



Research Paper

Potsherds with Early Brahmi Inscriptions: Walking through the History of Letters in Sri Lanka (With Special Reference to Potsherds Found in Kantarodai and Jaffna Peninsula)

D. Thusitha Mendis¹, Nimal Perera², Janeena Nonis*³

¹ Professor in Archaeology, Department of Archaeology and Heritage Management, Rajarata University of Sri Lanka.

² Former Deputy Director General, Department of Archaeology, Sri Lanka.

³ Lecturer (Temporary), Department of Archaeology and Heritage Management, Rajarata University of Sri Lanka, janeenanonis2@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Archaeologists tend to recreate the human past by analysing material evidence and in related studies, a large collection of materials with a vast diversity used as artefacts to interpret contemporary society. Potsherds can be identified as most abundant artefacts that attest to the significance of ancient culture. In the Sri Lankan Context, pottery remains are often found in settlement sites and mortuary complexes. Through analysing them, it is possible to uncover information about economic, political and social sectors such as technological development, craftsmanship, resource utilisation, domestic and foreign linkages, etc. A wide variation can be recognised in the potsherds retrieved from different contexts and among them, the fragments engraved with symbols and characters occupy a special place, since they interpret the literacy, language use, communication methods and many more associated with ancient society. The first part of the present paper mainly focuses on potsherds carved with Brahmi Inscriptions recorded from Kantharodai and Jaffna Peninsula, Sri Lanka (Potsherds retrieved from the excavation at Kantarodai conducted in 2019 and the pottery collection of Prof. S. Krishnarajah). In the second part, writers discuss the connection between engraved potsherds in India and Sri Lanka. Furthermore, it discusses the national and international research that was previously conducted in this regard and similarities and differences between engraved pottery remains of Sri Lanka and India.

Keywords: Potsherds, Early Brahmi Inscriptions, Jaffna Peninsula

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1. Introduction

It was believed that the first inscriptions written in early Brahmi in Sri Lanka dated to the period of King Devanampiyatissa (250-210 BC), who reigned contemporary to King Asoka in India (Fernando, 1969, 20). As an alternative suggestion, it is proposed that the Aryans migrated in the 6th century BC from India to Sri Lanka, and possessed the knowledge of these first scripts (Paranavithana, 1970, xxii). Piyatissa Senanayaka points out that the literary sources which mention the use of writing

systems, which could be assigned to a period earlier than the 3rd century BC, have to be considered cautiously as such sources were written in a much later period (Senanayake, 2002, 58-59).

However, some symbols reported from the capstones of the Megalithic burials (Yapahuwa, Ibbankatuwa), terracotta seals/stamps (Sulupanapahura temple - Matale) and inscriptions from potsherds (Anuradhapura, Kantarodai,

Tissamaharamaya, Ridiyagama, Andarawewa etc.) belong to the protohistoric period of Sri Lanka (Parker, 1885, 67-68; Deraniyagala, 1972, 122-130; Seneviratne, 1984, 294-298; Indrapala, 1973, 18-19; Pushparathnam, 2014, 541; Mendis, 2019). The undated metal seal from Anaikkodai megalithic burial can be identified as a special artefact as it contains some early Brahmi scripts and symbols (Ragupathy, 1987, 200). Piyatissa Senanayake argues that the usage of symbols in studying the history of the evolution of scripts becomes limited as they are not fully deciphered yet and should be cautious in using them to represent a mode of communication (Senanayake, 2018, 14-16). When constructing the history of letters in Sri Lanka, potsherds with symbols and characters play a major role as they attest to the development of literacy in ancient society. Most of the engraved pottery remains were recorded from protohistoric and early historic contexts, including settlements and burials. The first section of the present article discusses the artefacts with early Brahmi inscriptions retrieved from Jaffna Peninsula.

2. Materials and Methods

The research is mainly based on 8 potsherds with symbols, collected from archaeological excavation at Kantarodai conducted in 2019 (Director - Prof. Barbara Helwing) and the pottery collection of Prof. S. Krishnarajah. As well information on early Brahmi inscriptions from India and Sri Lanka gathered through archaeological reports, academic papers, and museum collections to establish a comparative dataset.

