Tamil - Brahmi Inscriptions

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The Palaeography of the Tamil-Brahmi Script

I. Dravidian Pictographic Script of the Proto Historical Period:

1. 1 Recent advances seem to indicate that the language of the Proto-Indian Pictographic ('Harappan') script was probably Dravidian. Thus one of the three earliest writing systems known to the world seems to have been developed by the Dravidians in North-west India in the Third Millenium B.C. The script was in use in the Gujerat phase of the Proto-Indian civilization upto 1500 B.C. or perhaps a little later.

1. 2 The graffiti on the megalithic pottery in South India, datable in the First Millenium B.C. though the exact duration is still uncertain, seem to be related to the Pictographic signs of the Proto-Indian script. Lal has demonstrated that eightynine percent of the megalithic symbols go back to the Chalcolithic-Harappan times. It is, therefore, likely that the Dravidians continued to have a rudimentary writing system or atleast a set of meaningful symbols down to the megalithic age.

1. 3 One should, however, distinguish between the earlier Picto-graphic writing system for Dravidian represented by the Proto-Indian ('Harappan') script and the much later syllabic or quasi-alphabetic writing systems represented by the Brāhmī scripts. On the basis of the present evidence, it is not possible to posit any link between the two systems. Langdon, Hunter and others did suggest a connection; but this has not been proved. It appears that the knowledge of writing was totally lost in India and the introduction of the Brāhmī script was a completely new beginning. Such a phenomenon has happened elsewhere also. The Greek alphabetic script of about the seventh Century B.C. is totally unrelated to the syllabic Linear-B script used for writing an early form of Greek in the second mill-enium B.C. in Crete and Southern Greece.

2. Brahmi Script:

There is no certain example of the occurrence of the Brāhmī
script before the third or perhaps the Fourth Century B. C. In the
present state of our knowledge we can only say that the Brāhmī
script was developed sometime around the middle of the First Milleni-
um B. C. There has been a lot of controversy about the origin of
the Brāhmī script. However, the semitic origin proposed by Buhler
and recently reiterated by Dani has never been seriously challenged.
There are too many close resemblances between the North Semitic
alphabet and the Brāhmī syllabary to be dismissed as mere coinci-
dences. However, the aspirates, the medial vowel signs and the system
of ligaturing letters are indigenous developments. To pursue the matter
further would be beyond the scope of these papers which are concerned
with the origin and the development of the Tamil-Brāhmī script.

3. The Origin of the Tamil Brahmi Script :

3. 1 It is certain that the Tamil-Brāhmī script developed out of
the Brāhmī script. The evidence on this point may be summarised
thus :

(i)   All but four letters of the Tamil-Brāhmī script are identical
      with those of the southern variety of the Mauryan Brāhmī
      script found in the Aśokan edicts at siddhapura, Yerra-
      guḍi, Brahmagiri, Māski and other places in the South.

(ii) Even the four characteristic Tamil-Brāhmī letters (viz., ḷ,
      ḻ, r and ṉ) can be shown to be derived from the corres-
      ponding Brāhmī letters having the nearest phonetic values.

(iii) The earlier absence of separate letters for the short vowels
      e and o and their later development by a process of ad-
      aptation from the corresponding long vowels indicate that
      the Tamil-Brāhmī script developed from the Brāhmī script
      which did not have the shorter vowels, e and o.

(iv) Letters of the Brāhmī script, not part of the Tamil-Brāhmī
      syllabary, are found used occasionally to express non-Tamil
      sounds in loan-words even in the earliest Tamil-Brāhmī
      texts (e.g. dhammam in the Mangulam Cave inscriptions).

3. 2 The Brāhmī script seems to have been brought to South India along with the spread of Jainism and Buddhism. According to an old Jaina tradition Bhadrabāhu migrated to Śravaṇa Belgōḷa in Mysore in the time of Chandragupta Maurya. It is believed that his disciples under the leadership of Viśākhamuni came further south to preach the faith some time around the beginning of the Third Century B.C. Buddhism reached South India and Ceylon not much later, thanks to the missionary zeal of Aśoka. The rock-shelters with Jaina Buddhist associations contain the earliest specimens of the Tamil-Brāhmī script. We may, therefore, conclude that knowledge of the Brāhmī script reached the Tamil country in the third Century B.C. in the wake of the spread of Jainism and Buddhism and that the Tamil-Brāhmī script was a local development which took place sometime around the end of the Third Century B.C.

