

# Tamil Brahmi Inscription Belonging to 2200 years ago, Discovered by German Archaeological Team in Southern Sri Lanka.

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## ABSTRACT

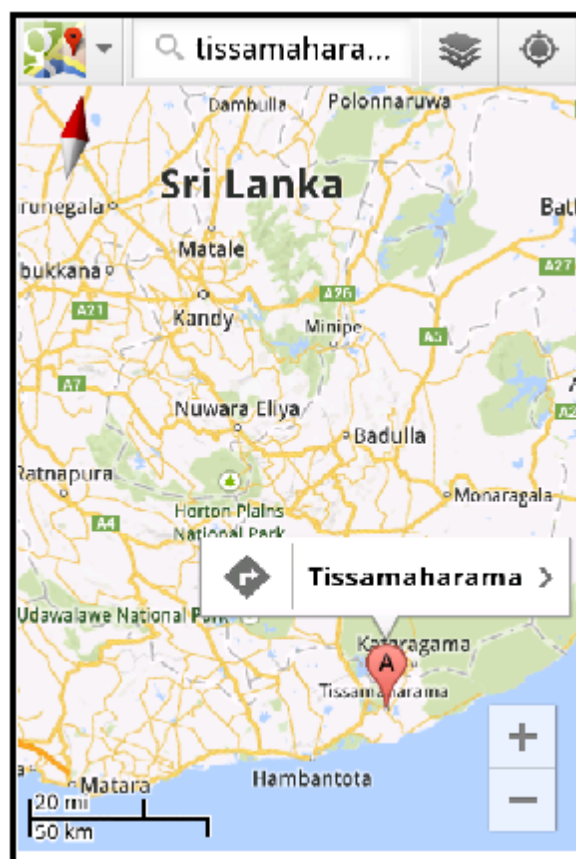
As a general rule, interpretations, Brahmi potsherds, copper plates, seals and coins, among others, provide reliable information to trace the beginning, development and evolution of a language of a region or country. The Brahmi inscriptions play an important part in tracing the history of Sri Lankan languages.

These Brahmi inscriptions which belong to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. to the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D., tell about the message relevant to Buddhism. Scholars like Professor Paranavithana who studied the above inscriptions comment that they are evidences to show that the ancestors of the Sinhala race and their culture came from the North India and the Prakrit language is the forerunner of the old Sinhala language. Scholars like Professor Karunaratna who studied the above inscriptions, considering the unique Tamil letters, names and words, are of the opinion that the Brahmi letters and writing which were introduced from South India were in use in Sri Lanka, before the introduction of Brahmi letters to Sri Lanka with the advent of Buddhism from North India [1].

Recent Archaeological studies in South Sri Lanka and Northern Sri Lanka and the evidences of Brahmi inscriptions and Brahmi potsherds, coins, seals and copper plates provide adequate evidences to show that the use of Tamil language was prevalent in Sri Lanka, since the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. These evidences show the antiquity of the Tamil language. Among these evidences, the discovery of the Brahmi inscribed pottery at Tisamaharama in the Hambantota District in Southern Sri Lanka by the German Archaeological team need special mention. This inscription which belongs to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. was written in the Tamil language with Tamil scripts. However, there are differences of opinion among scholars about the reading and interpretation of the above inscription. The objective of this research is to re-read and scrutinize the above inscription to derive a profound interpretation of it.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION



Recent Archaeological evidences reveal that the evolution of Tamil language in Sri Lanka began almost at the same period as in Tamil Nāṭu. The Brahmi potsherds at Tisamaharama in the Hambantota District Southern Sri Lanka confirm the fact. In South Asia, the ancient Brahmi writing was in use from 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. The Brahmi gave birth to many forms of writing later. In South Asia, when Prakrit was the language of inscription from 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. to 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D., Brahmi script was used to write the Prakrit language. As an exception in Tamil Nāṭu where Tamil was used in the inscriptions, at the same period. As such, the Brahmi inscription of Tamil Nāṭu was called

as Tamil Brahmi inscriptions. Though the contemporary Brahmi inscriptions of Sri Lanka were written in Prakrit language, it contained the influence of Tamil language, with the unique characteristics of Tamil letters. Citing the above evidences, Professor Satmangala Karunaratna, Dr. Aria Abeyasinghe and Dr. P.E. Fernando opine that, before the use of Brahmi script from the Northern India, the writing style of Southern India had been in use in Sri Lanka [1],[2],[3]. These evidences show that the Tamil language was in use in Sri Lanka before the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. Evidences discovered during the excavations in Southern India, especially in Tamil Nāṭu and in Sri Lanka reveals that Brahmi potsherds were in use among the Early Iron Age people who lived before the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. In south Asia, though the Brahmi inscriptions were popular, Brahmi potsherds were a special feature in Tamil Nāṭu and in Sri Lanka. The Brahmi potsherds discovered at Āticcānallūr, in Tamil Nāṭu and at Anurādhapura, in Sri Lanka show that they belonged to a period before 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C., when they were subjected to modern dating [4],[5].

