

THE ORIGIN OF THE BRAHMI AND TAMI SCRIPTS

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ABSTRACT: *Some findings of the origin of the Brahmi and Tamil scripts are presented in this paper.*

The oldest testimony of the Brahmi is to be found on stone-edicts of the Buddhist emperor Ashoka, who rules in the third century ante our era. But the language of the edicts is mostly Prakrit or Pali, and it is not very reasonable to assume, that a script with the holy name of the goddess Sarasvati, the consort of God Brahma, was invented for the purpose of writing Buddhist messages or for languages other than Sanskrit¹. It is more likely that the Buddhist king made only use of an invention which was already known for several centuries. This supposition is mainly based on the fact, that the edicts show a lot of variants without a definite historical development². In several cases, notably in case of letter t, we find the same form in the first century after our era as in the third century before, and in between the letter is similar to that of the Gupta script from the 3rd century after our era.

In the course of the excavations at the Mohenjo Daro four sherds have been found, which Marshall relates to the Kushan period, i.e. to the first century after our era. The letter t occurs five times on these inscriptions, and is quite similar to the form Buhler gives in line XIX (150 after our era). This is most probably the life-time of the Kushan king Kanishka, who was famous for his cruelty, but became Buddhist in later life and inaugurated the Mahayana branch of

that religion³. The Mahayana is a synthesis of Hindu and popular beliefs with the teaching of the Buddha like Hindu Gods. Kanishka also distributed coins with old Indian symbols⁴ and he wrote himself a poem in Sanskrit⁵. This proves that he was very much aware of the Indian tradition though he himself came from Baktria.

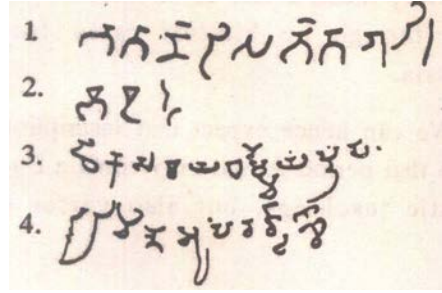
We can hence expect that inscriptions from that period do not only contain Buddhistic teachings, but also verses or names from the Veda or other famous texts of that time, notably the Ramayana. But what were found by Marshall were only shreds with short inscriptions and he supposed that they contain only names. But the translation, which he gives on this presumption, can be satisfactory only to those scholars, who believes in his hypothesis.

Marshall admits in one case that it could not be deciphered with certainty, and gives no translation then at all, in the other three cases the translation is no less uncertain, based only on a few letters and even those are not fixed according to the values the letters had at that time⁶.

But when we give up the unfruitful assumption that the inscriptions contain the names of donors and similar worldly statements we get quite reasonable translations of the three long inscriptions,

and two of them can even be related to the Veda in an almost similar way as the inscriptions of the Indus seals⁷. One inscription deals with Rama, who was certainly a famous hero already in that time.

The four inscriptions as published by Marshall read as follows⁸:



The equivalent in Sanskrit would be:




























1. Kali deya dharmmya pushyam

The first sign I take as purely ornamental. It could also be a sign for OM. The fourth sign I read according to Marshall as de, the last sign I have emended. The compounds have been divided.

The English translation of this sentence is :
The giving of (the Goddess) Kali (or: to give to kali) is lawful and nutritious. A similar statement with both connotations is contained in RV IV.51.3ab in respect to the Dawn: Growing bright the Dawns may enlighten the generous; rich in giving's they may grant reward.

Marshall 'translates' only two words of this sentence with "the gift (dheyadharmma) of – the name is missing". But 'dheyadharmma' means, taken as a compound 'the duty of giving' in Buddhist literature according to Monier Williams⁹. It makes no sense to this connection.

2. This inscription has only two or perhaps three letters, the rest is broken off. The first letter is again a tra or tri, the second probably a sha, for it is similar to this letter in the Gupta script. This would result in trish, thirst. The whole inscriptions could be something like the imperative "may you quench the thirst", which is quite suitable for a pot and for the Goddess represented by it.