4. Palæography:

4. 1 *Phonetic Adaptation in Tamil:*

The Tamil-Brāhmī script is an adaptation of the Brāhmī script to the Tamil phonetic system. The adaptation consists of.

    (i) *Omission* of symbols representing sounds not found in Tamil:—

        (a) the semi-vowels *r* and *l*;

        (b) the *anusvara* and the *visarga*;

        (c) voiced consonants;

        (d) aspirates (except *dh* in the loan-word (*dhammam*);

        (e) sibilants (except *s* in loan-words).

    (ii) *Addition* of new symbols to represent sounds peculiar to Tamil: *ḷ, ḻ, ṟ* and *ṉ*.

    (iii) *Orthographical modifications:*

        (a) use of the consonantal symbol to represent the basic consonant;

        (b) use of a medial sign for the medial vowel *a* not considered inherent in the consonant;

        (c) use of the short *u* of the Brāhmī script to represent the 'ultra-short' *u* (kuṟṟiyal-u-karam) and the long *ū* of the Brāhmī script

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to represent the short *u* of Tamil.

(d) Avoidance of ligatures.

4. 2 *Inventory of Symbols :*

A complete inventory of the symbols for the letters and the medial signs occurring in the Tamil Brāhmī script is given below :

I. *Vowels :*

  (a) initial (full) :

    a, ā, i, ī, u, ū, e/ē, ai, o/ō,   (9)

    அ ஆ இ ஈ உ ஊ எ/ஏ ஐ ஒ/ஓ

  (b) medial vowel-signs :

    a/ā, i, ī, u, ū, e/ē, ai, o/ō   (8)

    ஆ இ ஈ உ ஊ எ/ஏ ஐ ஒ/ஓ

II. *Consonants :*

  (a) letters :

    k ṅ c ñ ṭ ṇ t n p m y r l v ḷ ḷ ṟ ṉ

    க ங ச ஞ ட ண த ந ப ம ய ர ல வ ழ ள ற ன

  (b) Consonantal sign :

    the Puḷḷi (in the late period)   (1)

    Total Letters :   (27)

    Signs   (9)

III. *Brāhmī letters in loan-words :*

  (a) In the cave inscriptions :

    dh, s

    ध स

  (b) In the Arikamedu graffiti :

    kh, d, dh, b, bh, s

    ख द ध ब भ स

4. 3 *Special palaeographical features :*

The most interesting palaeographical feature of the Tamil-Brāhmī script is the origin and the evolution of the four special letters not found in the parent Brāhmī script; viz., *ḷ ḷ ṟ* and *ṉ*. It will be seen that in each case the new letter is formed by a process of adaptation from a corresponding Brāhmī letter with nearest phonetic value. Thus we have *ḷ* from *ḍ*, *ḷ* from *l*, *ṟ* from *ṭ* and

n from *n*. The origin of the letters indicates their early phonetic affinities. The evolution of the letters provides us with a method of arranging the inscriptions in a relative chronological order.

5. Orthography of the Tamil-Brahmi Script:

5. 1 The Tamil-Brāhmī inscriptions defied the earlier attempts at decipherment mainly because of its remarkable orthographical peculiarities which sharply distinguish the script from Brāhmī. The orthographical system of the Tamil-Brāhmī script is a deliberate modification to suit the needs of Tamil phonetics.

5. 2 A careful study of the Tamil-Brāhmī inscriptions reveals the existence of two orthographic systems which can be shown, on palaeographic and linguistic considerations to belong to two successive periods. The following Chart summarises the features of the two orthographical systems of the Tamil-Brāhmī Script:

Earlier orthographical system (Pre-Arikamedu) (3-1 Cent. B.C,)	Later orthographical system (Post-Arikamedu) (1-6 Cent. A.D.)
1. The values of *i* and *ī* symbols of the Brāhmī script are found inter-changed in the Tamil-Brāmī script.	The values of the *i* and *ī* symbols in the Tamil-Brāhmī script are the same as in the Brāhmī script.
2. The *u* and *ū* symbols of the Brāhmī script are used to indicate the 'ultra-short' *u* and short *u* respectively in the Tamil - Brāhmī script. The latter symbol is also used to denote the long *ū* of Tamil.	The values of *u* and *ū* symbols in the Tamil-Brāhmī script are the same as in the Brāhmī script.
3. There is no distinction between short and long *e* and *o* in the Tamil - Brāhmī script though the contrasts existed in the language.	The *Puḷḷi* is invented to denote the basic consonant as well as short *e* and *o*. The present evidence shows that this development took place at about the end of Arikamedu Period (2 Cent. A.D.).