As the research focused on engraved characters in potsherds, symbol decipherment method used as the main analysing method to decode their meanings and assess their role in communication.

In the second stage a comparative study conducted and analysed the similarities and differences between the Sri Lankan and Indian inscriptions, focusing on content, style, and the historical period in which they were created.

3. Discussion

3.1 Potsherds with Inscriptions retrieved from Kantharodai and Jaffna Peninsula

With regards to the inscriptions reported from the Jaffna peninsula, there were some early reported inscriptions such as Anikkodai metal seal inscription which was read by K. Indrapala as a combination of Brahmi script and symbols (Ragupathy, 1984, 200). K.V. Ramesh doubted the way how symbolic meaning is interpreted in the inscription (ibid, 207). From the recent studies based on Kantharodai, conducted by Barbara Helwing, Nimal Perera, Thusitha Mendis, S. Krishnarajah and P. Pushparathnam, several potsherds with Brahmic script and symbols were reported. Three pieces of potsherds with symbols and one rouletted rim with Brahmi

script were identified from the top layer. Symbols are yet to be studied.



Photo No. 01 - A rouletted potsherd with Brahmi inscription from Kantarodai in 2019 read as ['ti sa ga sa (di)'] Image courtesy: Prof. Barbara Helwing

The rouletted ware with Brahmi letters can be defined as the most important potsherd recorded from Kantarodai expedition and it is identified as a bowl. The Potsherd is 6.2cm X 3cm in size and left side of the sherd has broken in a straight line and the right side broken into an uneven shape. The scripts are linear and are of equal height. The occurrence of rouletted ware in South India and Sri Lanka is dated to 250 BC (Deraniyagala, 1992, 712-3; Bopearachchi, 2004, 543). The script in the potsherd can be compared with the Early Brahmi script and according to the palaeographic comparison, it can be dated to the period 3rd -1st Century BC. Accordingly, the potsherd can be dated to the same period. The script of the inscription includes four complete letters and one incomplete letter. The first four letters can read as 'ti sa ga sa' and with the remaining lines it can assume the fifth letter can be 'di'. The complete script can be read as;

"ti sa ga sa (di)"

The script and the content can be compared with the early Brahmi drip ledge inscriptions recorded from all over the country. Assuming the letters in the inscriptions can be only a part of a longer inscription, the text can be separated into three sections as "ti sa ga sa (di)".

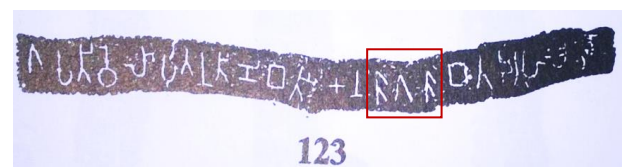


Fig. No.01- Hadagala - Anuradhapura Early Brahmi drip ledge cave inscription (Paranavithana, 1970, plate 123).

The term 'sa ga sa (sha ga sha)', usually can be found from early Brahmi inscriptions, mainly in drip ledge inscriptions, stands for donations given to Sangha. 'Sha ga' is sangha,

and the third letter 'sha' stands as a dative case suffix to denote the reception of something.

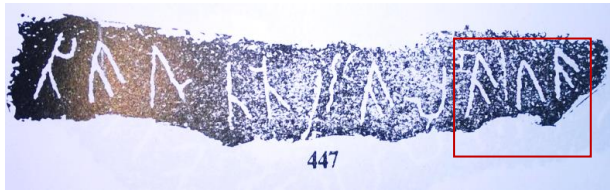


Fig. No. 02 - Henanigala-Ampara Early Brahmi drip ledge cave inscription (Paranavithana, 1970, plate 447)



Fig. No. 03 - Lenagala-Kegalle Early Brahmi drip ledge cave inscription (Paranavithana, 1970, plate 786).

