



Editor's Pick

Ratnapala: The Forgotten Genius; The Hidden Force Behind the Decipherment of Brahmi Scripts with James Prinsep

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ABSTRACT

The review of 19th-century literary sources has shed light on a hitherto untold narrative of historical significance. James Prinsep, renowned for his pioneering work in deciphering ancient scripts, particularly the Brahmi script, appears to have received vital assistance from an enigmatic figure named Rathnapala. This revelation emerged through a meticulous examination of early 19th-century Indian archaeological journals, as part of the methodology employed for this study, which involves a comprehensive review of 19th-century literary sources, including journals, manuscripts, and historical records. The literature from this period has provided invaluable insights into the collaborative efforts of Prinsep and Rathnapala in unraveling the mysteries of Brahmi inscriptions. This research aims to revive forgotten role of Rathnapala in the study of ancient Brahmi scripts and its implications for our understanding of India and Ceylon's history. In spite of Prinsep's significant contributions, historical documentation in both Sri Lanka and India has frequently overlooked or disregarded the valuable assistance provided by Rathnapala, thereby denying him the rightful recognition he deserves. Through a meticulous examination of these literary sources, the story of Rathnapala's pivotal role in aiding Prinsep's decipherment of the Brahmi script has been unearthed. These findings not only illuminate the historical collaboration between these two individuals but also prompt a reevaluation of the roles played by uncelebrated heroes like Rathnapala, highlighting the significance of his prior education as a Ex-Ceylonese Buddhist monk in acquiring this knowledge. By resurrecting this overlooked segment of history, our intention is to correct the omission in contemporary literature and grant Rathnapala the recognition he rightfully deserves. Additionally, the study reveals another significant practice in Sri Lanka that has endured for centuries, the acquisition of knowledge within temples and *pirivenas*, where ancient Ceylonese Buddhist monks traditionally acquired expertise in Brahmi scripts and Pali through established educational methods. In ancient India, following the period of King Asoka, the Brahmi script had largely vanished from usage. In contrast, in ancient Ceylon, there is substantial evidence of the continued use of Brahmi scripts in writing lithic inscriptions, with their evolutionary progression extending until the 1500 AD period. These Brahmi lithic inscriptions were primarily discovered in ancient Buddhist sites, highlighting the central role played by Buddhist monks in safeguarding Buddhist manuscripts and chronicling the history of the nation. Consequently, the acquisition of knowledge in Pali language and Brahmi scripts became an integral component of their education. This article underscores the importance of collaboration and the necessity to recognize those contributors to our understanding of the past who are frequently overlooked and the need for further research in advancing the field of historical research.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to uncover the forgotten role of Rathnapala in the study of ancient Brahmi scripts and its implications for our understanding of India and Sri Lanka's history. Rathnapala's main contributions came through the work of James Prinsep, renowned for his pioneering efforts in deciphering ancient scripts, particularly the Brahmi. Prinsep's pivotal moment occurred when he undertook the ambitious task of decoding the Brahmi scripts found in ancient inscriptions. During this endeavor, he serendipitously crossed paths with a multilingual collaborator, an ex-Ceylonese Buddhist monk named Rathnapala, who possessed expertise in Brahmi scripts and Pali language. Rathnapala's collaboration played a pivotal role in Prinsep's transliteration and translation efforts, offering invaluable insights into the complex and ancient Brahmi texts and language (J.A.S Bengal Vol VI Part I, 1837: 470-473).

The paper begins with a brief account of Prinsep's diligent work, which transformed the field as he deciphered previously enigmatic inscriptions, unraveling the rich tapestry of ancient Indian history. His contributions shed light on dynasties, rulers, and significant events shrouded in mystery. James Prinsep's legacy continues to inspire linguists, historians, and archaeologists, serving as a testament to the power of collaboration, determination, and interdisciplinary scholarship in uncovering the mysteries of the past. Subsequently, the paper then delves into the forgotten legacy and contributions of Rathnapala to Prinsep's pioneering work, emphasizing their enduring impact on our understanding of ancient history (Archaeological Survey of India Volume I, Sir Alexander Cunningham. Introduction, Page IX-X).

