

Early Indian Scripts

WE NOW come to India. I start with an introduction to the 'Early Indian Scripts'.

It is unfortunate that our most ancient writing, is still unintelligible. How much we can learn about ancients' life and culture if only Indus script has been deciphered! Hence the presentation skips the Indus script, which is waiting to be completely understood. The presentation skips the Indus script, which is waiting to be completely understood. The Kharoshthi and Brahmi are get detailed treatment. However the Khroshthi story ends rather abrupt, as it has died without *varisu*.

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Two millennia pass after the Indus writing before we have the deciphered scripts of our land: Kharoshthi and Brahmi. Kharoshthi left no descendants. But why, I would like to know. It was being written extensively in the North-western greater India. We find them on the then media, birch-bark and on coins. Why there are no descendants to Kharoshthi, whereas it is from Brahmi all Indian languages got their script? Was it because it was in some way inconvenient, like being written from right to left? Some of you might see samples of Kharoshthi for the first time in my presentation.

Both the scripts, Brahmi and Kharoshthi, have some common features, like being syllabic and being made of simple, short strokes. There are also differences, the chief being the direction of writing. Kharoshthi, as mentioned before, was written from right to left.

As it was with Rosetta Stone, deciphering Brahmi and Kharoshthi became possible because of bi-lingual coins. The Alexander invasion may or may not have been good for India. That it helped indirectly deciphering both Brahmi and Kharoshthi is fortuitous. Some Indo-Greek kings who ruled in Afghanistan and the Punjab from about 200 - 25 BCE recorded their names and titles in Greek and in Brahmi or Kharoshthi.

And it was because of the untiring effort of James Prinsep (1799-1840), a qualified architect who came to India to work in the Mint at the age of 20 and worked himself to death unraveling the mystery of Brahmi, that we are able to follow the messages of the compassionate Asoka and trace our hoary antiquity.

‘The Brahmi Story’ I find to be exciting. Why exciting? Let me mention two features of Brahmi. It seems to me to be the earliest, truly syllabic script. That is, each character is a syllable, that is, a vowel or a consonant-vowel, just suited for writing Indian languages. Its functional elegance is another aspect that might interest us. Most letters are simple geometrical shapes. The construction of consonant-vowels (like *ka, kaa, ki, kii*, etc) is systematic and uniform for all consonants. This you will see in the presentation. If there is a contender for single script for all Indian languages, we have this one invented 2500 years ago that fits the bill. Our children, who are being tortured to write complicated our ‘*jilebi*’ scripts, would be thankful to us!

It looks that there was no writing before the time of Asoka, or, put differently, we find no trace of writing before Asoka. Then the question is how a vibrant civilization managed without writing. This aspect is focused in the presentation.

Various theories on the origin of Brahmi are current. There is one aspect that puts the Brahmi script and the scripts for most Indian languages in a special category. This is the existence of post-consonantal diacritic signs (sorry, I should avoid jargon), that is, making it possible to write consonant-vowel, (again another jargon!), that is, 'uyir-mey' letters, and also of the existence of signs for conjunct consonants, that is, *kUTTezhuttu*, like *ksha*, except for Tamil. This is unique to India. In the scripts like Aramaic or Greek, the two scripts from which some people claim that Brahmi had descended from, this feature for conjunct consonant does not exist. Actually these have consonants and vowels written separately.

I consider it is quite inconceivable that the Asokan scribes took Aramaic or Greek, added symbols for voiced (*t* is unvoiced and *d* is voiced) and aspirated (*th*, *dh* etc) sounds, then added symbols for sibilants (*s*, *sh* etc), arranged according to the mode of production of sound, then added symbols for conjunct consonants, etc.

All Indian scripts have these special features. This sophistication was perhaps because India had the advantage of possessing a very sophisticated knowledge of phonology and grammar prior to ‘inventing’ scripts. Because of this its alphabet were organized scientifically. The letters were divided into vowels and consonants, and both these arranged according to the articulation in the mouth. Presence of consonant-vowels and of conjunct consonants makes the script syllabic.

