

A historical review of whether the Sinhala alphabet originated before or after 'Mahindāgamanaya'

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Introduction

It is very important to study the origin of the Sinhala Alphabet as there are controversies as to when, where and how it originated. It is to be noted that studies are still being conducted to find exact answers to this question. But whatever the arguments, the most popular opinion is, "*The Sinhala Alphabet originated after the arrival of Arahath Mahinda Thera.*" This view is based on the argument that there is no evidence of the use of an alphabet before the arrival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

Despite the above facts, it can be seen that many historians such as *Ven. Okkampitiyē Pagnāsāra, Senarath Paranawitāna, Vimal G. Balagallē, Tennakōn Wimalānanda, Saddhāmagala Karunārathne, Sirkār* and *Ahmed Hasan Dhāni* have commented on this situation. *Nicholas* introduced a structure of the Brāhmi alphabet separating it into two periods and stated that the script originated after the '*Mahindāgamanaya.*' *Wimalānanda* points out that

Sinhalese had an alphabet that was spread over the country after the Mahindāgamanaya and this is because of the cultural relations that had with India. *Karunārathne* mentioned that the sea-traders and merchants may have introduced scripts to Sri Lanka. Ariyasinghe states that there is a probability that before Mahinda Thero and his followers introduced the Brahmi letters, they might have been introduced much earlier to South India and then the island by Jainas. If someone considers that the Sinhala Alphabet originated after the Mahindāgamanaya, he has to accept it without any argument. But the problem is, "Is it reasonable to accept this argument when there are several criticisms"? because there is a question before us. That is, "Wasn't there an Alphabet before that?" It is therefore very important to examine this controversial matter. The main purpose of this research was to find out the answer to the question "Did the Sinhala Alphabet originate before or after the Mahindāgamanaya?"

The Methodology

For this research, the *Mahāwamsaya* and the *Dīpawamsaya* have been used as the main primary sources. Also as the main archaeological evidence, it has been used symbols or pictograms (Citrākśara) especially found in *Thissawāva* and *Wēvāltāna*. This research therefore has been done with special reference to the above primary sources, and after analyzing most of the secondary sources too.

The results of the research

There is enough evidence to prove that the Sinhalese have been using an alphabet in the pre-Buddhist period. The most proof is, the exchanging of the letters between Sinhala and Indian Kings. The below factors too give further proof.

1. The letter which was sent by King Vijaya to Pāndya King.
2. The reply which was sent by Pāndya King to King Vijaya.
3. The letter which was sent by King Vijaya to his brother-Sumitta
4. The letter which was sent by Pandukābhaya to his uncle- Abhaya

Another significant factor which can be identified after analyzing the above letters is that, ensuring whether the letters were written in the Brāhmi alphabet or not. When studying this matter, it was convinced that there is a tendency to guess that this could also be the Brāhmi alphabet due to obvious evidence. Most importantly, some argue that the Indu-Valley alphabet,

i.e., pictograms have influenced the Sinhala alphabet. Among the historians: Langdon, Hatton and Hunter are special in this respect. Pictograms found in Tissawāva, Wēvāltāna offer proof for this claim. Paul M. Jayarājan has arrived to a conclusion, with the help of a research done by Robinson in Olynthus of Macedonia. In his book- *Sinhala Akārādiyē Parināmaya Pilibanda Ithihāsaya* he has highlighted these letters. Once Father Hēras, a veteran of the Indu-Valley alphabet, came to Sri Lanka and was surprised by seeing some symbols on old coins; he stated those symbols were equal to that of Indu-Valley pictograms. Above the pictograms in Wēvāltāna Cave, one can observe 'Thirathana Sankēthaya.' With this, one can identify that there could be at least a few people who were not educated but adhered to the Buddhist philosophy. Also, one can assume that some Buddhist monks also might have been in Sri Lanka who had a comprehensive knowledge of writing letters, and they might have helped King Vijaya (543-505 BC) to write such letters based on the historical evidence that the Buddha came to Sri Lanka thrice.

As a result of conducting this research, it can be concluded that Sinhala alphabet was originated before *Mahindāgamanaya*. Also some evidence was found to prove that the people in the pre-Buddhist era were

literate in the Brāhmi alphabet. However, this is still a controversial matter because many believe it happened after the *Mahindāgamanaya*. But if someone studies this matter further, with special reference to the *Mahāwamsaya*, indeed, the researcher may understand that the Sinhalese had been using an alphabet even before the arrival of Arahath Mahinda Thero.

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