So, it is assumed that the Brahmi inscriptions might have been written before 200 years from the above date. Citing the above dating and the unique features of the

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Brahmi script of Tamil Nāṭu, one sect of scholars opine that Brahmi writing originated in Tamil Nāṭu and spread to the other regions of South Asia. On the contrary, Professor K. V. Raman opines that Brahmi script spread to Tamil Nāṭu from Sri Lanka. [6]. So, it is considered that the Brahmi potsherd discovered at Tissamaharama will play an

important part in the research on the origin of the Tamil language and Tamil script.

The above pottery was discovered at Tissamaharama, in Hambantota District, in Southern Sri Lanka during a recent joint Archaeological excavations conducted by the Archaeology Department and German Archaeology scholars. Along with the above pottery, many kinds of other old potteries akin to Early Iron Age culture of Tamil Nāṭu and beads, iron tools and various other potteries with various markings were discovered. However, we have not received the full analysis of the findings. Anyhow, the “Madras Hindu” newspaper in India published a detailed report of one Brahmi potsherd by an Indian scholar Mr. Iravatham Mahadevan. Subsequently, some Indian and Sri Lankan scholars studied the significance of this Brahmi potsherd. The researches and reports of Mr. Iravatham Mahadevan and Dr. P. Ragupathy are the foundation of our research. [7],[8],[9],[10].



This inscription is found along the rim of the lid of a Black and Red pottery, in five letters. Graffiti marks are seen between two letters. This inscription is in Tamil, and the letter “ṛ” (w) is used which has a unique characteristic of the Tamil language. Most of the scholars agree with Mr. Iravatham Mahadevan that the writings on the Inscription belong to 200 years B.C. However, there are differences of opinion in reading, comprehension and interpretation of the writing on the inscription, among the scholars. Mr. Iravatham Mahadevan interprets the first three letters from left to right as “Tīṛali” (jpusp) and the next two letters from right to left as “Muṛi” (Kwp) and explains that the word “Muṛi” (Kwp) refers to a business deal among Tamil traders in Southern Sri Lanka. Though, Dr. P. Ragupathy agrees with Iravatham Mahadevan in reading the word as “Muṛi” (Kwp), but he does not agree with his interpretation of the word for the following reasons. He says that it is not proper to assume that traders had written their business deal on a pottery. Further, he says that the word “Muṛi” (Kwp) had been used in the ancient Tamil literatures as “share” (gq;F), “Measure” (msT), and “Part” (gFjp). But, the word “Muṛi” (Kwp), had been used as “agreement” and “arrangement” (Deal – Contract), for the first time since 7<sup>th</sup> century

A.D. As the writing (Muṛi) and the inscription belong to the “Caṅkam” period, it is appropriate to interpret the writing “Muṛi” (Kwp), according to the usage of the “Caṅkam” period as “measure – share – Part” to indicate the quantity. Further, he opines that, as the inscription is on the lid of the pottery, it is probable that the pottery might have been used to measure things such as grains, food items, etc. He says that the words “Muṛi” (Kwp) and “Thirali” (jpusp) convey the same meaning. In the ancient Tamil literatures, the word “Thirali” has been used in the sense of “Tiraḷ” (jpus;), “onṛuceruḷal” (xd;WNRUjy;), “onṛuKuvital”, (xd;WFtpjy;), generally meaning, a heap or a collection or a lump quantity. Further, he mentions the present day usage in Jaffna, such as “Mēṇmuṛi – kPd;Kwp” (“a lump collection of pieces of fish”), “Taḷicai – jspir” (A traditional sweetened cooked rice given in Hindu Temples). Further, he cites that it is common usage in Jaffna to call a big portion of fishes in Tamil as “Mēṇmuṛi” and to call a big portion of food given to devotees as “Taḷicai” and to call its container a “Taḷicai caṭṭi”. So, if we take it granted that Mr. Iravatham Mahadevan’s reading of the script is correct, Prof. Ragupathy’s explanation seems to be appropriate. However, there are some reasons to subject the scripts for re-reading.