There is one more direction we would consider. The poetic meter of Sanskrit (*Chandas*) is based on syllables. Even Vedic hymns are set to poetic meters. The scripts adopted for Sanskrit, namely Devanagari and Grantha, are both fully syllabic scripts. That is each character is a syllable, meaning each character is either vowel or consonant-vowel. This is so for Prakrit dialects also. Thus any script that would be used for these languages would have to be syllabic and Brahmi fits the bill.

The making of Brahmi script, and perhaps of Kharoshthi, it is surprising to note, was initiated and completed in one life time, namely, during the reign of Asoka, actually after the Kalinga war! Added to this is the fact that during his time itself the script travelled all over India and Srilanka. The script was not used by the emissaries of Asoka only, but by the Jains, which is the case in the Tamil country.

The earliest writing we have is those of Asoka, his edicts all over his mighty empire. Travelling through time and topography the script provided the basis for the scripts for all Indian languages. Now became curvilinear to suit the new media, the palm-leaf and the birch-bark.

A condensed version travelled to Bengal and Assam.

Another version descended from the north to the west, eventually to become Devanagari, which became most widely-used and widely-travelled script.

Would it be wrong to say that India provided both the letter – their scripts - and the spirit – of the Buddha - to the East?

Brahmi is the mother script of most of the Asian languages, of Java, Sumatra, Borneo, Thai, Laos, Khmer, Cambodia, Vietnam etc. This happened through the political and the cultural conquest by the Indian rulers starting from the Pallava-s. The Pallava-s developed a script, called Grantha or Pallava Grantha, to write Sanskrit in the Tamil country and was the inspiration to these Asian scripts.

Harappan script

There is evidence of writing during the Harappan civilization.

The numerous seals found in the excavations attest to this.

Unfortunately, the script has not been deciphered satisfactorily yet.





Post-Harappan situation

Indian writing dates from around 3rd century BCE.

It is surprising that writing should have evolved so late.

There are reasons for being surprised.

Post-Harappan situation



The post-Harappan civilization was
at least 2000 years by 3rd century BCE.

It inherited a rich legacy of Indus script, and
had cultural and commercial interaction
with powerful literate states,
like those in Mesopotamia etc.



Post-Harappan situation

It had attained unimaginable peak
in phonetic and grammatical theories
by Panini's time in the 5th century BCE.



Post-Harappan situation

It attained remarkable intellectual heights through the Upanishads, the Buddha and Mahavira,