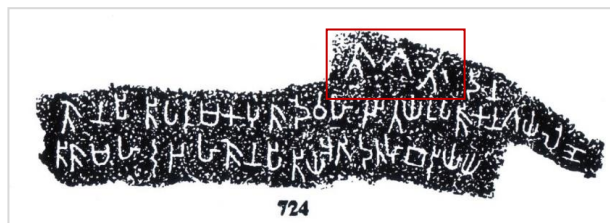


Fig. No. 04 - Valaellugodakanda- Monaragala early Brahmi drip ledge cave inscription (Paranavithana, 1970, plate 724). text - *Tisa maharajhaha senapitiya Agidatha bariyaya senapiti parumaka pusadevaha jhitaya upasika Nagaya lene sagasa dine*, Transliteration - King Tissa's general Aggidatta's wife (and) the daughter of chief general Pussadeva, Upasika naga's cave given to sangha'

According to mentioned inscriptions and previous researches the phrase of 'sha ga sha' was a common expression which used in cave monastery-related inscriptions in Sri Lanka (Paranavithana, 1970, xxx).

Potteries with, various symbols were also identified as follows; When considering the potsherds with early Brahmi inscriptions retrieved from Jaffna peninsula, it is essential to study about the pottery collection of S. Krishnarajah who previously engaged on archaeological researches based on Jaffna. Potsherds found from different areas were included in the collection but could not identify the exact details as they were collected randomly and received from different villages. However, we cannot underestimate the value of these artefacts as they attest the development of literacy in Jaffna peninsula through engraved early Brahmi letters.



Photo No. 02 - Potsherd with unknown symbols found from Jaffna peninsula. Image courtesy: S. Krishnarajah

Among them, there is a grey ware sherd, 34cm in diameter, which was carved with letters as 'a nu rā dha sa' and due to the aspirate 'dha' it can be identified as a Prakrit phrase (Deraniyagala,1992,746). According to the meaning, this can be divided into two parts as 'anurādha sa' and the word 'anurādha' mostly used as a personal name in ancient times.

In Mahavamsa, the name Anuradha first appears as the name of the founder of Anuradhagama, who also known as one of the ministers of king Vijaya (Mahavamsa,VII:43-45). Furthermore, there was a maternal great-uncle of king Pandukabhaya who called anurādha and according to chronicles, he offered his residence to the king and due to both anuradhas lived there (minister of Vijaya and great-uncle of Pandukabhaya), the place 'Anuradhagama' was reformed as a city called 'Anuradhapura' (ibid,X:73-76).

With regards to the related archaeological evidence, it is important to discuss the engraved potsherds retrieved from the excavation of Salgahawatta-Anuradhapura, conducted by Siran Deraniyagala in 1988. In one of these sherds, there is a Sinhalese Prakrit phrase written in early Brahmi letters as 'biya anuradha' and it is found from the layer dated to 600 BC - 500 BC (Deraniyagala,1992,746). Several differences in the script 'anuradha' can be identified between two sherds found from Anuradhapura and Jaffna as follows.



Photo No. 03 - Potsherd with early Brahmi inscription; defined as 'anurādha sa'. Image courtesy: S. Krishnarajah

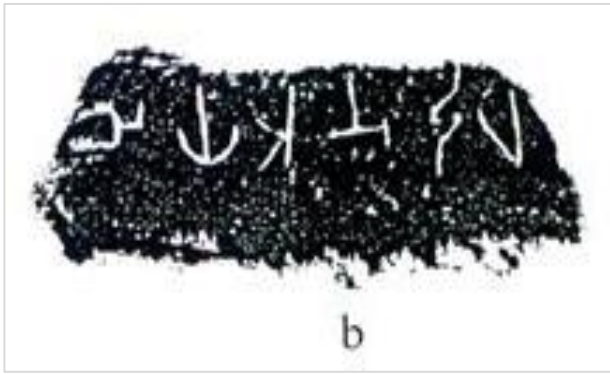


Fig. No. 05 - Potsherd with early Brahmi inscription; read as 'biya anuradha' found from ASW-88 (Deraniyagala, 1992).

