



*Brahmi, the Fountainhead  
Mother of scripts of all native Indian languages*

SINCE THE turf is our own land, we are dealing with a living tradition. In fact, many of the inscriptions cited can be seen ‘alive’ or in the museums, in India and, more likely, abroad. This is more so with Tamil inscriptions. Hence I have made it elaborate.

I have even attempted tutorial-like explanation, that can whet the appetite of the curious minded. A leisurely going through could be rewarding, and can even find holes in my arguments! But, my being not quite knowledgeable, has some virtue; none of the subject-matter in the presentation is mine, and were taken for authoritative sources.

As far as the Brahmi descendants are concerned, we may consider three lines of successions: the northern, which gave rise to Devanagari and the scripts for all the Indo-Germanic languages of India, scripts of the south and the pan-Indian scripts.

This part of the presentation mainly deals with the development of Devanagari and touches upon the scripts of the Southeast, while the next part would deal with scripts of the Tamil country, and that of its Dravidian siblings.

The discussion starts with the role of writing medium on the shape of letters. When writing went beyond royal proclamations, alternate media chosen were palm-leaf, in the coastal areas and bhoj patra, bark of a tree, elsewhere. The corresponding tools were iron-nail for the former and reed-pen with ink. This greatly affected the shape of letters, as can be seen in the presentation.

Specimens from significant periods have been chosen for discussion. The selections have been chronologically arranged, and I have tried add features that would make the presentation interesting, and, wherever possible teasing.

## *Development of Indian scripts*

Scripts for all languages native to India originated in Brahmi,

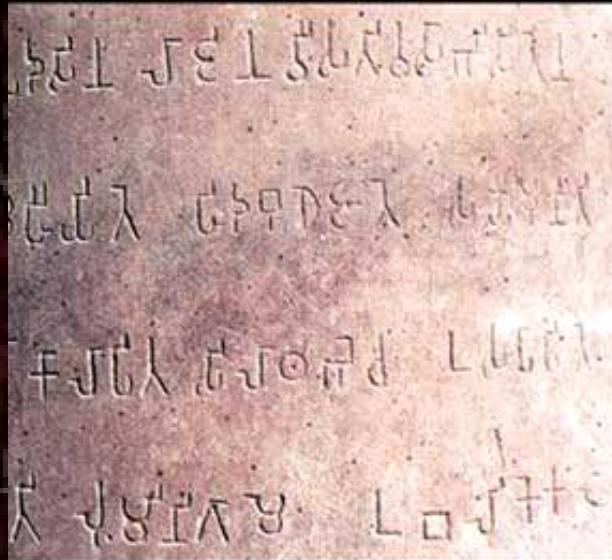
which had a number of regional variations,  
like Southern Brahmi, Tamil-Brahmi, Sinhala Brahmi etc.

# *Effect of writing materials*

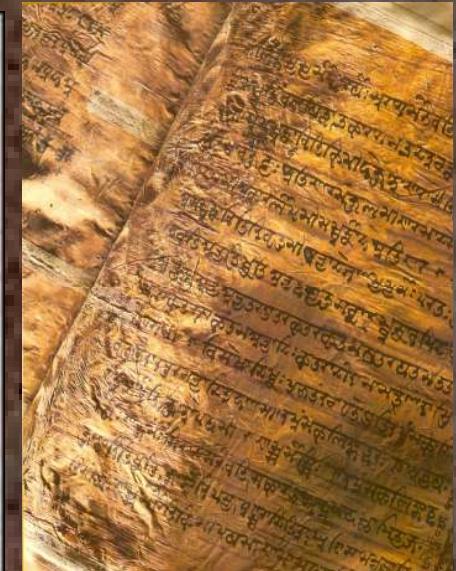
Over a period of time changes happened  
in the shape of Brahmi letters,  
the main reason being  
the use of various writing materials:  
the base on which the writing is caused and the writing tools