No.	Brahmi key-word	translation	Indus-sign	notes	
1.	𑀅	a	asva	horse	 unicorn
2.	𑀇	i	indu	drop/Soma	(with tree ?)
5.	𑀬	u	u	weave	...
7.	𑀶	e	eta	gazelle	
8.	𑀺	o	ojas	strength	
9.	𑀻	ka	karma	sacrifice	 pillar
10.	𑀼	ka	kha	channel	
11.	𑀽	ga	gati	going	
12.	𑀾	gha	ghus	announce	
13.	𑀿	ca	candra	moon	 Standard
14.	𑁀	cha	child/khid	destruct	 hammer
15.	𑁁	ja	jaya/jnana	woman/wisdom	
19.	𑁂	tha	thakkura	name of Shiva	
22.	𑁃	na	na	name of Shiva	 world-egg
23.	𑁄	ta	tanu	body	 stem apart
24.	𑁅	tha	tha	name of Shiva	 stretch
25.	𑁆	da	div	sky/day	 sun-eye
26.	𑁇	dha	dhanus	bow	
27.	𑁈	na	nabhi	navel	
28.	𑁉	pa	patra/pad	cup/foot	
30.	𑁊	ba	bila/bhid	cave	 room
32.	𑁋	ma	makara	dolphin	
33.	𑁌	ya	yani	womb	
34.	𑁍	ra	rad	scratch	
35.	𑁎	la	lingam	sign	
36.	𑁏	va	vap	seminate	
37.	𑁐	sa	saru	arrow	
39.	𑁑	sa	savitar	sun/impe1	
40.	𑁒	ha	hara	name of Shiva	 goad

3. Tratrina(m) sutratra(m) gahi.

By the Gods well – protected go!

This sentence is contained in RV V.70.3 addressed to Mitra and Varuna :

Protect us, You two, who are like two Rudras, together with your protectors, and save us as good saviours! May we conquer the Dasyus with our bodies!

Here Mitra and Varuna are compared to two Rudras, i.e. to Shiva. The Dasyus, who are equal to the Indus people, are also mentioned.

The sentence is delivering the inner evidence of four similar letters. The requirement is only fulfilled by the letter tra. The fourth sign I read as the number two. Numbers 1 or 3 occur frequently occur in Rig-Veda to indicate the intonations. In the Yajur-Veda the number two is also used for this purpose. That number-signs as well as ligature-letters were used from the very beginning in the Brahmi can be taken as a proof of her connection with the Indus script, which has the same features in regard to the signs. The stroke for a long a is missing on the first tra.

Marshall reads the first letter as bha, the second as ta, for these two letters are quite equal in that period. The other two similar letters he does not translate at all. In this way he gets “bhatanamdi”, which he explains as the name of “either the donor or owner of the vessel”¹⁰. Analogous to this he gets the Pali word “bhadata” (mendicant) for the broken inscription 2. But why should the word ‘mendicant’ is written on a vessel?

4. Ramanuvamsya cancuna mi (tam)

(Measured/given) by the well known of Rama’s family.

The first ra is doubled in the inscription, which can be explained as a scratch in the material. It gives no sense to double the letter here, nor does a letter of this form exist anywhere in the Brahmi. The greatest problem is letter four and five. I read them as Vam + sya. The word Cancun is not very frequent. This gives an additional reason for the correctness of the reading.

This translation of the Brahmi inscription is also a proof of the religious function of the Indus seals. Both, the authors of the seal inscriptions and of these Brahmi sherds were priests with little or no worldly ambitions. The Gita confirms this by referring to the line of raja – rishis from the time immemorial onwards¹¹.

It is hence quite possible that the letters of the Brahmi script were derived from Indus signs, as was already supposed by Langdon¹². This could be done in quite a simple way. One has only to take the first letter of the words corresponding to some of the more frequent pictograms of the Indus script and arrange them according to the consonants of Sanskrit. This is called the acrophonic method, from Greek ‘akros’ being at the head. From this reason a pictographic inscriptions starts generally from that side the head of an animal pointing at. Similarly the Semitic script was developed by the Phoenicians and the runes by the Germans. Vowels were expressed in the Brahmi in the same way as in the later Devanagari.

As the pictograms were looked upon as holy or divine owing to their heritage from a very

ancient traditions¹³, the letters derived from it were also called holy as well in the case of the Brahmi as in the case of the Devanagari, and also because they were used by priests and seers. Further more, the letters of the Devanagari were arranged according to the carakas, the subtle centre of the Kundalini – Yoga, which has its origin most probably also in the Indus-Valley, as is evident from several seals with a man in a yogic posture, sometimes flanked by two snakes reminding of the nadis of Ida and Pingala going along side the channel of the Kundalini in the spinal cord.

I shall now give a list of the Brahmi letters together with a key word giving the meaning of the pictograph of the Indus Valley script. The key words are not fixed. But I have taken pains that they give the concrete image of the Indus sign. In case of missing numbers the relating sign could not be found among the Indus signs or they belong to the cerebral class, which are hardly used as initial letters in Sanskrit. Mostly only a part of an Indus sign is adopted by the Brahmi, often in an inverted position.