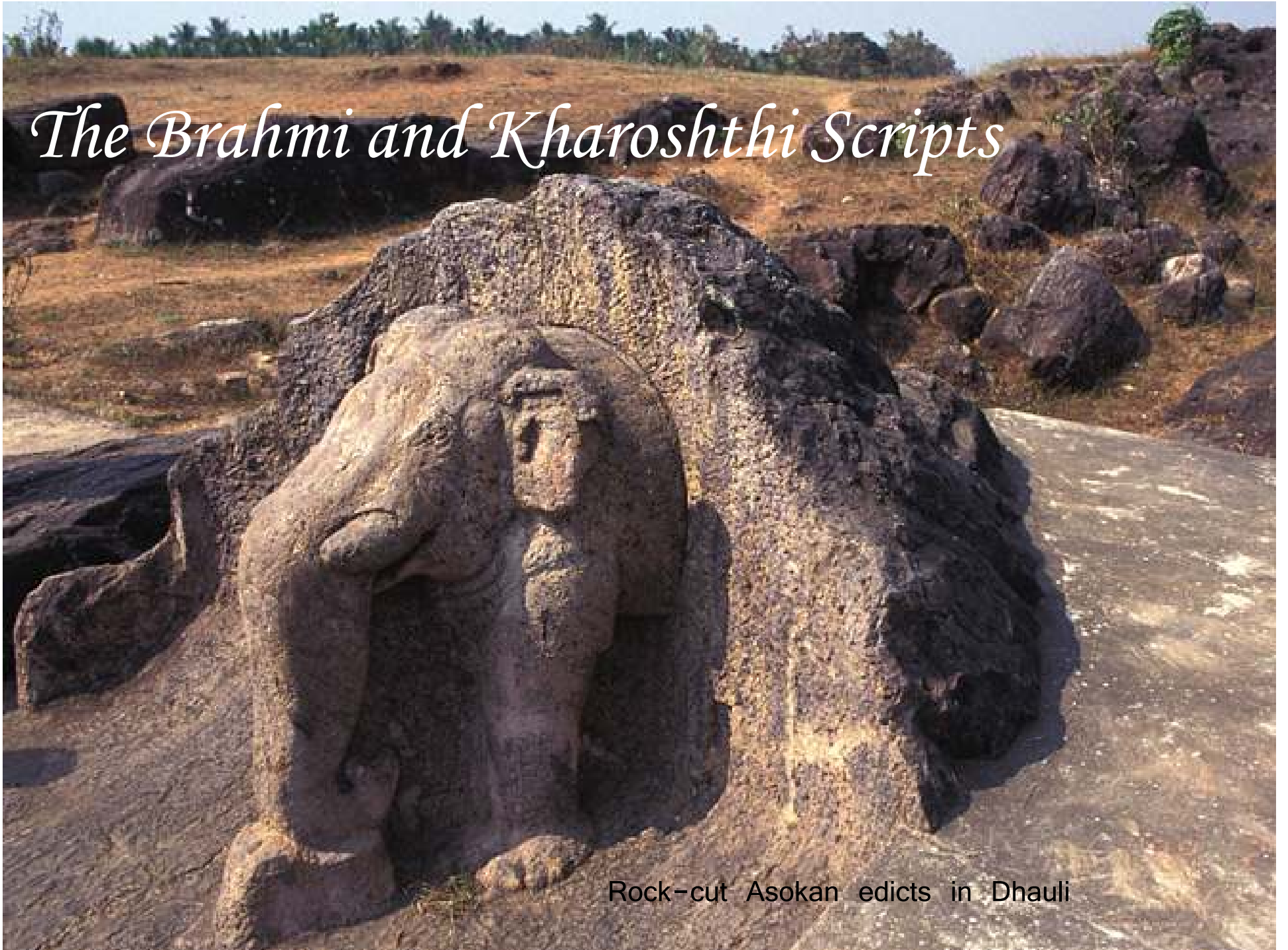
It had witnessed rule by legendary rich, like the Nandas,

and a highly sophisticated literary tradition in the Tamil country.

That all these would have been feasible without writing is quite incredible.

The Brahmi and Kharoshthi Scripts

Rock-cut Asokan edicts in Dhauri



Brahmi and Kharoshthi



The earliest scripts in India
that have been deciphered are
Kharoshthi and Brahmi.

There were similarities among and
differences between them.

Brahmi and Kharoshthi

Both were developed around 300 BCE.

While Kharoshthi came to be used only for Prakrit dialects, Brahmi, in addition, was employed for writing Tamil.

Both were syllabic.



Brahmi and Kharoshthi



Kharoshthi was written from right to left,
whereas Brahmi, like all its descendants,
was written from left to right.

There are no descendants for Kharoshthi,
and it became extinct by 400 CE.

Brahmi spawned scripts for all Indian languages and
for most South-east Asian languages.



Origin of Brahmi

We are still not certain about its origin.

Some claim that it is of Aramaic or of Semitic origin.

It is a descendent of Indus script is another claim.

Some hold that it was specially designed during Asoka's time.

That it was of Tamil origin, later adapted for other languages is another line of thinking.



Inscriptions in Brahmi

The earliest available Brahmi writing
belongs to 3rd century BCE.

They are found in
coins of Indo-Greek Kings,
Asokan edicts in North India and the Greater India
and the Jaina inscriptions
in various Prakrit dialects, and
Tamil inscriptions, mostly Jaina,
in Tamilnadu

Translation

Thus speaks the King, dear to the Gods, Príyadarshí.

*When I had been consecrated twenty-six years
I ordered this inscription of Dharma to be engraved.*

*Both this world and the other are hard to reach,
except by great love of Ríghteousness,
great self-examination, great obedience (to Ríghteousness),
great respect (for Ríghteousness), great energy.*

*But through my leadership respect for Ríghteousness
and love of Ríghteousness have grown and will grow from day to day.*

*Moreover my officers, of high, low and medium grades,
follow it and apply it, sufficiently to make the waverer accept it;
the officers on the frontiers do likewise.*

*For this is (my) rule: government by Ríghteousness,
administration according to Ríghteousness,
gratification (of my subjects) by Ríghteousness,
protection by Ríghteousness.*



Brahmi

First let us have a look at the alphabet.