Palm-leaf



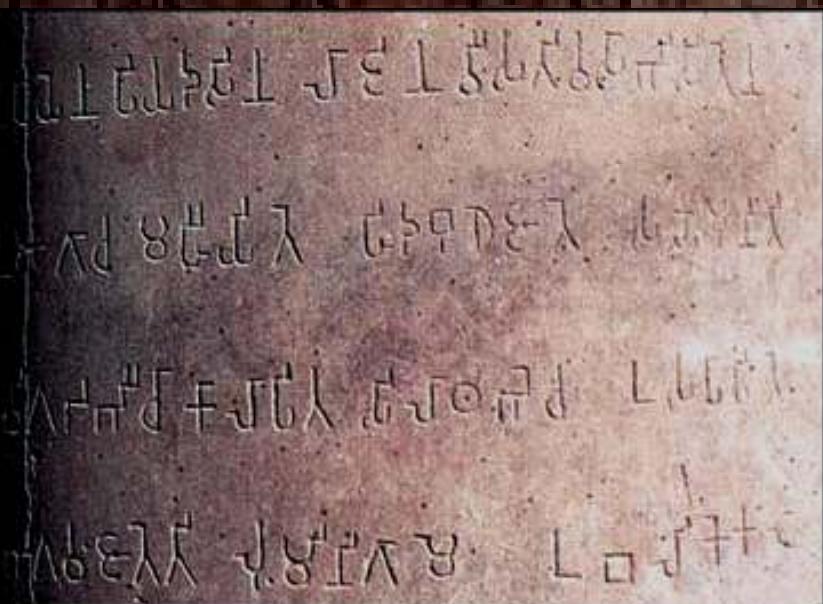
Stone

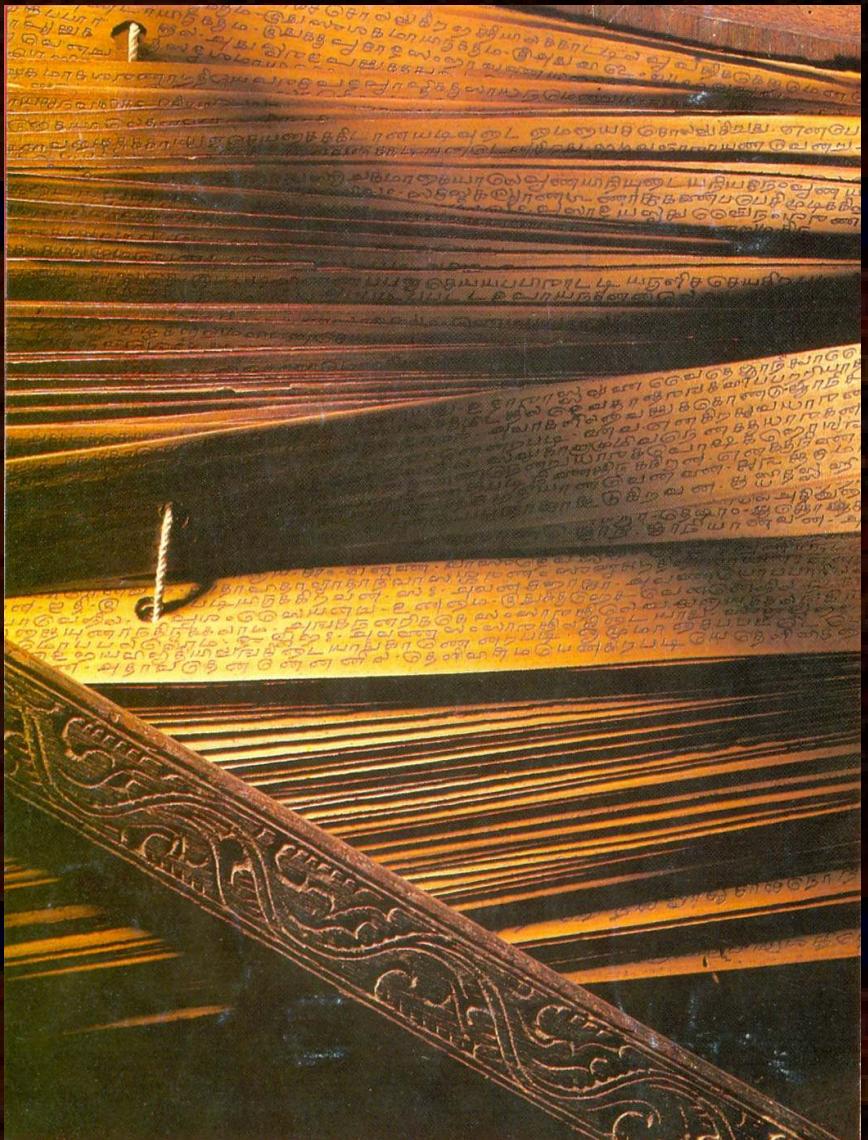


Bhoja patra

From the period of Asoka  
we have inscriptions  
on stone  
using metal chisels.

Straight lines were easier.  
Brahmi script consisted  
predominantly  
of short straight strokes.





Till a few centuries ago, we used a metal needle  
to engrave on palm leaves.  
In this, rounded letters were  
preferable, as straight strokes  
may tear the leaf,  
particularly, along the length.

In the regions, where palm-leaf was  
the predominant writing medium,  
the script was rounded,  
like of all southern languages and of Orissa.

Kannada

ಹಿಂದು ಹಾಸನವರ್ಮ ಸತತಾರ್ಥಕಾರಿಗಳು

Oriya

ବିଜୀ ଦେଖିଲେ ପିଲ୍ଲ ନାମକ କଣ୍ଠ

Sinhalese

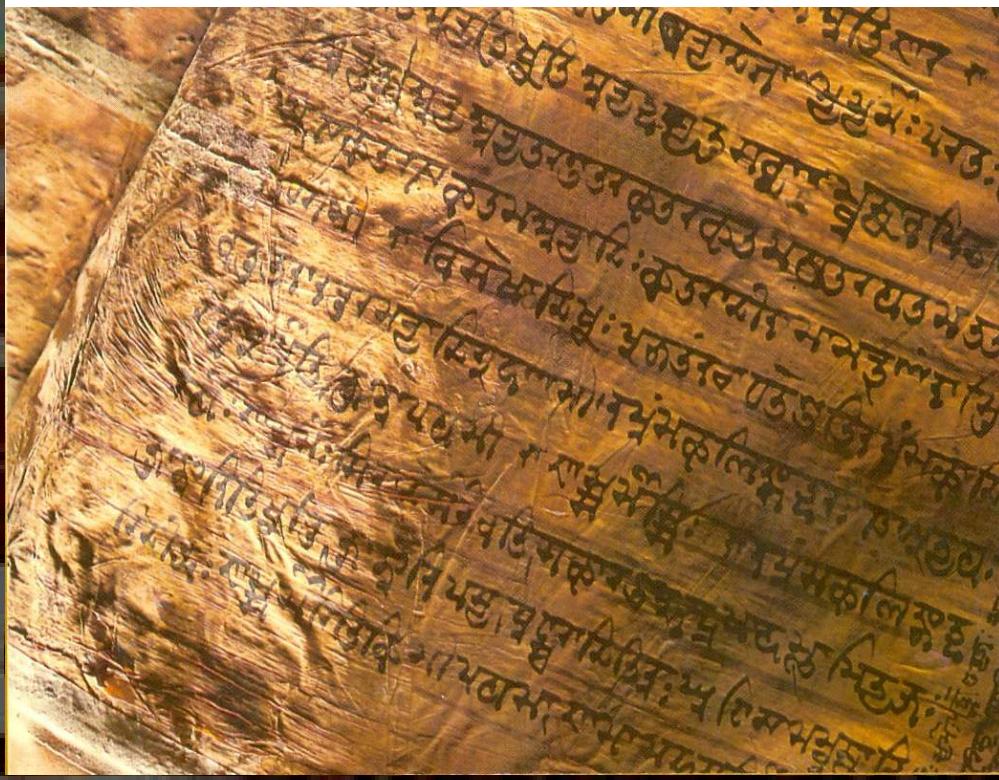
ඩා ඩෝන් රිං: සු ප්‍ර



Bhojapatra roll



Bark of the tree



In North India,  
it was a pen on tree-bark,  
called, bhoja-patra,  
using a reed pen.

Devanagari and the north Indian scripts didn't have to avoid straight lines, particularly the top line.