4. The consonantal s y m b o l, unaccompanied by a medial sign, represents the basic consonant.	In the Arikamedu Period (1-2 Cent. A.D.) the consonantal symbol is either basic or has the inherent *a* according to context. The *puḷḷi* was later developed to indicate the basic consonant.
5. The *a* medial sign is also used to denote the *ā* medial vowel.	The *a* medial sign denotes only the *a* medial vowel as in the Brāhmī script.

5. 3 *Dating of the earlier orthographic system :*

The precisely dated Arikamedu graffiti (1-2 Cent. A.D.) constitute the sheet-anchor for the chronology of the Tamil-Brāhmī inscriptions. All the five criteria listed in the preceding chart serve to distinguish the Arikamedu graffiti from the earlier Tamil-Brāhmī cave inscriptions which also show archaic palaeographic and linguistic features. The earlier orthographical system can, therefore, be neatly bracketed between Aśoka and Arikamedu (C. 3-1 Cent. B.C.). This dating is also corroborated by the Bhattiprolu casket inscriptions (C. 200 B.C.). The Mangulam cave inscriptions are good examples of the earlier orthographical system.

5. 4 *Dating of the later orthographic system :*

The later inscriptions (C. 1-6 Cent. A.D.) can be dated only by palaeographic and linguistic data as their orthography had had become stable and shows no change except for the introduction of the *Puḷḷi* at a later date. The Pugalur cave inscriptions are good illustrations of the later orthographic system.

5. 5 *Puḷḷi :*

This is a later development. The *Puḷḷi* is obviously a diacritical mark invented to eliminate the confusion between the basic consonant and the consonant with the inherent *a*. This clearly reveals that the *Puḷḷi* system could have developed only out of the later orthographic system, as there was no confusion in the earlier system between the basic consonant and the consonant with the inherent *a*. (In fact the confusion in the earlier system was between the *a* and *ā* medial vowels). This theoretical deduction is also confirmed by the actual occurrences of *Puḷḷi* from about the end of the Arika-

medu Period (Century 200 A.D.). The earliest occurrences of *Puḷḷi* are on the bilingual silver coin of Vāsiṭhīputa Siri Sātakaṇi, on the lead coin of Cēntaṇ in the Chengam hoard (both C. 2 Cent. A.D.) and in the Araccalur cave inscription (C. 3-4 Cent. A.D.). The age of the invention of the *Puḷḷi* has a bearing on the date of *Tolkāp-piyam* which is quite familiar with the device.

6. Evolution of the medieval Vatteluttu and Tamil Scripts:

6. 1 The recent advances in the study of the Tamil-Brāhmī script have cleared up the mystery surrounding the origin of the Vaṭṭeḷuttu script. It is now seen that the Tamil-Brāhmī script had a continuous evolution until it became by imperceptible stages the Vaṭṭeḷuttu script. There is no sharp dividing line between the two stages of the script. We may draw a line for the sake of con-venience at the commencement of the Pallava rule in the Tamil Country (C. 600 A.D.).

6. 2 The Tamil script, properly so called (along with the Grantha script used in the Tamil Country to write sanskrit) appears to have developed in the northern border of the Tamil Country during the Sātavāhana and the Pallava Periods out of the Brāhmī script used for the Prākṛt inscriptions of these dynasties. The Chōḷas inherited the script from the Pallavas and made it the standard script for Tamil that we use even today. Vaṭṭeḷuttu script slowly became extinct when the Tamil Country was unified under the Chōḷa Empire (9-12 Cent. A.D.), though it lingered on for some more time in Kerala.

The Grammar of the Tamil-Brahmi Inscriptions

I. Phonology :

1. Phonemic inventory :

VOWELS

	Front		Middle		Back	
	S	L	S	L	S	L
High	i	ī			u	ū
Middle	e	ē			o	ō
Low			a	ā		

CONSONANTS

	Plosives	Nasals	Laterals	Fricatives	Semivowels
Velar	k	ṅ			
Palatal	c	ñ			y
retroflex	ṭ	ṇ	ḷ	ḻ	
Alveolar	ṟ	ṉ			
dental	t	n		r	
labial	p	m			v

2. Vowels :

There are ten vowels, *a*, *i*, *u*, *e* and *o* and their length. *ai* occurs mostly medially except in two cases-*aiyan* (51) and *aimpattēḷ* (*u*) (76). *Au* does not occur. Though the length of *e* and *o* is not marked, it can be inferred from the contrasts in the language e.g. *Veḷ* white (3) and *vēḷ* : a caste-name (25). All vowels occur in the initial and medial positions (except *o* initially). The vowels *i̅* *e* and *o* do not occur finally. Vowel-clusters are fequent, though the glides *y* and *v* also occur from the earliest level.