We may notice that the letters comprise
simple, short strokes,
evidently made to suit
the contemporary mode of writing,
namely, inscriptions on stone.

You may also notice later
that this feature is shared by Kharoshthi too.

Alphabet of Brahmi

The following are the vowels
(shown for Prakrit dialects)

𑀓	𑀔	𑀕	𑀖	𑀗	𑀘	𑀙	𑀚	𑀛
a	ā	i	ī	u	ū	e	ai	o
अ	आ	इ	ई	उ	ऊ	ए	ऐ	ओ
𑀓𑀔	𑀓𑀕	𑀓𑀖	𑀓𑀗	𑀓𑀘	𑀓𑀙	𑀓𑀚	𑀓𑀛	𑀓𑀜

And here are the consonants
(shown for Prakrit dialects)

 ka	 kha	 ga	 gha	 ña		
 ca	 cha	 ja	 jha	 ña	 ya	 śa
 ṭa	 ṭha	 ḍa	 ḍha	 ṇa	 ra	 ṣa
 ta	 tha	 da	 dha	 na	 la	 sa
 pa	 pha	 ba	 bha	 ma	 va	 ha

The construction of consonant-vowels
is systematic.

Here is an example using the letter 'k' (𐌕).



It is important to note that
it is uniform for all consonants.

A portion transliterated

ॐ नमो भगवते वासुदेवाय

देवानांपिये पियदासी

தேவாநாம்பியே பியதாஸீ

𑀀	𑀁	𑀂	𑀃	𑀄	𑀅
a	ā	i	ī	u	ū
𑀆	𑀇	𑀈			
e	ai	o			
+	𑀊	𑀋	𑀌	𑀍	𑀎
ka	kha	ga	gha	ṅa	
𑀏	𑀐	𑀑	𑀒	𑀓	
ca	cha	ja	jha	ṅa	
𑀔	𑀕	𑀖	𑀗	𑀘	
ṭa	ṭha	ḍa	ḍha	ṇa	
𑀙	𑀚	𑀛	𑀜	𑀝	
ta	tha	da	dha	na	
𑀞	𑀟	𑀠	𑀡	𑀢	
pa	pha	ba	bha	ma	
𑀣	𑀤	𑀥	𑀦	𑀧	
ya	ra	la	ḷa	va	
𑀨	𑀩	𑀪	𑀫		
śa	ṣa	sa	ha		

+	𑀌	𑀍	𑀎	𑀏	𑀐	𑀑	𑀒	𑀓
ka	kā	ki	kī	ku	kū	ke	ko	ko



Kharoshthi

Kharoshthi was prevalent only in North-western India.

Some believe that it was derived from the Aramaic script.

We have a number of Asokan edicts
and legends in the Indo-Greek and Kushana coins
in Kharoshthi.