# Gurmukhi for Punjabi

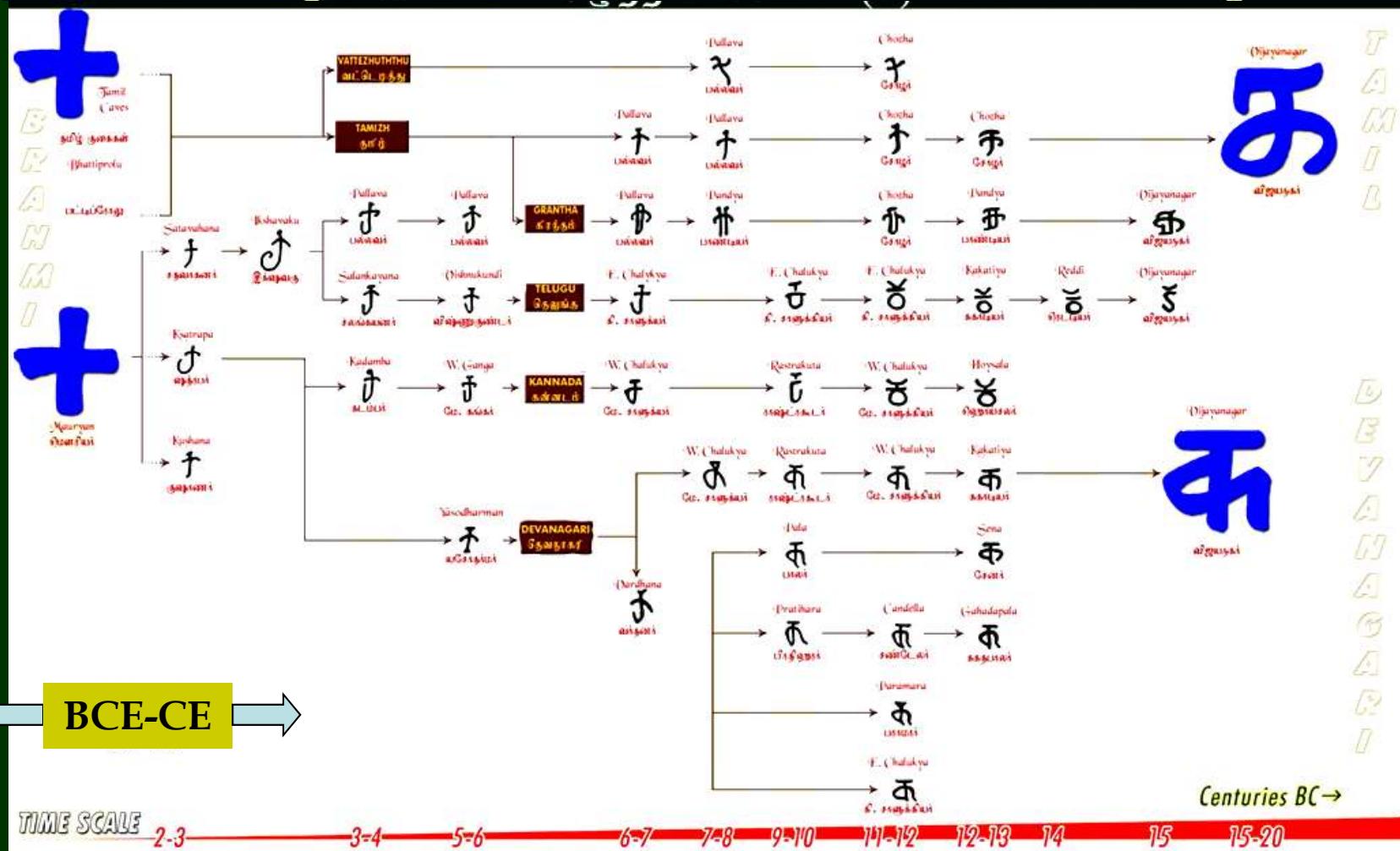
ਸਾਰੇ ਇਨਸਾਨ ਆਜਾਦ ਅਤੇ ਹੱਕ ਤੇ

# Bengali

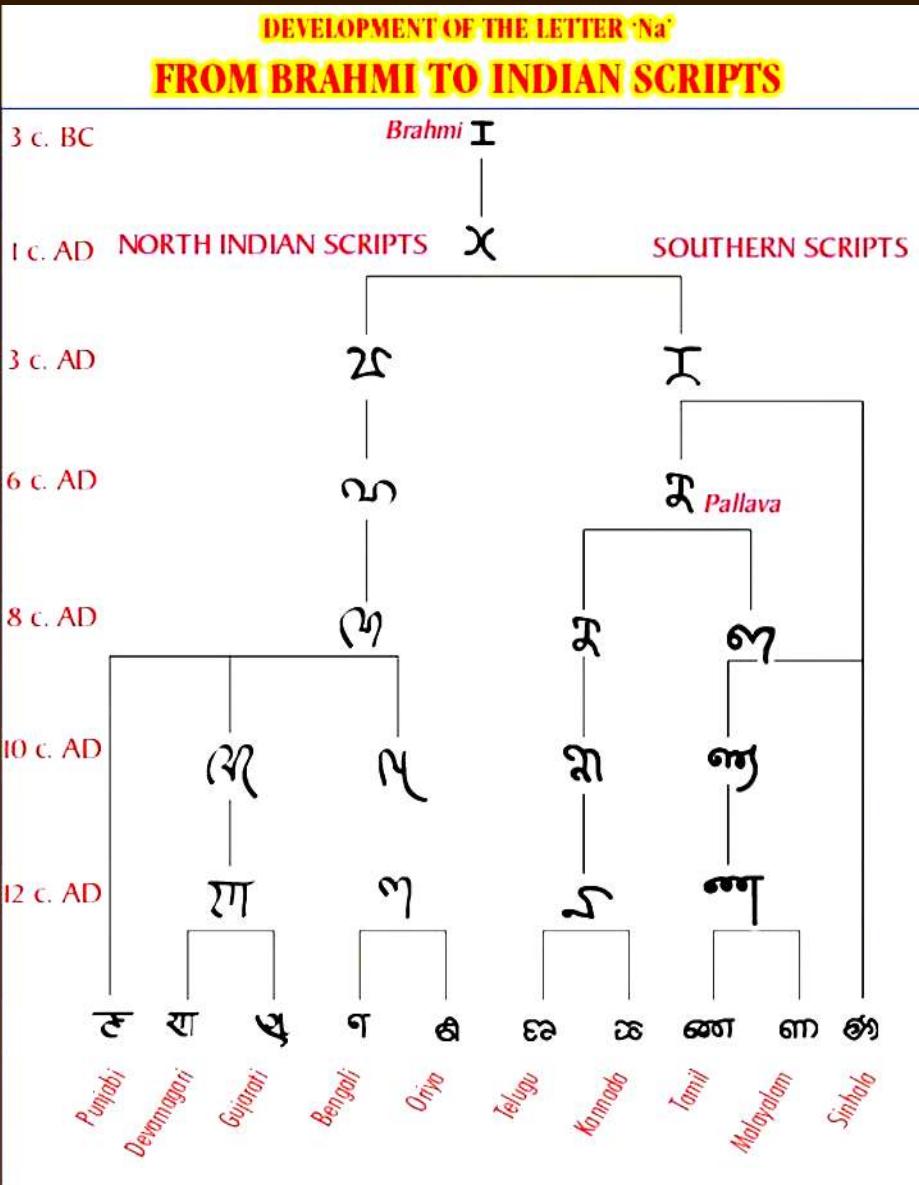
# সমস্ত মানব পৃথিবীতে বেসমান ম

# Tibetan

## Development of latter 'k' (க) in Devanagari, Tamil and other south Indian Scripts



Development of the letter 'N' (ନ୍ତା) in all Indian languages starting from Brahmi,  
It may be noted how the characters change drastically over the centuries!

