it means to fight, to rule, to grieve, and to be remembered.

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