



Scripts of the Tamil country

FINALLY I come to the Scripts of the Tamil country'. In the Tamil country (a term that includes most of Kerala) we have links from the 3rd century till date, fortunately. This region has the largest number of inscriptions on stone. Any one visiting any temples in Tamilnadu - there are lakhs of them - cannot fail to notice inscriptions all over these temples.

You may notice that I am using the term scripts of the Tamil country and not scripts for Tamil. In addition for the language Tamil, there came into use a script for writing Sanskrit in this region. The need arose as the letters used for Tamil were not adequate for Sanskrit. The script that came in use is called Grantha, or Pallava Grantha, as it were the Pallava-s who created the Grantha script.

Till the beginning of the 20th century only two scripts were known for writing Tamil. One is *vaTTezhuttu*, belonging to 8th century CE and Tamil, of the Pallava-s dated the 7th century CE. *vaTTezhuttu* is now extinct. Their descent from Brahmi could be inferred. But it was wondered why there should be two scripts for one language. The complete absence of written record of a great literary civilization of 2000 years vintage was a puzzle.

Towards the end of the 19th century a number of inscriptions were found in remote places. These were mostly on natural caverns where Jain ascetics stayed. These inscriptions, called as cave inscriptions, looked ancient and similar to the Asokan inscriptions.

In course of time the cave inscriptions were documented and finally deciphered. These are dated to the 3rd century BCE onwards, coeval with the inscriptions of Asoka. But these are by the Jains. Now the picture was getting clearer.

The script of these Jain cave inscriptions is known by the term Tamil-Brahmi to distinguish it from the Asokan script. The Asokan Brahmi was used to write Prakrit dialects, while the Jain cave inscriptions were for writing Tamil. The requirement of these two languages is different and hence these two are known by different names.

In this section will be found representative vintage selections of scripts of the Tamil country, Tamil-Brahmi, *vaTTezhuttu* and Tamil scripts for Tamil and Grantha script for Sanskrit.

This includes a few Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions which are of great importance, for they mention some Sangam kings: Neduchezhiyan in Mangulam, Athiyaman of Auvai's Nellikani fame in Jampai and Irumporai dynasty in Pugalur.

Development of scripts for Tamil

Tamil is the only Indian language, other than Prakrit, used in inscriptions in early Brahmi.

Over the centuries there developed two more scripts for Tamil.

This development is unique in certain ways.

Tamil-Brahmi

Thus the story of writing in the Tamil country starts with Tamil-Brahmi: a Brahmi script that is adopted for writing Tamil. The earliest writing belongs to the 3rd century BC.





vattezhuttu and Tamil

Out of this developed two scripts:
vaTTezhuttu and Tamil.

vaTTezhuttu became extinct by the 8th century, CE
and Tamil is the one that we use today.

Brahmi and Tamil-Brahmi



There are special requirements for writing Tamil which the Asokan Brahmi cannot meet.

These are:

- need to represent 4 new sounds
ṛ (R), ṇ (ṅ), ḷ (L) and ṣ (zh),
- need to write basic consonant
like 𑌕 (k), 𑌗 (ch), etc, and
- need to represent the short vowels
𑌆 (e) and 𑌇 (o)



We shall follow the development of
the scripts of the Tamil country through a few examples.



Earliest Tamil inscriptions

Jaina ascetics stayed in natural caverns
from the 3rd century, BCE and performed penance.

Inscriptions in these caves by the devotees
form a major part of the early writing in Tamil.

There are also inscriptions on pottery
found in many parts of Tamilnadu.

Coins, seals and rings of the period also carry legends .

These inscriptions also help us
to understand the life of the period.



Tamil-Brahmi

Mangulam Inscription, 2nd century BCE

An inscription was discovered in a natural cave in Mangulam, near Madurai, in 1882.

The inscription states that the hermitage was made by *kaTalan vazhuti*, a servant of *neTunchezhiyan* for the monk, *nanta-siri kuvan*.

This is the earliest writing found in Tamilnadu, and historically important for it refers to Netunchezhian, a Pandya king of the Sangam period.

Mangulam Inscription

𑌕𑌖𑌗𑌘𑌙𑌚𑌛𑌜𑌝
𑌞𑌟𑌠𑌡𑌢𑌣𑌤𑌥
𑌦𑌧𑌨𑌩𑌪𑌫𑌬𑌭
𑌮𑌯𑌰𑌱𑌲𑌳𑌴𑌵
𑌶𑌷𑌸𑌹𑌺𑌻𑌼𑌽

The inscription is in Tamil-Brahmi and
is dated to the 2nd century BCE

Mangulam Inscription

A line of the inscription is given below
to compare the Tamil script 2000 years ago
with the present day script.