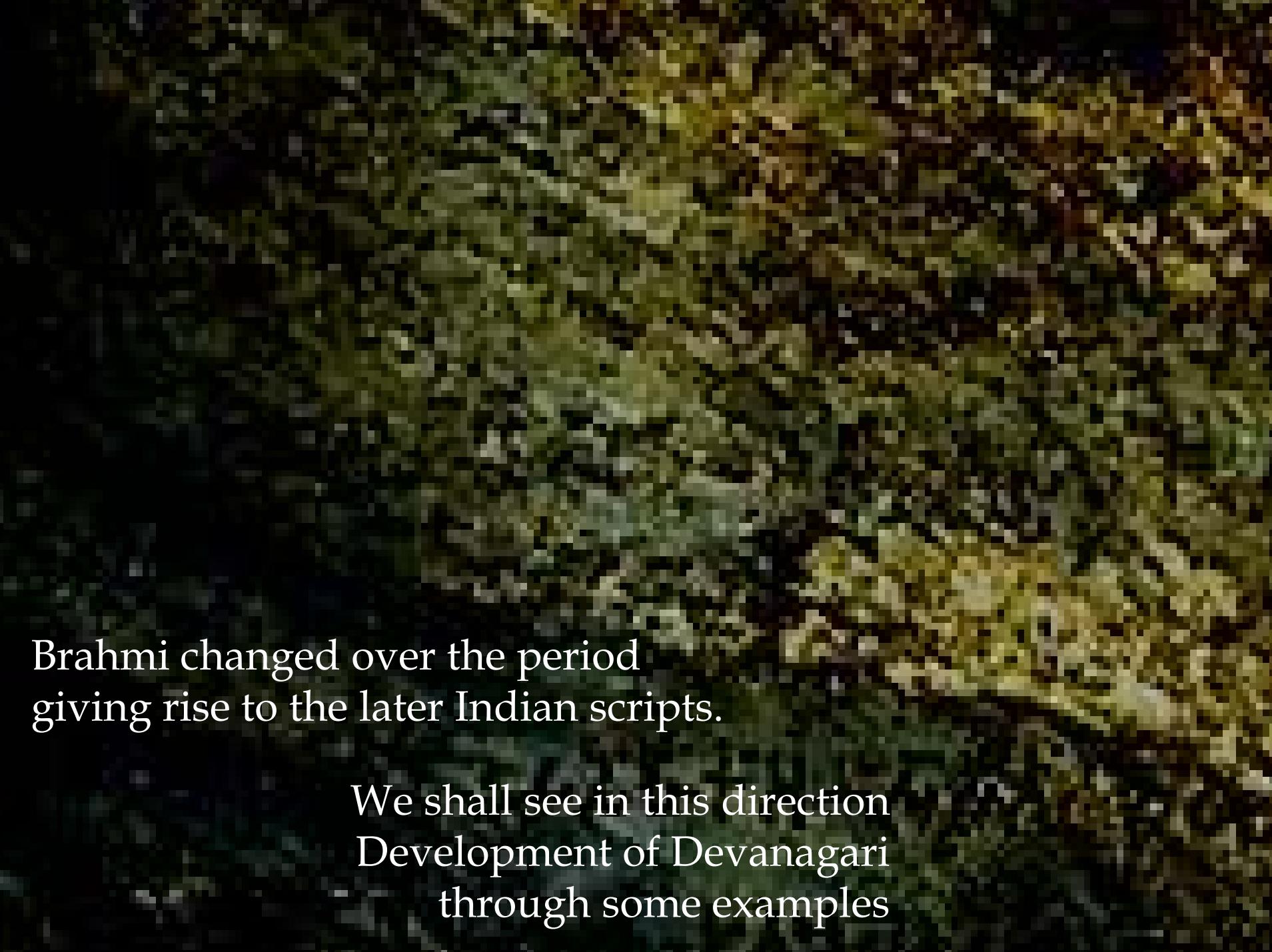


velars	DEV	GUJ	PUN	BEN	ORI	TIB	TEL	KAN	TAM	MAL
k	କ	ક	ਕ	କ	କ	୯	କ	କ	க	କ
kh	ଖ	ખ	ਖ	ଖ	ଖ	ର	ର	ର	-	ର
g	ଗ	ગ	ਗ	ଗ	ଗ	୯	ଗ	ଗ	-	ଗ
gh	ଘ	ଘ	ଘ	ଘ	ଘ	-	ଘ	ଘ	-	ଘ
ñ	ଙ	ઙ	ਙ	ଙ	ଙ	ଙ	ଙ	ଙ	ங	ଙ

Here is a sample Table  
from the Brahmi-based Indian scripts

	Transcription	sīvō rakṣatu gīrvāṇabhbāśārasāsvādatatparān
Bengālī	শিবো রক্ষতু গীর্বাণভাষারসাস্বাদত্তপরান्	
Devanāgarī	शिवो रक्षतु गीर्वाणभाषारसास्वादतत्परान्	
Gujarātī	શિવો રક્ષતુ ગીર્વાણભાષારસાસ્વાદતત્પરાન્	
Gurmukhī	ਸਿਵੇ ਰਕਸਤੁ ਗੀਰਵਾਣਭਾਸਾਰਸਾਸ਼ਵਾਦਤਤਪਰਾਨ्	
Oriyā	ଶିବେ । ରକ୍ଷତୁ ଗୀର୍ବାଣଭାଷାରସାସ୍ବାଦତତ୍ପରାନ୍	
Tamil	ஷிவோ ரக்ஷது கீர்வாணபாஷாரஸாஸ்வாததத்பராந்	
Tēlegu	శివే రక్షతు గీర్వాణభాషారసాస్వాదతత్పరాన్	
Kannada	ಶಿವೋ ರಕ್ಷತು ಗೀರ್ವಾಣಭಾಷಾರಸಾಸ್ವಾದತತ್ಪರಾನ್	
Malayālam	ശിവോ രക്ഷതു ഗീര്വാണഭാഷാരസാസ്വാദത്തെന്നരാൻ	
Grantha	ශ්‍රීඛ්‍රා රැක්ෂණ ග්‍යෙෂ්ඨ ප්‍රාග්‍රෑහිත තුවා	
Thai	ศิว รักษาตุ คีร์วานะภाषาเรสสาสวายะตตปะราณ	
Jawa	ଶିବ୍ୟା ରକ୍ଷତ୍ତୁ ଗୀର୍ବାଣଭାଷାରସାସ୍ବାଦତତ୍ପରାନ୍	
Bali	ଶିବା ରକ୍ଷତ୍ତୁ ଗୀର୍ବାଣଭାଷାରସାସ୍ବାଦତତ୍ପରାନ୍	
Sinhala	සිවේ රක්ෂා ගීර්වාණ බාහිර සාස්වාද පරාන්	

‘The unity in diversity’



Brahmi changed over the period  
giving rise to the later Indian scripts.

We shall see in this direction  
Development of Devanagari  
through some examples

## *Bhattiprolu Brahmi, 3<sup>rd</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> century BC*



Some caskets found in a stupa in Bhattiprolu in the Krishna valley, contained Brahmi inscriptions. The script was close to Asokan Brahmi, but there were differences.

Called Southern variety of Brahmi, this was the only sample.

This freak sample was a cause of confusion to the experts who were deciphering Brahmi.



## Bhattiprolu Brahmi

A photograph of a dark, reddish-brown, triangular stone object, likely a lid or seal, with a circular depression in the center. The surface of the stone is inscribed with several lines of ancient Indian script, specifically the Brahmi script, which is used for writing various Indian languages.

### On the lid

नेगमा  
वथो चत्रो  
ज्ञो जभो तिसो  
रेतो अचिनो षष्मिको  
अखयो केलो केसो माहो  
सेया छादिको ओखबूलो  
सोणुतरो समणो  
समणदाषो सामको  
कामुको चीतको

### Around the lid

अरहादेनानं खोठिया मजूस च षमुगो  
च तेन कम येन कुविरको राजा अकि

## *Bhattiprolu Brahmi*



Let us follow the meaning:

### **On the lid –**

Members of the guild - vacha (vatsa), chagha, Jeta (jayanta), Jambha, Tisa (Tisya), Reta, Achina, Sabhika, Akhasgha (Aksanghna), Kela, Kesa, MAha, SeTA, Chhadika (Chhandika), Okhabula, SoNuttara (Shonottara), Samana (Shramana), SamanadAsa (ShramanadAsa), SAMaka (ShyAmaka), KAMuka, chitaka.

### **On the rim:**

A casket and box are given by the Council of followers of the Arahadina (Arhadatta). The work is executed by him whom the king Kubiraka got to prepare the carving.

## *Kushana Brahmi*



There are a number of inscriptions found in Mathura.

Here is a headless statue of Kanishka, the Great and inscription can be seen on the lower part of his tunic.

