

# Inscription Technology within the British Colonial Period and onwards in Sri Lanka

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## **Introduction**

According to the archeological evidence, history of inscriptions in Sri Lanka extends to 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. The stone inscriptions of Sri Lanka can be categorized as cave, rock, pillar and slab inscription. The sole technology used to the inscriptions was incision the characters (sunken) on rock or stones surface with various thickness and depth.

After the arrival of Portuguese (in the 16<sup>th</sup> century) a new technique, i.e embossed was introduced to the stone inscription technology in Sri Lanka. This type of inscriptions is most abundance in Dutch churches in Sri Lanka. Embossed Sinhalese inscriptions also recorded very rarely in the areas affected by the Dutch rule. Within the colonial period, the both techniques were

used for Sri Lankan inscriptions. Epitaphs and memorial plaques were common in that period (Lewis.1913).

Granitic or Gneissic stone plaques were commonly used for the inscriptions. After the British period in addition to the both type of stones, imported rock types such as marble and slate were used. Moreover, the technology also differed as lead lettering incised and embossed on the surface of above material. The objective of the paper is to identify the various types of the inscription technology used in the British colonial period and onwards.

## **Methodology**

The research methods used were predominantly field surveys carried out in Colombo city and several

areas. Memorial plaques, epitaphs, sign plates, mileposts, name boards and other epigraphs belong to the period of 1800-1980 were based for the study. However, studied several modern inscriptions were also taken as examples to identify the effect of modern technology on stone inscriptions.

### **Discussion**

The inscription technology which existed in and after the British colonial period can be categorized as Incised stone inscriptions and Lead lettering inscriptions.

#### **1. Incised stone inscriptions**

This is the oldest type of inscription in Sri Lanka which was commonly used in historical period. In the British Period, this technology were used for memorial plaques, name boards, mileposts as well as epitaphs. Incised inscriptions of this period can be identified in several subtype according to the technological aspects as mentioned below.

##### **1.1 Normal incised**

This was the common type and utilized for epitaphs, memorial plaques, name boards and some mileposts. Granite and Gneiss rocks

were commonly used for the epitaphs. The incised letters of some inscriptions were colored with a black line also. e.g.; Memorial plaques of Ananda Balika Vidyalaya, Colombo (1954) and Denham Hostel, Thurston College, Colombo (1920) (plate 1).

Imported rock types, such as slate and marble also used rarely for these type inscriptions. Respectively memorial plaque of clock tower at Galle Fort (1883) and plaque on front wall of St. Paul's Oratory at Colombo (1926) are examples of that type of inscriptions (plate 2). Incised letters of some inscriptions also indicated by a black line. Most rarely another color line can be identified.

After the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this technique was also developed with another technology. Stone slabs with polished surface were used for the inscriptions and sometimes letters were painted with colors (Commonly white). This was the most popular inscription type used in 1970-80s. After 1990s this type is improved to highly polished (mirror-like) surface. At present

this type has most improved with modern polishing and shining technology and computer character system.

### **1.3 Incised inscriptions with V-cut letters** (Cutting off the letters in V shape)

This is a newly introduced type to Sri Lanka in early 19<sup>th</sup> cen. A regular thickness of letters was a special feature in traditional inscriptions in Sri Lanka. But under the V cut technique, the thickness of a letter is differing. This technique was mainly used for epigraphs, mileposts, and memorial plaques until 1850s. e.g.; Old mileposts of Colombo - Kandy road (1820-30), Memorial plaque of Nanuoya bridge at Pilimathalava (1826) (plate 3).

### **2. Lead lettering inscription**

This is also a newly introduced European type in early 20<sup>th</sup> cen. to Sri Lanka. The common technique of this type is filling the incised letters with lead. These type of inscription were used in Sri Lanka until 1960s. Imported marble were commonly used for the inscriptions. But nevertheless, local rock types such as granite also used for that. e.g.; Memorial

plaques of Poramadulla Central College at Hanguranketha (1951) (plate 4), Al - Iqbal Balika Vidyalaya, Colombo (1956), St. Paul's Oratory, Colombo (1926) and Colombo Buddhist Theosophical Society (1927) Lead lettering inscriptions can be identified in two forms i.e. beaten and hammered smooth (Flushed) and moreover raised in relief.

### **2.1 Beaten and hammered smooth (flushed)**

The inscription would then be cut out, incised into the stone using a hammer and chisel in the same way that lettering being V- cut. If the finish of the inscription was to be flush letters, the inscriber would keep hammering until the lead was flat. The face of the stone would then be sanded down with a flat block of soft abrasive sandstone. This would remove excess lead, smooth the face of the lettering and at the same time blacken the lead. e.g.; memorial plaque of Princess Yuriko Mikasa at Ananda Balika Vidyalaya-Colombo (1957) flushed lead lettering on granite is more durable than on marble due to the protection granted by the harder surface of stone (Clamp and Clamp 2010 :63) (plate 5).



## 2.2 Raised in relief

After setting out the letters on the surface of the slab in a Pencil the next step is drilling tiny holes spaced evenly in each letter. If the lettering was intended to be raised in relief the lead used would be of thicker grade. The lead still hammered into each letter but the surface of the lead left proud. e.g.; Memorial plaques of Khan Memorial Clock Tower-Colombo (1923) and Clock Tower at Kurunegala. (1922).

Unfixing the letters after several years is can be identified as a major disadvantage of the type of inscriptions. On some inscriptions the lead letters were lost in toto, can be seen only tiny holes of letters. Moreover, only several letters are resting on some inscriptions. However, according to Ron and Sallie Clamp, if replacing and missing lettering careful inspection of the splay is important to determine if they need to be recessed further into the stone for a better bond between and the stone (Clamp and Clamp 2010:63).

## Conclusion

Sri Lanka inherits a long, rich history about the usage of inscriptions. There are many archeological evidences for that. The only technique was used for the inscriptions is incised method on the stone surface. But in colonial period embossed technique also utilized as a new method. In the post-colonial period inscription technology were further broaden with several new techniques such as lead lettering, metallic and cement or plaster inscriptions. At present stone inscription technology has highly improved than other techniques with modern stone technology.

## References

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