𑀘𑀓𑀡𑀭𑀮𑀢𑀣𑀤𑀥𑀦𑀧𑀨𑀩𑀪𑀫𑀬𑀭𑀮𑀯𑀰𑀱𑀲𑀳𑀴𑀵𑀶𑀷𑀸𑀹𑀺𑀻𑀼𑀽𑀾𑀿𑀿𑀸𑀷𑀶𑀵𑀴𑀳𑀲𑀱𑀰𑀯𑀮𑀭𑀬𑀫𑀪𑀩𑀨𑀧𑀦𑀥𑀤𑀣𑀡𑀠𑀟

𑀘𑀓𑀡𑀭𑀮𑀢𑀣𑀤𑀥𑀦𑀧𑀨𑀩𑀪𑀫𑀬𑀭𑀮𑀯𑀰𑀱𑀲𑀳𑀴𑀵𑀶𑀷𑀸𑀹𑀺𑀻𑀼𑀽𑀾𑀿𑀿𑀸𑀷𑀶𑀵𑀴𑀳𑀲𑀱𑀰𑀯𑀮𑀭𑀬𑀫𑀪𑀩𑀨𑀧𑀦𑀥𑀤𑀣𑀡𑀠𑀟

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Kharoshthi

𑀘𑀓𑀡𑀭𑀮𑀢𑀣𑀤𑀥𑀦𑀧𑀨𑀩𑀪𑀫𑀬𑀭𑀮𑀯𑀰𑀱𑀲𑀳𑀴𑀵𑀶𑀷𑀸𑀹𑀺𑀻𑀼𑀽𑀾𑀿𑀿𑀸𑀷𑀶𑀵𑀴𑀳𑀲𑀱𑀰𑀯𑀮𑀭𑀬𑀫𑀪𑀩𑀨𑀧𑀦𑀥𑀤𑀣𑀡𑀠𑀟
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From an inscribed Silver Leaf, Takshashila, 1st Century AD

𑀘𑀓𑀡𑀭𑀮𑀢𑀣𑀤𑀥𑀦𑀧𑀨𑀩𑀪𑀫𑀬𑀭𑀮𑀯𑀰𑀱𑀲𑀳𑀴𑀵𑀶𑀷𑀸𑀹𑀺𑀻𑀼𑀽𑀾𑀿𑀿𑀸𑀷𑀶𑀵𑀴𑀳𑀲𑀱𑀰𑀯𑀮𑀭𑀬𑀫𑀪𑀩𑀨𑀧𑀦𑀥𑀤𑀣𑀡𑀠𑀟

Translation

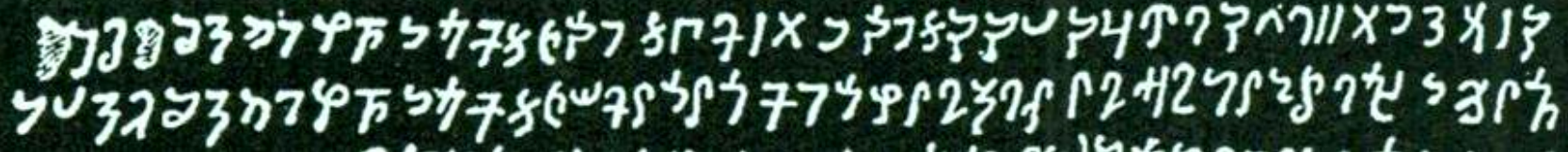
In the year of Aya, in the month Ashadha on the 15th day.

*On this day the relics of the Lord (the Buddha) were deposited
by Urasaka, the Bactrian, the son of Imtavhria,
a citizen of the town of Noaca.*

*These relics of the Lord were deposited by him
in his own Bodhisattva chapel
of the Dharmarajika (Stupa) of Takshashila,
for the blessing of health for the great King,
the King over Kings, the Son of the Gods, the Kushana, and
in reverence to all the Buddhas, in reverence
to all the Pratyeka Buddhas,
in reverence to the Arhants, in reverence to all beings,
in reverence to his mother and father, in reverence to his friends,
his advisers, his kinsmen, and those of common blood, and
for the boon of health and Nirvana for himself.*

May right renunciation be widespread.

First two lines of the inscription transliterated



स 11002010411 अयस अबडस मसस दिवसे 1041 इश दिवसे प्रदिस्तवित भगवतो धातु उर
केन इंत व्हि अपुत्रेण बहलिएन णोअघए णगरे वस्तवेन तेन इमे प्रदिस्तवित भगवतो धतुओ