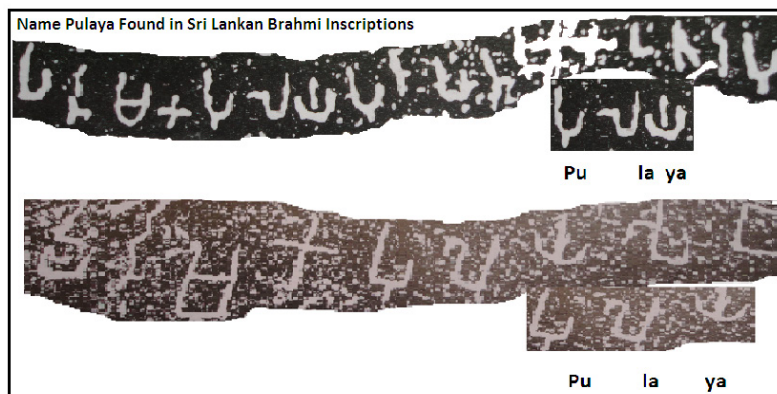
Generally, in Brahmi inscriptions and Brahmi potsherds, a tradition to inscribe Graffiti Marks at the end or in the middle has been observed. There is no wonder that the same trend is seen on the Tisamaragama Brahmi potsherd. Generally, Brahmi inscriptions on caves are written from the left to the right. But, as exceptions, one or two inscriptions in Tamil Nāṭu and Sri Lanka were written from the right to the left. Maybe, when the upper edges were high and unreachable, they inscribed from the upper part to the lower part of the cave which resulted in the right to the left trend of inscription.

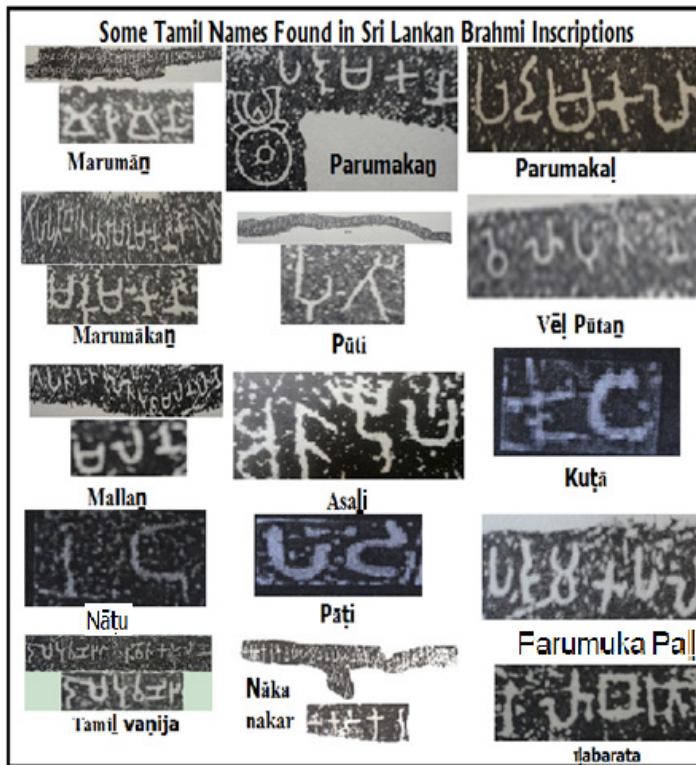
These difficulties would not arise when writing inscription on pottery. Above all, there are no reasons to write some inscription from left to right and to write other

inscription from right to left. There are no evidences to prove these dual trends of writing inscriptions on pottery. As such, it is probable that this inscription was written from left to right, as usual. So, the three letters which are read as “Tiṛaḷi” (jpusp) from right to left can be read as “Puḷaiti” (Giojp) from left to right. In the first letter which gives the sound “Pu” (G), there is small bend to the right on the straight line which appears on the right side. This slightly differs from the letter “Pu” which appears on Brahmicave inscriptions. Such trend is prevalent on the Sri Lankan and Tamil Nāṭu pottery which bear Brahmi scripts. As such, before one confirms the nature of a script, one has to interpret the meaning of the whole word. The second letter “ḷa” (o) has a unique characteristic of Tamil language. In it, on the right part of the script there are two lines on the right side of circular portion to indicate “long sound” (neby;). The above two lines appear to touch the first script “Pu” (G). It may be the cause to consider the letter as “ra” (u). The third script is clearly “Ti” (jp). So, it may be appropriate to read the three letters as “Puḷaiti” (Giojp). Generally, in literatures the words come in “Eraṭṭittu”. But, on inscription, the words come in oṛṭṭukkal. For example, the name “Cāṭṭaṇ” (rhj;jd;) in literature is written as “Cāṭṭaṇ” (rhjd;) on Brahmi inscriptions. Likewise, “Mallaṇ” (ky;yd;) in literatures is written as “Malaṇ” (kyd;) on Brahmi inscriptions. So, it may be appropriate to consider the “Puḷaiti” (Giojp) on Tisamaragama inscription as “Puḷaitti” (Gioj;jp).