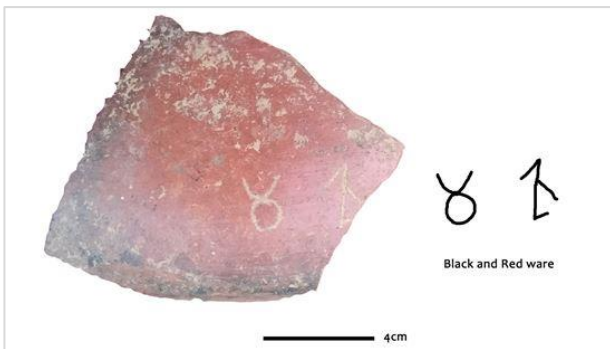


Photo No. 06 - Potsherd with non-Brahmi inscriptions (Paranavitana, 1970, xxvi). Image courtesy: S. Krishnarajah

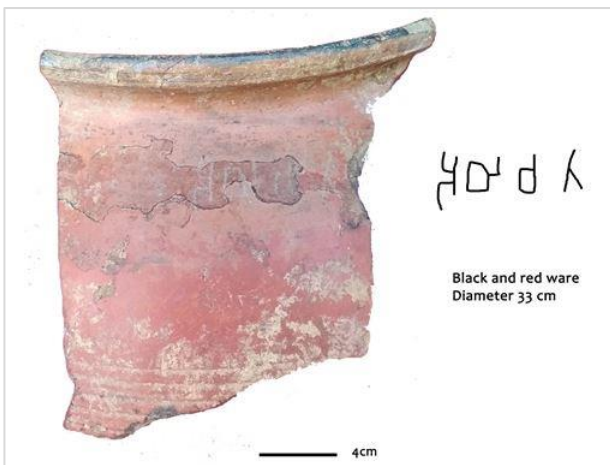


Photo No. 05 - Potsherd with early Brahmi inscription; defined as 'a bi bha tha (ra)'. Image courtesy: S. Krishnarajah

The word engraved in potsherd recorded from Anuradhapura region can be identified as 'anuradha' and the word in grey ware piece found from Jaffna peninsula can be read as 'anurādha'. It is clearly visible that 'rā' letter in this inscription represents the long vowel of 'a', as it combined with a short straight line which has turned to the right.

Furthermore, a huge difference can be recognized in 'ra' character as well. The potsherd retrieved from Jaffna peninsula reflects a straight linear 'ra' and in contrast, a

wavy and serpent-like 'ra' was engraved in the sherd found from Anuradhapura. According to Paranavitana, it is not possible to state that one or the other is the earlier in date (Paranavitana, 1970, xx).

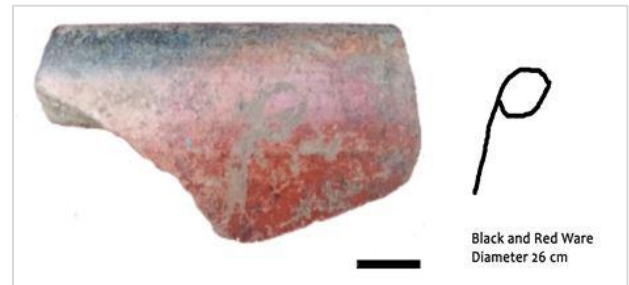


Photo No. 07 - Engraved potsherd. Image courtesy: S. Krishnarajah

When considering the second half of the phrase of inscription in potsherd recorded from Jaffna peninsula, the character of 'sa' could be representing the meaning of 'ownership' since it was recognized as a Prakrit phrase. Therefore, it can be translated as anuradha's. However, these potsherds were once a part of a whole pot and there could be more engraved parts which may never be seen and never be unearthed. Hence, it should be known that the character phrasing and given meanings could be changed or remained as assumptions.

In comparison, between potsherds of Anuradhapura and Jaffna, it can be identified that, though there are slight differences, both of the sherds mostly share common features. Apart from the 'ra' character, all the other characters are the same in appearance. Therefore, according to these archaeological facts, the Anuradhapura region and Jaffna peninsula reflect a common bond in using early Brahmi letters with the Sinhalese Prakrit language.