EARLY LIFE AND BACKGROUND OF JAMES PRINSEP

James Prinsep (1799-1840), a chemist by profession, arrived in Calcutta in 1819, at the age of 20 he joined the service of the East India Company as an assay-master in the Banaras mint. It's worth noting that Prinsep was not a Sanskrit scholar of the type and caliber of figures like Sir William Jones, Colebrooke, and Wilson, nor did he initially have a marked interest

in Sanskrit manuscripts. Instead, he held the position of Assay Master at the Banaras mint, a profession seemingly unrelated to his later significant contributions to Indian history. In 1830, he returned to Calcutta as the deputy assay-master of the mint, where H.H. Wilson held the position of chief. However, Prinsep's unique journey was about to take an extraordinary turn. In 1832, he succeeded Wilson in this role and remained in the post until 1838 when he was compelled to return to England due to a year-long illness. Tragically, this prolonged illness led to his untimely death on April 23, 1840, at the age of forty. Despite his unconventional background, James Prinsep's legacy would be forever etched in Indian history as the decipherer of the Brahmi scripts (Archaeological Survey of India. Volume I. Sir Alexander Cunningham. Introduction, 1862, Page X-XIII).

JAMES PRINSEP'S INTEREST IN NUMISMATICS: DECIPHERING THE KHAROSTHI SCRIPT

While working as the assay master of the Banaras mint, Prinsep developed an interest in ancient coins. He interpreted Bactrian and Kushana coins. He also succeeded Wilson as the Secretary of the Asiatic Society in 1832 and initiated his journal, 'The Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal'. Prinsep's appeal for more coins and inscriptions from officers in the upper provinces was highly successful, flooding him with materials that reshaped Indian antiquarian research. One type of coin issued by Greek rulers in the North-western parts of India (2nd B.C- 1st A.D) played a crucial role in deciphering the Kharosthi scripts. These coins featured Greek inscriptions on one side and notes in an unknown script on the other. Prinsep's assumption that these words were equivalent to Greek words led him to identify the Kharosthi alphabet in 1834, located predominantly in the northwestern regions of India (J.A.S Bengal Vol VI Part I, 1834 : 227-231).

PRINSEP'S INTEREST IN PILLARS AND ROCK INSCRIPTIONS: THE BRAHMI SCRIPT

Despite lacking the traditional background of Sanskrit scholars like Sir William Jones, Colebrooke, and Wilson, Prinsep left an indelible mark on Indian history

as the decipherer of Brahmi scripts. Half a century of systematic efforts had passed in India to decipher Brahmi scripts with no immediate success. Prinsep, while arranging facsimiles of inscriptions on the stone railing of the great stupa at Sanchi, observed that the inscriptions terminated in two letters (DhaNa). This led him to believe that these records could not be fragments of one continuous text but were either 'Obituary notices' or more likely records of 'offerings and presents of votaries.' Another letter he found repeatedly preceding the last two letters Dha Na was Ma, which he eventually read as 'DANAM.' Prinsep's success was attributed to his keen powers of observation (J.R.A.S Bengal Volume VI Part I, 1837).

CRACKING THE CODE WITH RATHNAPALA: THE ROLE OF RATHNAPALA

In the year 1834. Prinsep had made significant strides in his study of Brahmi inscriptions but was stuck on a particular set of inscriptions, unable to unlock their meaning (J.A.S Bengal Vol VI Part I, 1837: 470-473). These inscriptions, found in various locations across the Indian subcontinent, were a vital piece of the puzzle in understanding the history and culture of ancient India. Prinsep had tried tirelessly to decipher them but had reached an impasse. In the bustling city of Calcutta, where Prinsep was stationed, fate intervened. Little did he know that his journey would take an unexpected turn, guided by the unassuming but invaluable assistance of an ex-Ceylonese Buddhist monk a Pali scholar named Rathnapala. This hidden aspect of history was brought to light through letters written by James Prinsep to Sir Alexander Cunningham. These letters were published in 1862, approximately 24 years after Prinsep left India (Revealing India's Past. Sir John Cummings. 1939:203).

"As mentioned in his letter to me, Prinsep had immediately invited Ratna Pala, the Ceylonese Pali scholar, to assist him in reading the inscriptions. With Rathnapala's aid, he was able to translate several important passages, such as "in the twenty-seventh year of my reign." Prinsep's industry was unremitting, and his intuitive perception was rapid. He completed his translation by the end of July 1834, and the complete version appeared in the

journal for that month, which was published in the middle of August."

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Buddha-pālitosa lichhanon dānam.
 "The gift of the protected of Buddha, the Lichhanān."
Vijigatasa dānam.
 "Eh? will not this do? and the pillar inscription
Derdaam piya piyadasa Raja keva ahd.
 "The most particularly-beloved-of-the-gods Raja de-
 clareth thus.
 "I think with Ratna Pāla, whom I shall summon, we
 shall be able to read the whole of these manifest-*as* of the
 right faith—Buddha's bulls. Will send plates after breakfast.
 "Yours,
 "J. P."

The formal announcement of this discovery was made in the June number of the journal which was published in July, by which Prinsep had recognized the true values of all the letters which he had yet found, and the old alphabet was complete with the exception of the very rare letters *gh* and *jh*, and the guttural, palatal, and cerebral *v's*.