The Tamil script was invented in the 7th century after our era almost at the same time as the Devanagari for Sanskrit¹⁴. Whereas the Devanagari claims the divine origin, nothing of this sort is said of the Tamil script, it has not even a name. But it is hardly disputed now a day that Sanskrit as Tamil alike together with all other North and South India scripts were derived from Brahmi¹⁵.

In Tamil the acrophonic method is not appreciable, because there are several consonants in this language. Which do not occur at the beginning at all? The Tamil language is ornamental in structure like the South Indian art and hence more focused to the end of the word and to the extensions by

the suffixes¹⁶. This makes it possible to arrange the letters, consonants as well as the vowels, in a symbolic way entirely independent of their alphabetic order. We get then the following diagram:

Tamil letters	Indus-sign	Brahmi	Sanskrit
க ங ச த ந	✕	+	क ka
ட ப ம ய ர ழ	U	८	प pa
ண ன ற ள ழ	≡	E	ण ṇa
ஞ ல வ ழ ழ ள ள	†	ॆ	व va
அ ஆ இ ஓ ஔ	○	○	उ u

According to the symbolic values of the Indus pictograms as found out with the help of the Rig-Veda, the first group is equal to the jaws, the second to the cavern of the mouth, the third to the teeth, the fourth to the tongue and the fifth to the skull, because here the sound of the vowels is formed. It is also equal to the element ether and likewise the other groups can be affiliated to the other four elements: the jaws to the earth, the cavern of the mouth to the waters, the teeth to the fire, and the tongue to the air, because it moves in the air, because it moves in the air of the mouth. The tongue is also the symbol of fire in the Veda and corresponding to this “Pavana” in Sanskrit means both air and fire.

The five classes can also be divided into male and female: The first and the third class are female, the second is the male and the fifth belong to both sexes. By this it becomes obvious that the Tamil script expresses the whole cosmos just alike the Devanagari. The reason here of is that both have their root in the Indus script. The over – estimation of the Devanagari cannot be justified therefore.

When we look upon a script in its symbolic form, it is, of course, much easier to learn,

especially for children, whose mind is still working in an irrational manner and is hence much nearer to the way of thinking of the ancient man. Moreover, when we trace back a letter script to its spiritual origin, we open up a way for the mind to recollect its own heritage.

In the last 3000 years humanity has developed almost entirely along the rational way of thinking. It is high time to go back to the past, where the mind was led by intuition instead of mere calculation.

NOTES AND REFERECES

1. According to Indian mythology Sarasvati has also invented the Devanagari. The name ('coming from the town of the gods') can be referred to the Indus cities.
2. This is also pointed out by H. Haarman, *University-geschichteder Schrift*, Frankfurt 1990, p.341.
3. See Michael Edwards, *A History of India (Illustrierte Geschichte Indians)*, Munchen 1961, p.72.
4. See J. Marshall, *Mohenjodaro and the Indus civilization* London 1931, pl. CLXIV V. Moeller, *Symbolik des Hinduismus and Jainismus*, Stuttgart 1974, p.12.
5. See Michael Edwards, *op. cit.* p.75.
6. The letters of the Brahmi script in different periods are given by G. Buhler, *Grundriß der indo-arischen Philologie und Altertumskunde*, Straßburg 1896.
7. See Egbert Richter-Ushanas, *Der Funfte Veda, Die Indus-Siegel im Vergleich zum Rig-Veda*, in press.
8. See J. Marshall, *Mohenjodaro and the Indus Civilization*, Delhi2 1973, pl. XC 1,2,3,4. I have no access to the original studies.
9. M. Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, Oxford 1899.
10. See J. Marshall, *Mohenjodaro and the Indus Civilization* London 1931, p.317.
11. See Gita 4.1-2. Even in our century Paramahamsa Yogananda mentions a silver-amulet that materialized in his hands, through which he got confirmed to embrace a spiritual life (*Autobiography of a Yogi*, Munchen 1950). In a later edition even Mohenjo Daro is mentioned in a note in this connection.
12. See S. Langdon, *The Indus Script*, in: J. Marshall, *op. cit.* p. 433.

13. The Rig-Veda refers to them as the beloved and hidden names of the gods. Cf. X.5.2; X.123.7.
14. See H. Haarmann, *op. cit.* p. 527.
15. *op. cit.* p. 523.
16. For the structure of Tamil see P. Jothimuththu, *A guide to Tamil*, Madras 1965.