You may recollect that Kharoshthi is read from right to left

𑀀 𑀁 𑀂 𑀃 𑀄 𑀅 𑀆 𑀇 𑀈 𑀉 𑀊 𑀋 𑀌 𑀍 𑀎 𑀏 𑀐 𑀑 𑀒 𑀓 𑀔 𑀕 𑀖 𑀗 𑀘 𑀙 𑀚 𑀛 𑀜 𑀝

𑀠 𑀡 𑀢 𑀣 𑀤 𑀥 𑀦 𑀧 𑀨 𑀩 𑀪 𑀫 𑀬 𑀭 𑀮 𑀯 𑀰 𑀱 𑀲 𑀳 𑀴 𑀵 𑀶 𑀷 𑀸 𑀹 𑀺 𑀻 𑀼 𑀽 𑀾 𑀿

𑀠 𑀡 𑀢 𑀣 𑀤 𑀥 𑀦 𑀧 𑀨 𑀩 𑀪 𑀫 𑀬 𑀭 𑀮 𑀯 𑀰 𑀱 𑀲 𑀳 𑀴 𑀵 𑀶 𑀷 𑀸 𑀹 𑀺 𑀻 𑀼 𑀽 𑀾 𑀿

𑀀 a	𑀁 i	𑀂 u	𑀃 e	𑀄 o
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𑀅 ka	𑀆 kha	𑀇 ga	𑀈 gha	𑀉 ña
𑀊 ca	𑀋 cha	𑀌 ja	𑀍 jha	𑀎 ña
𑀏 ṭa	𑀐 ṭha	𑀑 ḍa	𑀒 ḍha	𑀓 ṇa
𑀔 ta	𑀕 tha	𑀖 da	𑀗 dha	𑀘 na
𑀙 pa	𑀚 pha	𑀛 ba	𑀜 bha	𑀝 ma
𑀞 ya	𑀟 ra	𑀠 la	𑀡 va	
𑀢 śa	𑀣 ṣa	𑀤 sa	𑀥 ha	



Kharoshti
Alphabet

𑀀 𑀁 𑀂 𑀃 𑀄 𑀅 𑀆 𑀇 𑀈 𑀉 𑀊 𑀋 𑀌 𑀍 𑀎 𑀏 𑀐 𑀑 𑀒 𑀓 𑀔 𑀕 𑀖 𑀗 𑀘 𑀙 𑀚 𑀛 𑀜 𑀝 𑀞 𑀟 𑀠 𑀡 𑀢 𑀣 𑀤 𑀥 𑀦 𑀧 𑀨 𑀩 𑀪 𑀫 𑀬 𑀭 𑀮 𑀯 𑀰 𑀱 𑀲 𑀳 𑀴 𑀵 𑀶 𑀷 𑀸 𑀹 𑀺 𑀻 𑀼 𑀽 𑀾 𑀿

Kharoshthi

Vowel addition – A sample

	+					
ka		a	i	u	e	o

ka	ki	ku	ke	ko

It s likewise for all the other consonants.

Handwritten text in Kharoshthi script along the top border of the page.

Vertical handwritten text in Kharoshthi script along the left border of the page.

Vertical handwritten text in Kharoshthi script along the right border of the page.

Handwritten text in Kharoshthi script along the bottom border of the page.

Kharoshthi

A portion magnified

Handwritten Kharoshthi text on a dark background. A yellow rectangular box highlights a specific portion of the text in the second line.

Magnified view of the highlighted portion of the Kharoshthi text, showing individual characters in detail.

ΔL-ϷIϫtϷϩEIVϫLϫFϫC.I.ηIϫt ϷϫϯϷϷI.ϫϷIϩϷϫϫϫCηCϯ

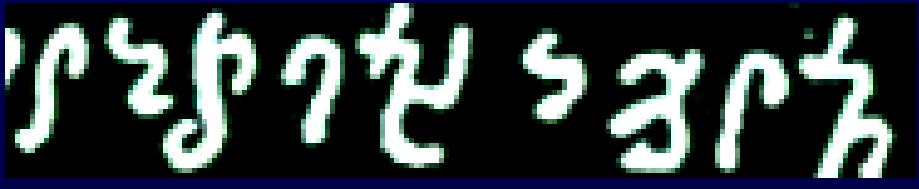
ΔL ϷIϫt ϷϩEIV ϫL ϫFϫC.I. ηIϫt Ϸϫ ϯϷϷI. ϫϷI ϩϷϫ ϫϫ ϫC ηC ϯ