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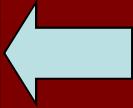
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*Kushana Brahmi, Sanskrit, 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE*

ै॒ शुक् रेः क्षुप्रज्ञात्युच्चुप्तप्तप्तप्तुष्टु  
ै॒ अ॑ त्वं इ॒ लेण्ड॑ न॒ गग्न॒ पत्तु॒ त्वं

सिद्धम् राज्ञः क्षहरात्म्य कन्त्रात्म्य नहणन्म्य जामागा  
दोनोक्षुत्रेण उषवदातेन त्रिगोशत्तम्हस्तदेन नथा

Nasik inscription of King Uasavadatta

This script is very similar to those found in Mathura.  
This is one among the finest in Indian epigraphy

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ヌヌヌ  
カカカ

# *Kshatrapa Brahmi, Sanskrit, 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE*



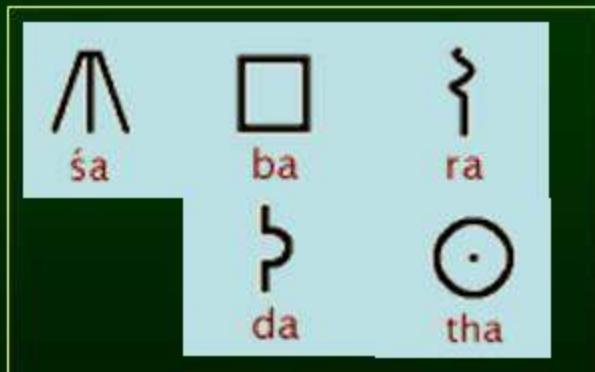
This inscription is a fine example  
of classical Sanskrit.

That the phrases used in this have been  
directly lifted from  
the Ramayana and the Mahabharata  
shows that the poet of this inscription  
was well-versed in these epics.

Let us transliterate one word of this inscription.

## *Junagadh inscription – a portion transliterated*

ગુરૂષ્ટીનુષ્ઠાયદ્વારા શાસ એવા બૃજાદ્વિત્તિપુરાદ્વારા  
દ્વિત્તિનુષ્ઠા હૃળાદ્વારાથાણુષ્ઠા વૃદ્ધાદ્વારા દ્વિત્તિનુષ્ઠા



Letters



Inscription

શાબ્દાર્થ  
ચપ્તાર્થ  
ShabdArth  
Transliterated

## *Greek & Kshatrapa Brahmi, Prakrit, 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE*

We have also some bi-lingual coins of Rudradaman



Bust of Rudradaman,  
With Greek legend  
*Ovoniloocvλchλno.*

Three-arched hill with river,  
crescent and sun.

Brahmi legend:

*Rajno Ksatrapasa Jayadamasaputra*  
*Rajno Mahaksatrapasa Rudradamasa*  
(King and Great Satrap Rudradaman,  
son of King and Satrap Jayadaman)

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Satavahana Brahmi, Sanskrit, 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE

॥ श्री. एवं पूर्णप्रभु गन्धारा देवता ॥ ॥ देवता  
॥ त्रिपुरास्त्रेषु देवता ॥ गेषु द्विनाम् देवता ॥ पदे

सवराजलं कमडलम्पतिर्गद्यासासानस दिवसकर्करतिवोक्ति .  
कमलविमलमद्विसवदनस तिसमुद्देयरीतयाहनस पलि.

Satavahana Nasik inscription of Queen Balasri

The Satavahanas ruled a major part of the Deccan,  
And the later scripts of the Ikshvakus and the Pallavas  
were derived from the Satavahana script.

This inscription is an excellent literary piece.  
We find the qualities of the king extolled.

“whose command was accepted by the entire circle of kings,

“whose face was lovely and pure like the lotus opened  
by the rays of the sun, . . . ,

“whose fearless hand was wet with the water poured out  
in assurance of protection, . . . ,

“who well divided the place and time for the pursuit of  
the triple objects, that is, dharma, artha and kama,

“who equally rejoiced and sorrowed  
at the joys and sorrows of his citizens, . . . ,

“who utilised taxes acquired righteously,

“who disliked hurting life even in the case of an enemy at fault, . . . ”

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*Ikshvaku Brahmi, Prakrit-Sanskrit, 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE*



कंडियुर्गुतेद्वचद्यम्बुजप्रदृष्ट एवं विष्णु  
स्त्रियो ज्ञानिर्विकल्पाद्वया पूर्वीनभासित्वं वैक  
मुक्ते विश्वास्त्रियो ग्रन्थं कृष्णास्त्रियो

कांचीपुरा अगिटथोमवाजपेयस्समेवयाजि धम्ममहा  
सिद्धम् ॥ राजाविराजो भारद्वायो पल्लवाण सिवांबद्वमो  
अम्हंविस्ये सवत्थराजकुमारसेनापति

Hirahatahalli inscription of Sivaskandavarman

Some letters acquired longer vertical lines and curves.  
The last line is in Sanskrit.



# Gupta Brahmi 4<sup>th</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> centuries CE

During the Gupta period two styles developed

- monumental for inscription
- cursive for writing on  
palm-leaf, bhoj-patra and leather

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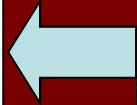
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Gupta Brahmi (Northern), Sanskrit, 4<sup>th</sup> century CE



भद्रीग्रन्थानुवाकम् अस्ति विभागः पुष्टिका अपोऽनुः  
सद्व्याप्त्यप्यप्यत्तेषु तु किं शब्दानुसृतैः

सुचारुतशतालकृडतानेकगुणान्मित्तिभिश्चरणतल्पमृष्टान्यनरपतिकर्त्तिः

साव्यसादुद्यपलयहेतुपुरुष्याचित्यस्य भक्त्यवननिमात्रावाहमृदुहृदः

Allahabad inscription of Samudragupta

The above inscription is an example of nail-headed letters characteristic of the Gupta

## *Gupta Brahmi, Sanskrit, 4<sup>th</sup> century CE*



Here is a gold coin of Samudragupta.

The King, standing holding *parashu* with a dwarf and a standard on the left.

Brahmi legend 'samudra' is below his arm.

Goddess Lakshmi on a throne, holding cornucopiae and a bouquet of flower on the left.

The Brahmi legend on the right reads 'krtantaparasuh'

# *Gupta Brahmi, Sanskrit, 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century CE*

Here is a gold coin of Chandragupta Vikramaditya

King, with a crest jewel on his fore head,  
is killing a lion with an arrow.

The legend around reads  
*narendrachandrah prathitaranorane*  
नरेन्द्रचन्द्रः प्रथितरनो

*jayatyajayyo bhuvi simhavikramah*  
जयत्यजय्यो भुवि सिंहविक्रमः

Goddess Laxmi, seated on a lion,  
holds lotus in her left hand and  
noose in her right hand.