க	ணி	ய்	ந	ந்	த	அ	ஸி	ரி	ய்	இ
ka	Ni	y	na	n	ta	a	si	ri	y	i

It may be noted that a non-Tamil letter 's' (ஸ) is used

Mangulam Inscription

The text of the inscription is given along
with meaning in present day Tamil

கணிய் நந்தஅஸிரிய்இ குவ்அன்கே தம்மம் இத்தாஅ நெடுஞ்சழியன்
குரு நந்தஸிரி குவனுக்கு தர்மம் இது; நெடுஞ்செழியனின்
பணஅன் கடல்அன் வழுத்திய் கொட்டுபித்தஅ பளிஇய்
பணியாள் கடலன் வழுதி செய்தளிக்கப்பட்ட படுக்கை

This is the charity to *nanta-siri kuvan*, the *kaNi*;
the bed was caused to be carved by *kaTalan vazhuti*,
the servant of *neTunchezhan*.

Tamil-Brahmi

Jambai inscription, 1st century CE

Inscription in Jambai, in Villuppuram district,
is one among the most outstanding discoveries.

The inscription records the grant of a cave shelter
by *atiyan neTumAn anchi*,
identified as the famous chieftain of Takatur
(modern Dharmapuri),
celebrated in *Purananuru*.

Jambai inscription

சு க ய பு தோ அ தி ய ன் நெடு மான் அ ன்சி ஈ த் த ப ளி

Sa ti ya pu tO a ti ya n neTumAn a ñchi I t ta pa Li

The hermitage was given by
atiyamaAn neTumAn añchi, the satiyaputta

Jambai inscription

Atiyan neTumAn anchi,

had the title of *satiyapitO*;

a title found in the Second Rock edict of Asoka
along with

the Chera-s, the Chozha-s and the Pandya-s,
thus establishing conclusively Asoka's connection
with the Tamil country.

Jambai inscription

The identification of *satiyaput* with *atiyaman* was on the linguistic grounds by Sesa Iyer and improved upon by Burrow.

Jambai inscription

According to Burrow the developments are:

satiya [ஸதிய] to *atiya* [அதிய]

(with the loss of the initial consonant), and

putO [புதோ] meaning 'son' [*makan*, மகன்]

then *makan* [மகன்] to *mAn* [மான்]

like *chEramAn* [சேரமான்]

corresponding to *kEraLaputO* [கேரளபுதோ].

Tamil Brahmi
Pugalur inscription, 2nd century CE

In Pugalur, near Karur, the ancient Chera capital a number of inscriptions were discovered.

One of them is important for it is a record of a Chera king of the *irumpoRai* line which ruled from Karur in the Sangam age.

Pugalur inscription

யாழ்ப்பாணம் செங்காயபன் உறைய
கோ ஆதன்செல்லிறும்பொறைமகன்
பெருங்கடுங்கோன்மகன்இளங்
கடுங்கோஇளங்கோ ஆக அறுத்தகல்

முதலாமண்ணன் யாற்றார் செங்காயபன் உறைய
கோ ஆதன்செல்லிறும்பொறைமகன்
பெருங்கடுங்கோன்மகன்இளங்
கடுங்கோஇளங்கோ ஆக அறுத்தகல்

Pugalur inscription

The inscription

முதா அமண்ணன் யாற்றார் செங்காயபன் உறைய்
கோ ஆதன் செல்லிறும்பொறை மகன்
பெருங்கடுங்கோன் மகன் இளங் கடுங்கோ
இளங்கோ ஆக அறுத்த கல்

The meaning of the inscription

The abode of the senior Jaina monk, *senkAyapan* of *yARRUr*.
The rock (shelter) was carved when (i) *LankaTunkO*,
the son of *perunkaTunkOn*, the son of King *Atan sel irumpoRai*,
became the heir apparent.

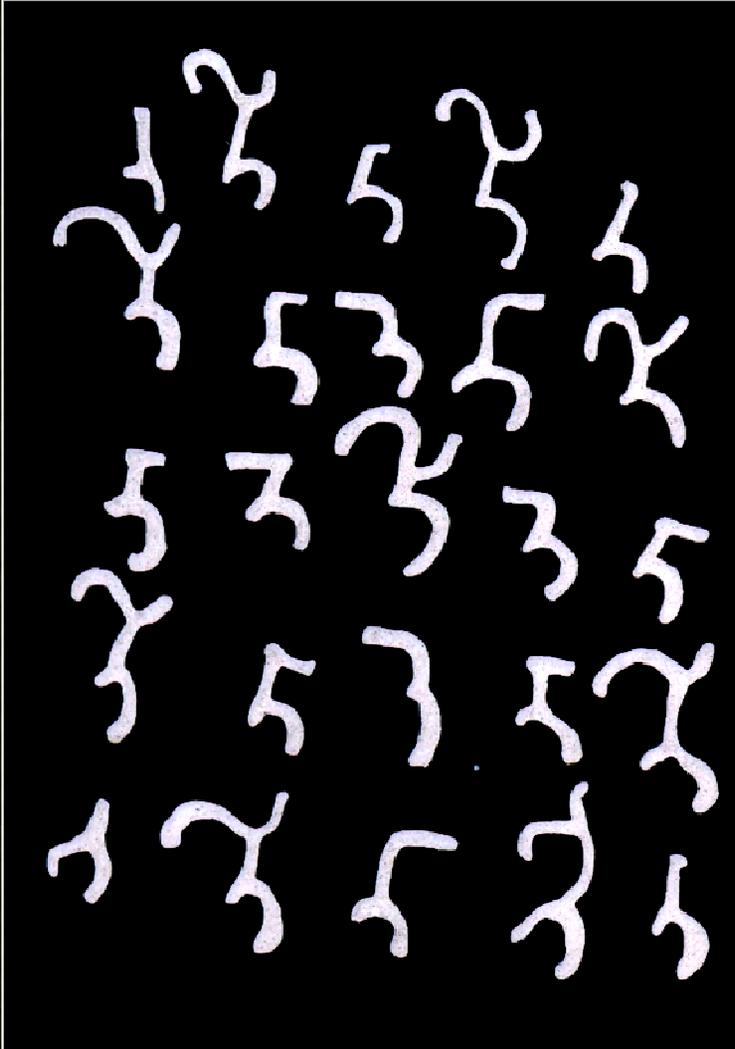
Tamil-Brahmi
Kudumiyanmalai, 3rd century CE