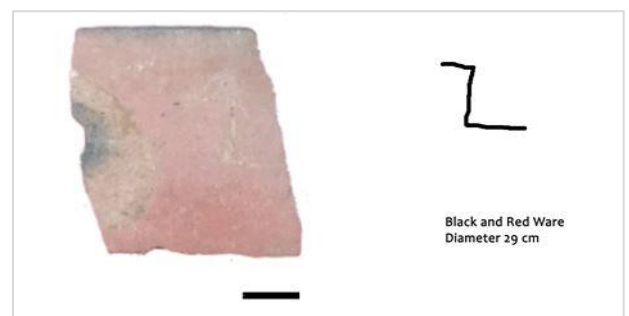


Photo No. 08 - Potsherd with early Brahmi inscription; defined as 'O'. Image courtesy: S. Krishnarajah

The rest of the potsherds with letters and symbols; belonging to the collection of S. Krishnarajah, can be reported as follows;



Fig. No. 06 - Engraved potsherds of Jaffna Peninsula. Image courtesy: S. Krishnarajah

As said by Lucien Febvre, the civilization of a country adjacent to a continent, takes the same form as the civilization of the adjacent continent and the special characteristics of that country are also evident (Febvre, 1950, 315). This can be related to the Sri Lanka and India according to their location and it is true that the culture of Sri Lanka has been influenced by Indian culture for a long time. Even though, Sri Lanka has its own cultural appearances that vary from other countries. However, when studying the history of letters through potsherds in Sri Lanka, it is essential to consider the research based on the Indian peninsula as well.

3.2 Similarities and Differences between Potsherds with Early Brahmi Inscriptions in Sri Lanka and India

Osmund Bopearachchi and K. Rajan conducted a comparative study on the symbols found on potsherds from Sri Lanka and Tamil-Nadu, and came to a conclusion that the occurrence of the same individual or composite graffiti marks on the potsherds from both regions confirms a continuous cultural and trade contact between the two regions (Bopearachchi, 2004, 541). Epigraphic evidence from both regions attests to the existence of inscriptions done by using Brahmi script with Sinhalese Prakrit (Old Sinhalese) and Tamil languages. For instance, I. Mahadevan has reported a number of potsherds in Sinhala Prakrit - Brahmi

script from Kodumanal, Arikamedu, Alagankulam, Kaverippumpattinam, (ibid,546,549) while P. Pushparathnam reported Tamil - Brahmi script from Poonagari, Jaffna and Tiassamaharama (cf. Pushparathnam,1990; Bopearachchi,2004; Pushparathnam,2014).

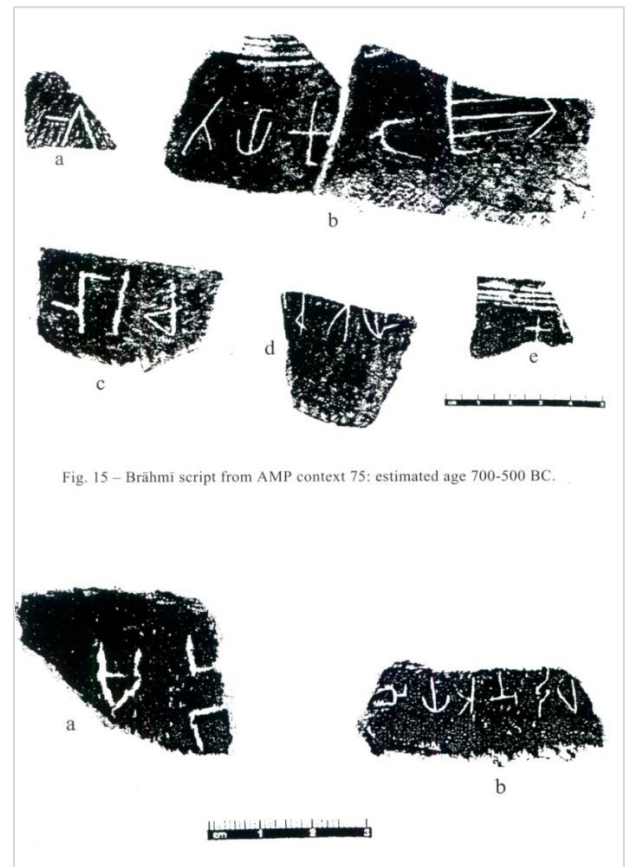


Fig. No. 07 - Brahmi scripts from Anuradhapura citadel (Deraniyagala, 1972)