To Professor Lassen belongs the honor of having been the first to read any of these unknown characters. In the previous year, 1836, he had read the Indian Pāli legend on the square copper coins of Agathokles as *Agathokla Raja*.† James Prinsep was puzzled by finding "that nearly the same characters appear on the coins of Pantaleon." He admitted however, that "it might be possible to assimilate the word

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As mentioned in his letter to me, Prinsep had at once invited Ratna Pāla, the Pāli scholar, to assist him in reading the inscription, and with his aid he was able to translate at once several important passages, such as, "in the twenty-seventh year of my reign." So unremitting was his industry and so rapid his intuitive perception, that he had finished his translation by the end of July, and the complete version appeared in the journal for that month, which was published in the middle of August.

Coins and inscriptions now poured in upon him so fast from all parts of India that much of his valuable time was now occupied in private correspondence, and when I left Calcutta towards the end of October 1837, he was working from twelve to sixteen hours daily. Much of his time was, of course, occupied with his public duties as Assay Master of the Calcutta Mint, as he wrote to me, "my whole day is consumed at the scales. What a waste of precious moments!"

(Archaeological Survey of India Volume I. Alexander Cunningham 1862: INTRODUCTION XII-XIII)

Interestingly, twenty-four years after Princep's passing, Sir Alexander Cunningham published the correspondence he had with Princep in the 'Archaeological Survey of India,' specifically in the four reports from 1862-1865. This collection of correspondence shed further light on Ratnapala's invaluable role in assisting Princep with the decipherment of Brahmi scripts. In light of these revelations, it becomes evident that Ratnapala's contribution deserves recognition and acknowledgment, as his collaboration with James Princep significantly advanced our understanding of ancient scripts and their historical significance (Archaeological Survey of India Vol. I. Sir Alexander Cunningham 1862: INTRODUCTION X-XIII).

MULTILINGUAL MAESTRO: RATHNAPALA AN EX SINHALESE BHIKKHU

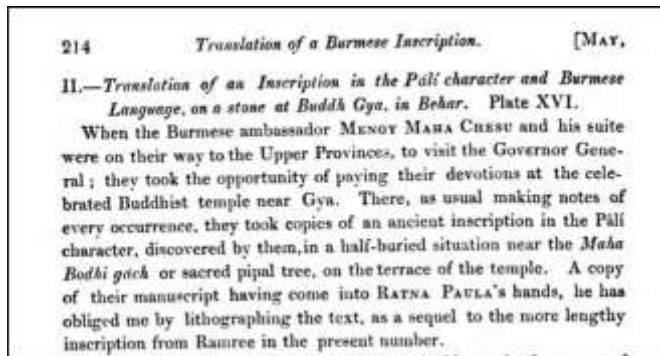
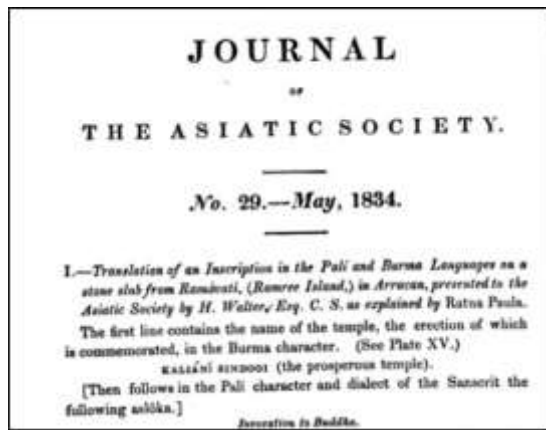
Ratnapala, the Ceylonese Pali scholar, and former Sinhalese bhikkhu, played a significant role in assisting James Prinsep in deciphering Brahmi texts, which were written in Pali. It's fascinating to learn about Ratnapala's life journey and his contributions to the field of archaeology and decipherment. He was ordained as a nineteen-year-old novice (Samanera) named 'Ratanapala' under the Chief monk of Amarapura Nikaya Mahaswami in the Amarapura sect in Ceylon. It is said that he went to the country of Burma with the Mahaswami of the sect, and then lived in Arakan as a priest, where he learned Burmese. Rathnapala left his monastic robes and actively participated in the first Anglo-Burmese war, demonstrating bravery during the conflict. After the war, Rathnapala married the daughter of a Ceylonese soldier named Bandula, who had died on the battlefield in 1825, adding an interesting layer to his life story. Later, he migrated to India and became a successful wealthy businessman in Calcutta. Rathnapala's linguistic skills were crucial to James Prinsep's work in deciphering the Brahmi script. He assisted Prinsep in transliteration and translation of the entire Brahmi script. As an Ex-Buddhist monk, Rathnapala's knowledge of languages and scripts, particularly his familiarity with Pali, was instrumental in this effort. He was proficient in Pali, Sinhala,

Burmese, English and Prakrit languages. Rathnapala also played a role in translating Burmese inscriptions, as evidenced by his involvement in translating an inscription near the Mahabodhi tree in Bodhgaya. Rathnapala's talent and contributions have been recognized and documented in the Asiatic Society Journal in May 1834, in a paper published by H. Walter, Esq., giving due credit to Ratnapala on both pages 209 and 214.