𑌕𑌗𑌛𑌑𑌛𑌛𑌛𑌛𑌛𑌛𑌛

நா ழ ல் கொற் ற ந் தை ய் ப [ளி] ய்
Na zha l ko R Ran thai y pa [L] y

The hermitage (is the gift) of *koRRantai* of *nAzhaL*

Arachalur inscription



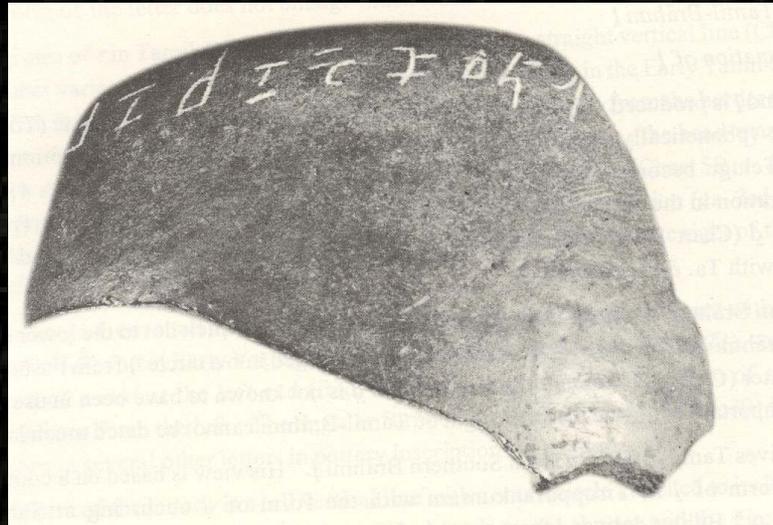
த	தை	தா	தை	த
தை	தா	தே	தா	தை
தா	தே	தை	தே	தா
தை	தா	தே	தா	தை
தா	தை	தா	தை	தா

This looks more like a page from a *chitrakavi* book:

letters த (*ta*), தா (*tA*), தே (*tE*) and தை (*tai*) arranged symmetrically in five rows and five columns.

Another part also is composed of another set of syllables arranged in a similar manner.

*Tamil-Brahmi
Inscription on pottery*



This is a piece of pottery from Arikamedu.

The Tamil Brahmi inscription reads

மணசண்டை கோவளான்

'maNachaNDaikOvaLAN'

meaning *'aLAN, the chief of maNachaNDai'*

Tamil-Brahmi

Satavahana coins 1st – 3rd centuries CE)

The coins of Satavahana-s have Prakrit and
Tamil legends on the two sides.

Prakrit was written in the Southern Brahmi
while it was Tamil-Brahmi for Tamil.



Legends on the above coin of Satakarni is instructive

Brahmi inscriptions in Satavahana coins



Both legends have the same meaning, namely
'Of the King vAsishThIputra Shri sAtakarNi'

The legends are:

Prakrit:

rAñO vAsiThi-putasa siri sAtakaNisa

राजो वासिठि-पुतसा सिरि सातकणिस

ரானோ வாஸிடி-புதஸ ஸிரி ஸாதகணிஸ

Tamil:

Aracan-ku vAciTTi-makan-ku tiru-cAtakaNi-ku

அரசன்-கு வாசிட்டி-மகன்-கு திரு சாதகணி-கு



Brahmi inscriptions in Satavahana coins



The Tamil legend is in Tamil-Brahmi is proved by the following:

- the presence of the characteristic Tamil-Brahmi letters ள [L] and ன [n];
- the case ending கு [ku];
- புள்ளி [puLLi] (dot-above) to indicate the basic consonant ட [T]