The legend reads *simhavikramah*



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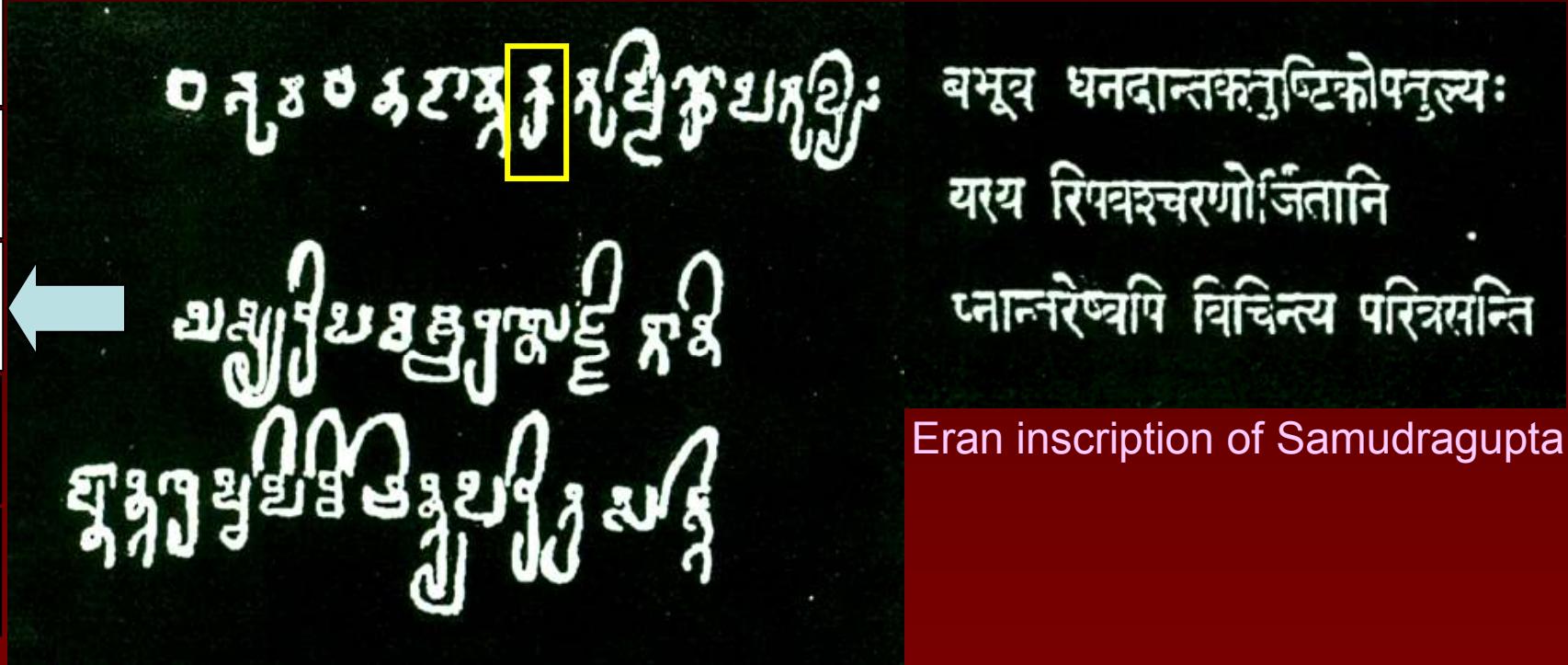
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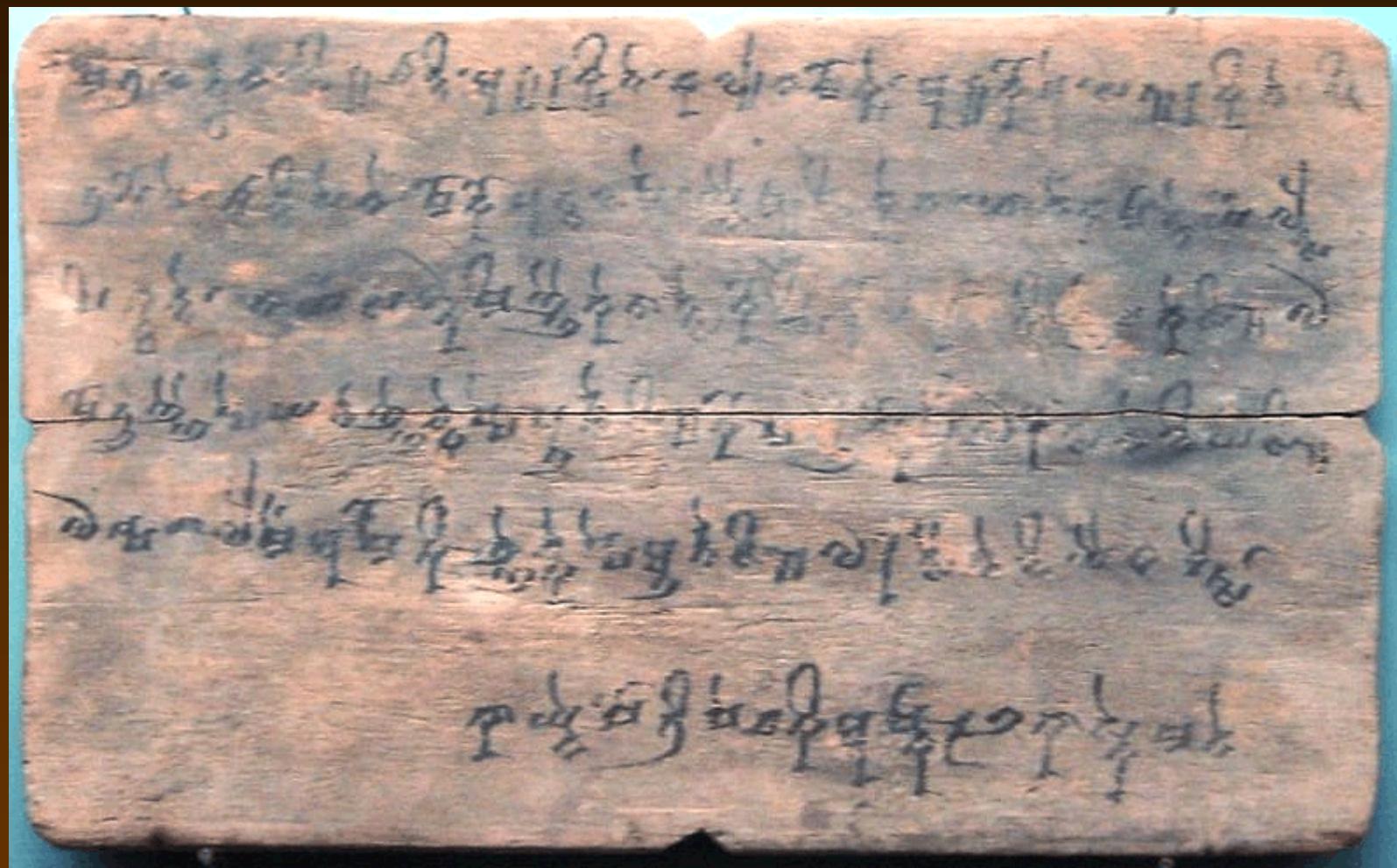
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Gupta Brahmi (Southern), Sanskrit, 4<sup>th</sup> century CE



The first line is nail-headed and the other two box-headed,  
both characteristic of the Gupta-s.



Gupta Brahmi in Bhoja-patra

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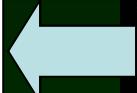
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*Kadamba Brahmi, Sanskrit, 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century CE*

अथ वभूव द्विदशुलप्रांतुनिवरद्गुणेन्द्रियमः डलम्यार्थवर्संहरिर्नित्यमृषिसुख्यमानव्यगोजम् ॥  
विविधयज्ञावभृत्पुण्या-वुनियत्ताभिषेकद्विमुद्रजम् प्रवचनावगाहनिष्णातविवित्समिद्राग्निसोमपम् ॥



Talagunta inscription of Kakusthavarman

This, of great charm and beauty, retains  
the box-headed features of the Guptas.

This is also the basis of the Old Kannada script.

# *Vakataka Brahmi, Sanskrit, 5<sup>th</sup> century CE*

इत्यन् प्रवर्गुन् अग्नस्तुमनाम्यादक्षयेऽस्यारेत्रवाजयत्वहमनि

मवसाद्यंकवन् गृह्यमेव्यज्ञिनः विष्णुवृद्धमगोत्रन्य संत्राटः वाकाटकानाम्ब

# Sivani Copper-plate Inscription of Pravarasena

The Vakatakas follow the box-headed features of the Gupta who were related to the Vakataka-s.

But later these features are not present.