“Translation of an Inscription in the Pali and Burma Languages on a stone slab from Ramivati, (Ramree Island) in Arracan, presented to the Asiatic Society by H. Walter Esq. C.S as explained by Ratna Pala. The first line contains the name of the temple, the erection of which is commemorated, in the Burmese character (See Plate XV) KALLANI SINDOGI (the prosperous temple).”

HOW RATNAPALA ACQUIRED HIS KNOWLEDGE: CENTRAL ROLE PLAYED BY ANCIENT CEYLONESE BUDDHIST MONKS

Ratna pala's proficiency in transliterating and translating Brahmi letters found in Asokan edicts in India might raise questions. However, Prinsep, in a letter to Cunningham, explicitly affirms Ratnapala's ability to read these manifestoes in their entirety. This capability is credited to the traditional teachings and documentations of ancient Ceylonese Buddhist monks, underscoring their pivotal role in preserving and transmitting knowledge. This linguistic proficiency is intricately linked to Ratnapala's knowledge acquisition, deeply rooted in the influential role played by ancient Ceylonese Buddhist monks in safeguarding wisdom.



Journal of The Asiatic Society, No 29, May, 1834 Page 209 and 214

The discovery of Brahmi lithic inscriptions, which include Pali or Magadi sentences, in caves generously donated by locals and rulers, emphasizes the monks' connection to the community and likely contains historical records. Additionally, it's noteworthy that Pali, or more precisely, Magadi language, was utilized in these Indian Asokan edicts, with the scripts carved in Brahmin akshara, similar to Ceylon inscriptions, facilitating Ratnapala's task.

The enduring practice of carving inscriptions into caves, rock surfaces, and columns until the 16th century underscores the enduring influence of monks, encompassing both spiritual and educational content. Furthermore, the meticulous documentation on Ola leaves within vihara complexes reflects the monks' commitment to preserving Buddhist teachings and national history.

Bhikkhu Ratnapala, akin to his contemporaries, received education in viharas, drawing from knowledge stored in inscriptions and on Ola leaves. The monks, devoted to safeguarding Buddha's doctrine, recorded these teachings on Ola leaves in every vihara and pirivena. Viharas, with their 'pothgul' libraries, served as educational hubs, highlighting the monks' pivotal role in shaping the region's intellectual landscape. Recognizing and understanding this historical context underscores the significance of monastic institutions in transmitting knowledge and culture, providing essential context to Ratnapala's educational journey.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the collaborative efforts of James Prinsep and the invaluable assistance of Rathnapala, an ex-Ceylonese Buddhist monk, were instrumental in deciphering the Brahmi scripts, shedding light on the rich history of ancient India. Prinsep's journey, from a chemist to a renowned epigraphist, underscores the power of interdisciplinary scholarship and determination in unraveling historical mysteries. Rathnapala's multilingual prowess and expertise in Pali and Prakrit played a pivotal role in translating and transliterating the Brahmi inscriptions, bridging the gap between languages and cultures. His remarkable journey from monkhood to a prosperous businessman in Calcutta adds a unique dimension to this collaborative effort.

This research highlights the central role played by ancient Ceylonese Buddhist monks, who meticulously documented history and preserved manuscripts in the face of political and cultural changes. Thousands of Brahmi lithic inscriptions found in caves, donated by local communities, attest to their dedication. The disappearance of the Brahmi script in India after king Asoka serves as a poignant reminder of the need for continuous exploration and critical analysis of historical artifacts. The resurgence of Rathnapala's role underscores the importance of recognizing unsung heroes who contributed significantly to our understanding of the past.

In the annals of historical research, the collaborative spirit of Prinsep and Rathnapala, along

with the enduring legacy of Ceylonese Buddhist monks, illuminates the richness of ancient India's history and underscores the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in uncovering hidden narratives. It is essential to recognize that Ratnapala's main contributions came through the work of James Prinsep, renowned for his pioneering work in deciphering ancient scripts, particularly the Brahmi scripts, highlighting the collaborative nature of their efforts in advancing our understanding of this critical field of study.

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