Brahmi inscriptions from Palani, South India were dated by Subramaniyan to 540 BC, 500 BC (Subramaniyan,2005,70-72 Subramaniyan,2005). K. Rajan's Poronthal megalithic burial excavation reported the earliest date for South Indian Tamil Brahmi script as the 6th Century BC (Rajan,2018, The New Indian Express,2013,5-17). Inscriptions written on potsherds in Early Brahmi scripts retrieved from the excavation based on Anuradhapura citadel, conducted by Siran Deraniyagala, are dated to the 6th century BC by radiocarbon and TL dating methods (Deraniyagala, 1992, 742-747; Deraniyagala & Abeyratne 2000, 759-791). Further, it was confirmed by R.A.E. Coningham through ASW 88 excavation of Anuradhapura citadel (Coningham and Bett, 1999, 125-132) and the dates from Galgamuwa - Andarawewa megalithic burial excavation dated to 505 - 501 BC by Thusitha Mendis (Mendis, 2019). Altogether, it confirms the use of Brahmi script in South India and Sri Lanka can be dated to the same time period regardless of the language used along with the script.

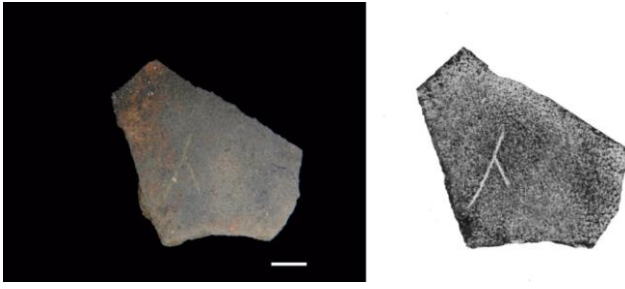


Fig. No. 08 - Potsherd with Brahmi letter 'tha'; found from Andarawewa megalithic burial site (Mendis, 2019)

Apart from the potsherds, an assemblage of 44 coins belonged to the time period of 2nd century BC to 2nd Century AD, found from southern Sri Lanka; two coins bear Tamil names as *ūtiraṇa*, read as Utiran (a proper noun) and *(ta)sapitaṇa* or *t(i)sapitana* read as tissa pitan, a name in both Prakrit and Tamil (Bopearachchi, 2004, 547). Both Bopearachchi and Mahadevan agree that the use of both Tamil and Prakrit together in some inscriptions during the early centuries can be observed. As supportive evidence for the early use of writing systems in India and Sri Lanka, stylus made from bones reported from Alamgirpur, Chirand, Hasthinapur and Ujjein in India and Anudapura citadel, Sri Lanka (Deraniyagala, 1992, 740, 742, 44).

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, potsherds play a major role in developing the history of letters in Sri Lanka and it has been proved that the first inscriptions of the country can be dated to an earlier time period than the 3rd century BC. With regards to the potsherds retrieved from the Jaffna peninsula, significantly they share the common features of early Brahmi characters in other parts of the country and it can be assumed that the Sinhalese Prakrit language also popular in Jaffna region in ancient times. When considering the Brahmi scripts of India and Sri Lanka, it can be identified that, regardless of the language, they were used in both countries in the same time period. As stated by the research done so far, the history of letters in Sri Lanka mostly influenced by Indian characteristics but through the ages it has developed unique featured letters which are conventional to the country.

Acknowledgement

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Department of Archaeology and Heritage Management, Rajarata University of Sri Lanka, who supported in reading the Brahmi letters. The main potsherd with Brahmi script which was discussed in the first part of this article was retrieved from the excavation conducted in Kantarodai, Jaffna, Sri Lanka in 2019 and the authors are extremely thankful to Prof. Barbara Helwing, Sydney University, Australia; the Co-director of the Kantarodi excavation for her enormous support in this regard.

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