ΔL ϷIϫt ϷϩEIV ϫL ϫFϫC.I. ηIϫt Ϸϫ ϯϷϷI. ϫϷI ϩϷϫ ϫϫ ϫC ηC ϯ

↵	↶	↷	↸	↹
a	i	u	e	o
⊥	⊃	⊦	⊧	⊨
ka	kha	ga	gha	na
⊥	⊥	⊥	⊥	⊥
ca	cha	ja	jha	ña
⊥	⊥	⊥	⊥	⊥
ṭa	ṭha	ḍa	ḍha	ṇa
↵	⊥	⊥	⊥	⊥
ta	tha	da	dha	na
⊥	⊥	⊥	⊥	⊥
pa	pha	ba	bha	ma
∧	↵	⊥	⊥	
ya	ra	la	va	
⊥	↶	⊥	⊥	
śa	ṣa	sa	ha	

Kharoshthi

A portion transliterated



Na - tre - pu - a - vñri - ta - im - Na - ke
 ण - त्रे - पु - अ - व्हि - त - इं - ण - के
 ण - த் - ரே - பு - அ - வ்ஹரி - த - இம் - ண - கே

ΔL-ϷIϫtϷϩEIVϫLϫFϫC.I.ηIϫt ϷϫϯϷϷI.ϫϷIϩϷϫϫϫCηCϯ

Here is another example of the Kharoshthi script.



The text is in Gandhari,
a Prakrit dialect,
spoken in
the northwestern India.

This is the oldest
surviving Buddhist text
belonging to
the 1st century CE.

The material is bhoja-patra,
bark of a tree.



Deciphering Brahmi and Kharoshthi



Deciphering Brahmi and Kharoshthi

We meet again the two fortuitous conditions
discovery of multi-lingual texts and
a determined researcher.

Some Indo-Greek king issued coins
which carried

Greek and Brahmi-Kharoshthi legends



Deciphering Brahmi and Kharoshthi

James Prinsep,
an employee of
East India Company,
painstakingly studied these
legends and
was able to decipher
the two early scripts.



Coin of Agathocles (190-180 BCE)



Left: Balarama sword in sheath, holding mace and plough
Greek legend: *Of King Agathocles*

Right: Krishna, sword in sheath, holding conch and wheel
Brahmi legend: *Rajane Agathuklayasa* ("King Agathocles")

Coin of Kushana King Vima Kadphises (110-128 CE)



Left:
Greek

The king on throne
legend: *Basileus Oema (Siva) Kadaphises*

Right:
Kharoshthi legend:

Siva with Nandi
*Maharajasa rajadirajasa sarvalogaishwarasa
Mahiishwarasa Vima Kadaphisasa Tratara*



Brahmi's Asian descendants



Brahmi's Asian descendants

India provided both
'letter' and 'spirit' to the East:

It is the Brahmi script
from which scripts for most of the languages
of Asia evolved.

And it was the Buddha who breathed the spirit.