# *Pallava Brahmi, Prakrit, 5<sup>th</sup> century CE*

ଦେଖନ୍ତିର ମୁଣ୍ଡିଟିଙ୍ ଅମ୍ବାର୍ଜନ୍ କୁଣ୍ଡଲ୍ ପାଇଁ ହୁଏ ହୁଏ  
ଶୁଣୁ ଧୂପରାଣ୍ କିଳାର୍ଜୁର୍ କାହାର ସେଇନ୍ ଦିନିରୁବୁ କିମ୍ବା କିମ୍ବା

जितन्भगवता स्तुलिष्वि द्विजयस्तन्वायागान्मेन्मानृग्रायासक्तास्परम् त्रिष्पष्ट्य  
 १ स स्थादुवला जिनेज्जिन्दात्रतयोनिधिं विर्यावहितस्तन्वमर्यादस्य

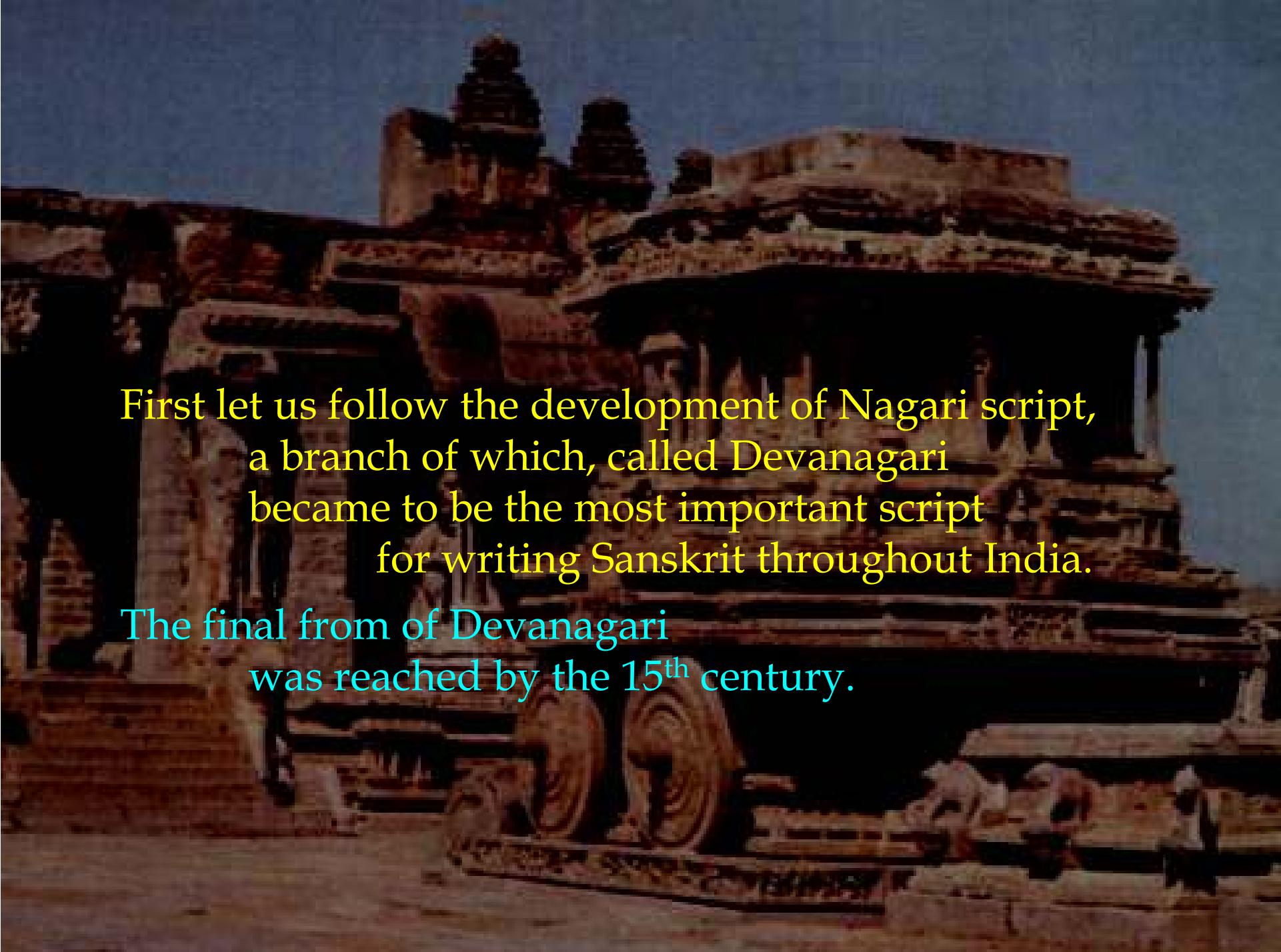
## Inscription of Simhavarman

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ヌヌヌヌ  
カカカカ

The change over from Brahmi  
to Devanagari and other scripts  
begins in the 6<sup>th</sup> century,  
with Yashodharman, the Gurjar King,  
who ruled the Malwa region.

From the Gupta Brahmi two forms branched off:

- \_ the cursive, eastern branch to form Bengali-Assamese script, and
- the non-decorative, western style to evolve into Sharada script



First let us follow the development of Nagari script,  
a branch of which, called Devanagari  
became to be the most important script  
for writing Sanskrit throughout India.

The final form of Devanagari  
was reached by the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

The name Nagari is from Nagara (Pataliputra).

The Nagari script was first developed  
in the Deccan in the 8<sup>th</sup> century,  
then in the north in the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

The former came to be known as Nandanagari,  
(after the place Nanded in the Deccan) and  
the northern variety as Devanagari  
(after a name of Chandragupta Vikramaditya)

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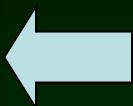
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## *Devanagari of Yashodharman*

### *Sanskrit, 6<sup>th</sup> century CE*



मुर्मित्रपत्रमुद्गदनेऽप्नेष्टुरान्तिष्ठास्त्रशुष्क  
ते विष्णुमिरपत्त्वः स्मृतेष्टुप्तुष्टिभूत्वरः परमा

आलौहित्योपकरण्ठात्तलवनगहनोपत्यकादामहेन्द्रादागज्ञाशिलस्थानोस्तुहिन  
शिखरिणः पश्चिमादापयोधेः मामन्त्रैर्यस्य वातुदिग्बहनमदैः माद्यो

Mandasor Inscription of Yashodharman

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Here we see the beginning of  
settled and beautiful Nagari script.

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## *Devanagari of Harshavardhana*

### *Sanskrit, 7<sup>th</sup> century CE*

ॐ श्री विष्णु द्वारा देवताओं के लिए विश्वास करने के लिए इसका उपयोग किया जाता है।

ओ स्वास्ति महानौहस्यश्वजयस्कन्यावाराच्छीव्यमानकोट्या महाराजकीनरवर्द्धनस्तस्य पुत्रस्तपादानुयात  
इशीवज्ञनीदेव्यामुत्सन्नः परमादित्यभतो महागजकीराज्यवर्द्धनस्तस्य पुत्रस्तपादानुयातहस्तीमद्

Banskhera Copperplate Inscription of Harshavardhana

Now we can see the complete change into Nagari script.

The beautiful script testifies to the taste of the emperor.

The ‘acute-angle’ script is called *kutila*,  
and can be seen in the Pallava inscriptions also.

King Harshvardhana was not only a mighty king,  
but also a man of literature, and also a calligrapher.

Here is a beautiful signature of the emperor.