3. *Vowel alternations*:

These are of 4 types as illustrated below:

   (i) *a>e* Cantaṉ (22): Centaṉ (21): a male personal name

   (ii) *i>e* iḷa (2): eḷa (38): young

   (iii) *o>u* koṭu (3): kuṭu (29): to give

   (iv) *i=y* ce-i-a (2): ce-y-a (13): past pple of *cey*, to do

4. *Consonants*:

   All 18 consonants of literary Tamil occur. *ṅ* and *ñ* occur only as positional variants of *m* before the homorganic stops and are not therefore separate phonemes but *ṉ* and *ṉ* are perhaps separate phonemes but no contrast can be found. *Āytam* does not occur.

5. *Distribution of Consonants*:

   The distribution of consonants follows the pattern of literary Tamil. Eight consonants occur initially (*k, c, t, n, p, m, y, v*) and eight occur finally (*ṉ, m, y, r, l, ḷ, ḻ, n*). *y* occurs only with *ā* (in *yāṟṟ-ūr*: No. 56). *c* occurs initially in three names Cantaṉ (22), Caḷiyaṉ (1, 2) and Caṭikaṉ (2). The only types of consonantal clusters are geminates and nasal-plosive clusters. *r* and *ḻ* are not doubled.

6. *Consonantal alternations*:

   (i) *ṉ>ḷ* Vēṉ (29) Vēḷ (25) a caste name

   (ii) *ḷ>ṭ* kaḷu (30) for kaṭu (56) fierce

   (iii) *k>zero* makaṉ (56) māṉ (71) son

   (iv) dropping of nasals: *antai* (18) *atai* (23) honorific

   (v) *s>c* Pkt. *upāsaka>upācāṉ* (8) a lay devotee

   (vi) *ṉ>n* initially in compounds: *Poṉ Vāṇikaṉ + atti = Poṉvāṇi-kaṇṇatti* (66) a name

2. **Morphology**:

   1. *Verbs*:

   Verbs generally occur in the participial form and frequently take the causal form, perhaps under the influence of Prākṛt originals. (e.g.

aṟupita (57), kuṭupita (29), ceyipita (59), etc. Finite verbs, which occur less frequently, are formed with the addition of the Pronominal suffixes ōṇ, ōṛ, avaṇ and aṇ. These forms can also be considered as particital nouns.

2. *Pronouns:*

The First Person singular pronominal termination -eṇ occurs once (11). First Person plural pronoun is the oblique form *em*' also occurs once (17). Second Person does not occur. In the Third Person, we have *avaṇ, avar, -oṇ,* and *or.* It is interesting to note the occurrence of -*uvaṇ* in the Mangulam inscriptions. The Feminine singular *avaḷ* does not occur. Neuter singular *ita* (*itu + a*) and plural *iva* occur.

3. *Nouns:*

(a) *Case-endings:*

The genitive case-ending -*a* is a distinctive feature of the earlier inscriptions. It disappears altogether from the Arikamedu Period. -*a* also occurs as the accusative case-ending (later *ai*) once (12). *il* occurs as the locative suffix (26) and *iṇ* as possessive (genitive) (28, 36). The genitive oblique *atu* (literary form-*attu*) also occurs. The form paṅkāṭa (for Paṅkāṭṭu) (7) using-*a* should be specially noted.

(b) *Suffixes:*

The use of the paragogic suffixes -*i, -iy* and -*y* is a distinctive feature of the earlier inscriptions. (e.g.) *tantai-y* (2). These suffixes are not used in the later inscriptions.

3. Lexical analysis :

1. The Tamil-Brāhmi inscriptions are the oldest extant records in Tamil and their study is very rewarding from a linguistic point of view. Only one example will suffice here. The word *antai* (as a free form) has been recovered only from these inscriptions. It is a honorific suffixed (rarely prefixed also) to make nouns to indicate status. It is a kinship root from which *tantai, entai* etc. are formed by the prefixing of Pronominal possessives. Hence form like *koṟṟantai* should be split up as *koṟṟaṇ+antai* and not as *koṟṟaṇ+tantai* as suggested

by later commentators. This discovery is important for correct
historical analysis of personal names occuring in the sangam works.