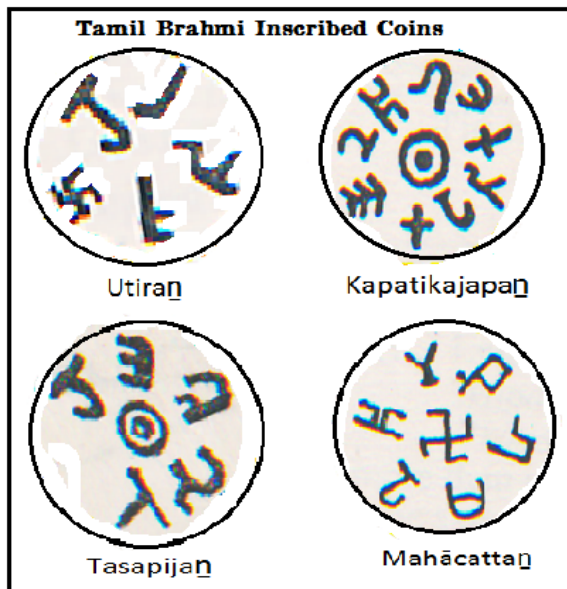
The names of individuals appear on the Brahmi potsherds of Tamil Nāṭu and Sri Lanka. These names probably refer to the maker or possessor of the pottery. For example, the pottery of Tamil Nāṭu bear the names of individuals, such as “Kaṇṇaṇ” (fz;zd;), “Āṭaṇ” (Mjd;), “Utiraṇ” (cjpud;), and “Kuvēraṇ” (FNtud;) etc. The pottery of Sri Lanka bear the names such as, “Apicitaṇ” (mgprpjd;), “Vēḷ” (Nts;) and “Nāka” etc. So, it is appropriate to consider the name on the Tisamaragama pottery as “-Puḷaiti” (Giojp) or “Puḷaitti” (Gioj;jp) who may be either the maker or the possessor of the pottery.

Following this name, on the left of the Graffiti marks, the two letters are read as “Muṛi” (Kwp). Though this word means “share” (gq;F), “Measure” (msT), and “Part” (gFjp), the Jaffna Lexicon bear the meaning of high quality pottery, among others. So, it may be probable to consider the word “Muṛi” (Kwp) as the vessel or container belonging to “Puḷaiti” (Giojp) or “Puḷaitti” (Gioj;jp).





Four Brahmi inscriptions belonging to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. found in Sri Lanka bear the word “Pulaya”(Giya) as a personal name [11]. So, the personal name Puḷaiti“(Giojp) or “Puḷaitti which appear on the pottery may be the feminine gender of the personal name of Pulaya(Giya).



As the scholars have differences of opinions about the reading and interpretation of this inscription, it shows that the inscription needs more research and scrutinization to derive the correct and clear interpretation. However, it is clearly evident that the inscription bears unique Tamil scripts.

Further, it shows that Tamil speaking community lived in Southern Sri Lanka about 2200 years ago. Next to Anuradhapura, Brahmi inscriptions were discovered in abundance in the Hambathoda district. Individual names, title names, social orders and relationships in Tamil provide adequate evidences that Tamil community lived in Southern Sri Lanka long ago. In 1999, Professor Osman Boparachchi and Rajawickramasinghe did extensive Archaeological research at Akkurugoda in the Hambantota district. During the Archaeological survey, they discovered hundreds of Brahmi inscribed coins belonging to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C and studied them [12]. They pointed out that some of the coins are in Tamil language. The author of this article, has identified some coins in Tamil language which bear the names such as “Utiraṅ”(cjpuḍ;), “Kapatikajapaṅ”, (fgjpf[gd;]) “Tasapijaṅ”(j]gp[d;), “Mahācattaṅ”(k`hrhj;jd;) and “Cuṭanāga”(Rleh’). One such coin deserves special mention. The coin bears the name “Ticapuracataṅakaracaṅ”(jp\Gurlzhfuhrd;).

The name ends in “aṅ” which refers to the male member of the Tamil community. Further, the name consists of the part “Aracaṅ”(murḍ;) which is the Tamil form of the word “Raja” in Prakrit language [13]. It shows that a Tamil chieftain, who ruled the Tissapura region, issued such coins. Pāil literary work Mahavaṃsa says that Prince Dutu Gamini (Jl;lfhkpdp) defeated 32 Tamil chieftains in the Southern Sri Lanka, before he defeated the Tamil King Ellāṅ(vy;yhsd;) who ruled at Anuradhapura [14].

The account in the Mahavaṃsa is probably true according to the evidence of the Brahmi potsherd and Brahmi inscribed coins discovered at Tissamaragama. Usually a language may take several years from its beginning as a spoken language to the beginning as



a written language. Some languages have no written forms at all. There are adequate evidences that the Tamil language in its written form was in existence in Sri Lanka since 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. The above evidences show that the Tamil language was in use in Sri Lanka before several centuries.

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