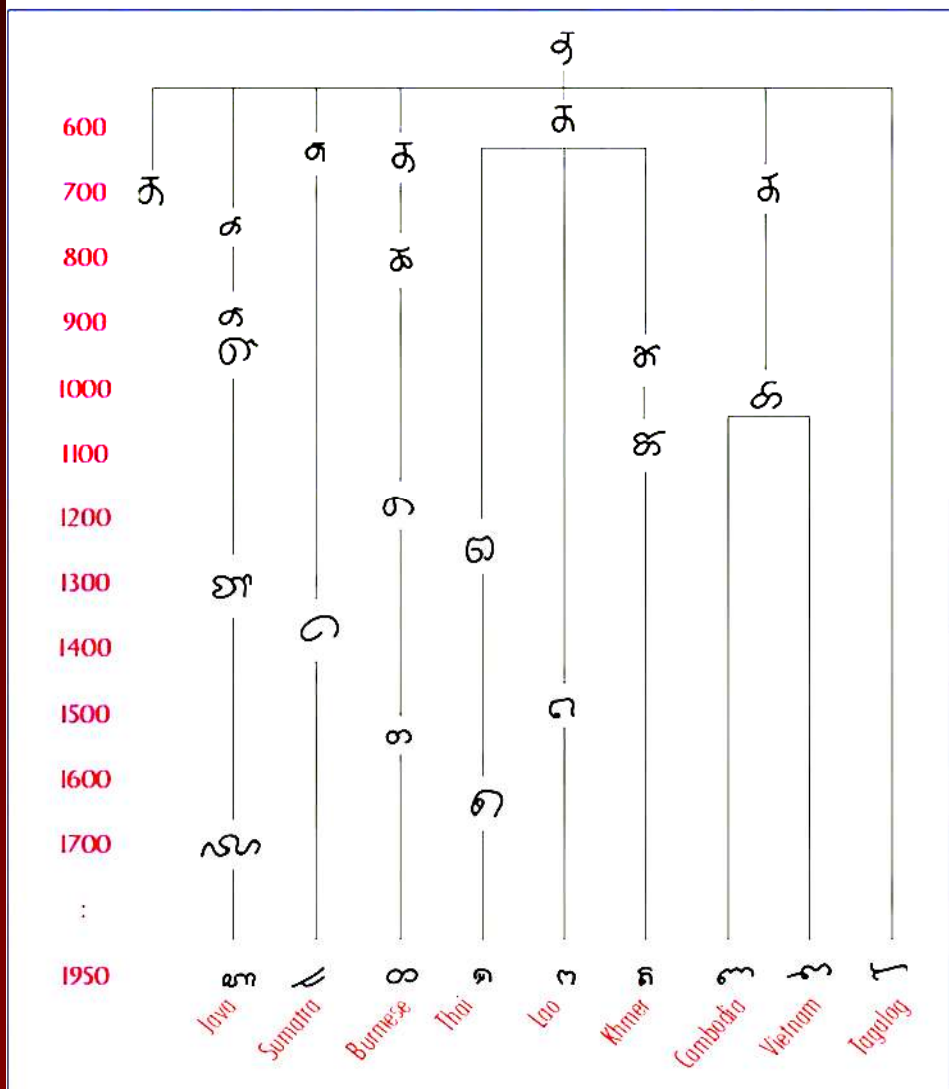


Brahmi's Asian descendants

Pallava Grantha, a derivative of Brahmi,
a script developed to write
Sanskrit in the Tamil country
was the inspiration to
most of the Asian scripts.

This happened through
the political and cultural conquest
by the Indian rulers,
starting with the Pallavas

DEVELOPMENT OF THE LETTER 'ka'
FROM PALLAVA GRANTHA TO EAST ASIAN LANGUAGES



Development of letter 'k' (𑊛) for the languages of Java, Sumatra, Borneo, Thai, Laos, Khmer, Cambodia, Vietnam, etc from the Grantha script

velars	SIN	BUR	LAO	THA	KHM	JAV	BAL	TAG	BAT	BUG
k	ක	က	ก	ก	ក	ꦏꦏ	ꦏꦏ	ക	ꦏꦏ	ꦏꦏ
kh	ක	က	ຂ	ข	ខ	ꦏꦏ꧀	-	-	-	-
g	ග	ဂ	ง	ง	ក	ꦏꦏ	ꦏꦏ	ក	ꦏꦏ	ꦏꦏ
gh	ග	ဂ	-	ง	ក	ꦏꦏ	ꦏꦏ	-	-	-
ṅ	ආ	င	ງ	ง	ង	ꦏꦏ꧀	ꦏꦏ꧀	ꦏꦏ꧀	ꦏꦏ꧀	ꦏꦏ꧀

Here is a sample table
from the Brahmi-based Asian scripts

ຍສຣີມາເນດຣາວາຣມມະຕິ
ມາເນດຣາ ວາ ວິສຣຸຕາ
ສາສາ ນິກາ ຣາ ຕາ ດຳ ກຳ ກຢາ
ນິນະ ກຳ ເນ ມາ ນິນະ ລຳ ສາ ຢາ ມ.

Ya śsrī ma he ndra va rmme ti
ma he ndra i va vi śru ta
sa śa nika ra ta dā kā khya
ñca khā ne ma ñja lā śa ya m.

Sra Kaeo in central Thailand, 7th century

ကံပံဃုတံကထုဂံကျမုဃ
ကမဗ္ဗုဗျာဒိဂံ

te saṃ - he tuṃ - ta thā ga tō - ā ha -
te sa ṇca - yō - ni rō dhō /

Nakhorn Pathom central Thailand, 7th centuy