    2. It is interesting to note that all the loan words in the
Tamil-Brāhmi inscriptions appear to be from prākṛt and not Sanskrit
(e.g.) *dhamam* (1,2). The earliest borrowing from Sanskrit appears
as late as the Fifth or Sixth Century A. D. (e.g. *cantira* (76)

      NOTE : Numbers within brackets are references to the *Corpus*
           of the Tamil Brāhmi inscriptions, Iravatham Mahadevan,
           SEMINAR ON INSCRIPTIONS, (1966) Madras.

Historical Data in the Tamil-Brahmi Inscriptions

Introduction :

The Tamil-Brāhmī Inscriptions are the most ancient of the extant written records of the Tamils. The inscriptions furnish valuable information on many aspects of life in the ancient Tamil Country from a period somewhat anterior to the literary age of the Sangam. Now that a satisfactory decipherment of the cave inscriptions has been achieved, it is hoped that scholars interested in different aspects of ancient Tamil history will make their contributions based on a systematic analysis of the inscriptional material.

Chronology:

As I mentioned earlier, the Arikamedu graffiti provide an invaluable datum line at the commencement of the Christian Era. By comparing the graffiti with the cave inscriptions, we can broadly divide the latter into Pre-Arikamedu of Early Period (3-1 Cent. B.C.) and Post-Arikamedu (1-6 Cent. A.D.). The latter period can be sub-divided into middle (1-2 Cent. A.D.), late (3-4 Cent. A.D.) and transitional (5-6 Cent. A.D.) Periods. These classifications are based upon palaeographic, linguistic and historical evidence and are only approximate in respect of the terminal dates. The details of classification regarding each site may be seen in my *Corpus of the Tamil-Brāhmī Inscriptions.*

History:

Pāṇḍyas:

The two rock inscriptions of Neṭuñceḷiyaṇ found at Mangulam near Madurai are the oldest historical inscriptions in Tamilnadu. Their archaic palæographical and linguistic features indicate that they are at least a century earlier than the Arikamedu graffiti and can be assigned to the Second Century B.C. The inscriptions record the gift of a_ monastery *(Paḷḷi)* to Kaṇi-nanta, probably a Jaina monk by

Religion :

The cave inscriptions furnish new material for the study of Jainism and Buddhism in the Tamil Country. The cave-shelters are called *Paḷḷi* (1, 2) and *Uṛai (-8).* The rock-beds were known as *atiṭṭāṇam,* Monks were called *amaṇṇaṇ (56), āsirikar (76),* (jaina) or *tavira (41)* (Buddhist). Nuns are referred to as *mātavirai (33)* (Buddhist) and *Pam(ṇ)itti (36)* (Jaina?). *Tāra-aṇi* is the beautiful word used to describe the drip-line cut on the brow of the Caverns. Prākṛt words like *dhamam, tāṇa(m) atiṭṭāṇam, upāca(k)aṇ,* etc. are found which show that the study of Prākṛt had already been introduced by Second Century B.C. in the Tamil Country by the Jaina and Buddhist monks.

Commerce and Trade :

The Mangulam inscriptions *(3, 6)* prove the existence of mercantile guilds (nikama) even in the Second Cent. B.C. The Alagarmalai inscriptions (30-43) give a long list of traders like *up(p)uvāṇikaṇ (salt merchant), aruvaivāṇikaṇ (cloth merchant), koḷuvāṇikaṇ (iron monger) Pāṇitavāṇikaṇ (toddy seller)* and *Poṇvāṇikaṇ (trader in gold).* The Araccalur inscription *(72)* refers to a *maṇivaṇṇakkaṇ* a lapidary. Occupations like *tac(c)aṇ,* (carpenter), *Poṇkolavaṇ (goldsmith)* and *Pākaṇ (charioteer)* are also mentioned.

Conclusion :

The study of the Tamil-Brāhmī inscriptions is still in its infancy. I hope that the Department of Archæology, Tamilnadu, will publish the photographs and the estampages of all the inscriptions on the basis of which a critical edition of texts and translations can be prepared. Tamil scholars should also take on hand the preparation of an etymological dictionary and the grammar of the cave inscriptions utilising modern linguistic techniques. Then it will be the turn of historians, anthropologists and scholars from other disciplines to use the source material to bring about a greater understanding of the ancient Tamil culture.

NOTE: The inscriptions are referred to by their Serial Numbers in *'the Corpus of the Tamil-Brāhmī Inscriptions'*, Iravatham Mahadevan, *Seminar on Inscriptions,* (1966), Madras.

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