स्वहस्तो मम महाराजाधिराज श्रीहर्षस्य  
Svahasto mama mahArAjaAdhirAja Shriharshasya

## *The Pallava contribution* *7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century CE*

This great temple-building clan  
has to its credit great strides in writing too.

They followed the Harshavardhana style of Devanagari,  
but also developed Grantha script  
to write Sanskrit in the Tamil country.

They have also contributed to the development  
of the Tamil script.

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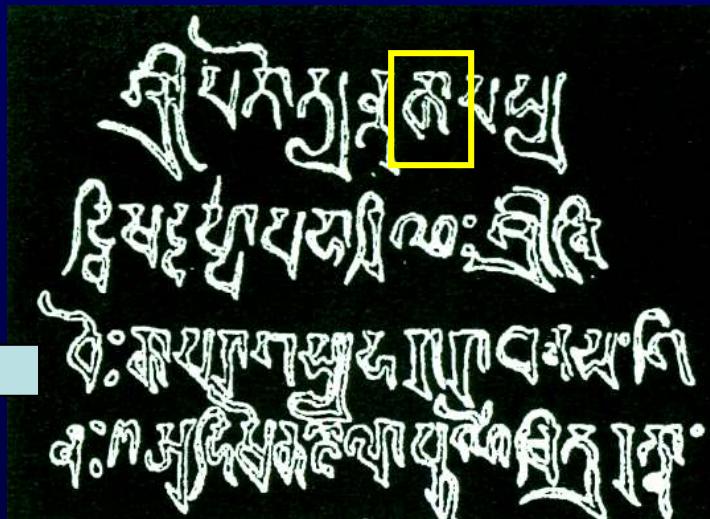
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## *Devanagari during the Pallavas* *Sanskrit, 7<sup>th</sup> century CE*



Saluvakkuppam Inscription of Rajasimha

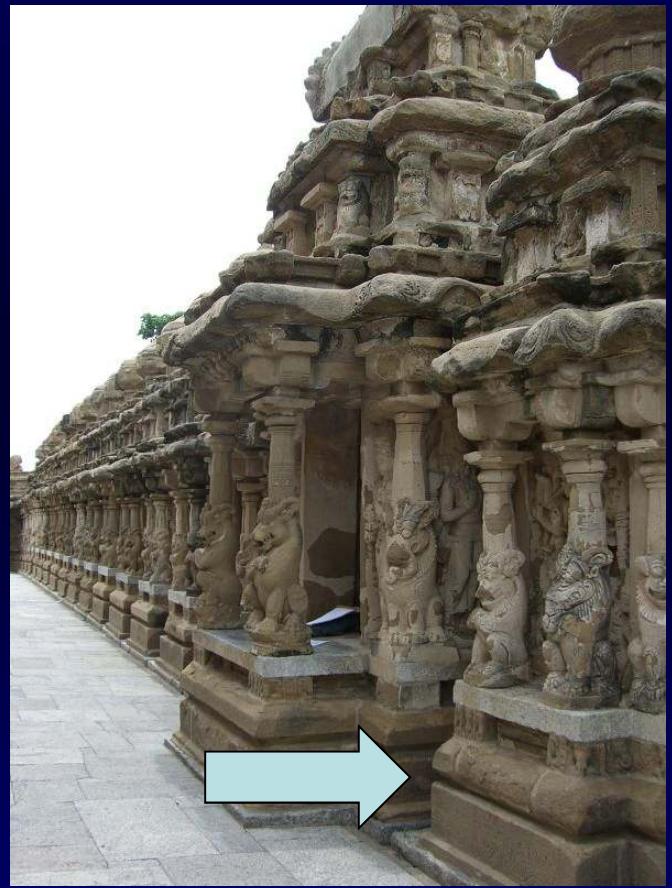
सीमतोत्यन्तकास्य  
द्विषद्दर्पणपहारिणः स्त्रीनि  
घेः कामरागास्य हराराधनसंगि  
तः॥ अभिषेकजलापूर्णे चित्रलां

The 'acute-angle' script, *kutila*, seen in the Harshavardhana inscription can be seen here also.

## *Pallava calligraphy*

Rajasimha Pallava's inscriptions  
in the Kailasantha Temple  
in Kanchipuram  
are calligraphy at its best.

Using Devanagari and  
simple to floriated Grantha scripts,  
he inscribed hundreds of his titles  
In this temple.



In these, like the one below, the calligraphic rendering  
in addition to beautiful curves,  
there are suggestions of plumes and neck of peacocks.



ஸ்ரீகலங்கரஹஸ்த: ஶரிகலம்கரகரஹஸ்த: ShrikalamkarahastaaH

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## *Devanagari during the Western Chalukyas*

### *Sanskrit, 8<sup>th</sup> century CE*

ॐ विष्णवे द्युर्गां श्रीकृष्णं श्रीरामं  
द्वादशो द्वादशो मति कृपलो लभी तमत्परं रविर्भी

ओं नम शिवाय ॥ स जयन् वामवाहुपरिच्छिवतवदनप  
योद्धारोस्थाऽमो अस्तिकुलासेललीउअलक्षादलिपि

Pattadikkal Inscription of Kirtivarman

Here the nail-headed character of the Guptas is retained .

This, along with the Pallava inscription in Saluvakkuppam,  
are the earliest Devanagari script in the south

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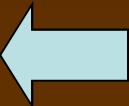
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# *Devanagari during the Rashtrakutas Sanskrit, 10<sup>th</sup> century CE*

कृत्वात्पदं हृदयहारि जघन्यदेशो स्वरं पुनमृतुविमर्द्धं च मध्यदेशं  
यस्थासमस्य समरे वसुधांगानायाः कांचीपदे पदमकारिकरेणभयः आसेतोः सा

## Begumra Copperplate Inscription of Indraraja III



Here is an example of next stage of development of Nagari in the Deccan

# *Devanagari during the Sena Dynasty*

## *Sanskrit, 12<sup>th</sup> century CE*

उर्बिंशाणि दिग्बृहं रश्वमनान् ईज्जना द्वाशिला रत्नान् कुटिनिर्विशेषित दयः गोत्राः गः इमनुवः  
योगाद्याश्वयरीः शगा नवम्भुत्तिक्षात् द्वास्त्राक्ष यां नश्चां मञ्चुत्तलोदित्तं नरणम्भक्ष्मिना द्वयः॥

उच्चित्राणि दिग्म्भरस्य वसनान्वयवाङ्मनास्यामिनो रलालंकृतिभिर्विशेषितवसुः शोभाः शतं खुम्लवः  
पौराधार्त्तुरीः श्मशानवस्तते भैशामुत्रोस्याक्षां लक्ष्मीं स अतनोद्दिद्विमरणे सुज्ञो हि सेनान्वयः॥

Deogarh Inscription of Vijayasena

The significant changes from the northern variety in the North-east can be seen here.

This ultimately led to the Bengali script.

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## *Devanagari during the Vijayanagaras Sanskrit, 15<sup>th</sup> century CE*

त्रियस्त्येत वतांशुकौ ल्लया दातवर्य कुंडन नः।  
विहारविनितं प्रस्तुविदुर्वदन् पुराविदः॥

भूयस्यै भवनां भूयै भूयादिचर्यकुंजरः  
विहारविनिं यस्य विदुर्वदान् पुराविदः।

Satyamangalam copper plate Inscription of Devaraja

Final shape of Devanagari was reached  
during the reign of Krishnadevaraya