

# Early Tamil Epigraphy

From the Earliest Times to the Sixth Century C.E.

Revised & Enlarged Second Edition  
Volume I  
Tamil-Brāhmī Inscriptions

**Iravatham Mahadevan**



Central Institute of Classical Tamil, Chennai

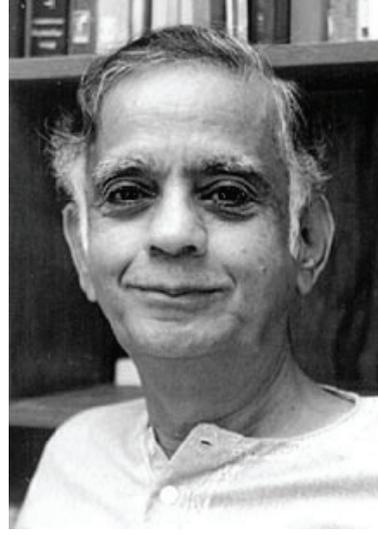
2014

## THE BOOK

This is Volume I of the revised and enlarged Second Edition of *Early Tamil Epigraphy*, first published in 2003. The Volume deals with Tamil-Brāhmī stone inscriptions discovered up to 2012. The main feature of the edition is that it is based on fresh *in situ* delineation and digitisation of the cave inscriptions included in the Corpus.

The work provides a detailed account of the discovery and decipherment of the inscriptions and relates their language and contents to early Tamil literature and society. Tamil-Brāhmī inscriptions on pottery, coins, seals and rings, have also been utilised to present a more complete picture of early Tamil epigraphy. Two new sections deal with Prakrit inscriptions on pottery and other inscribed objects, and Sinhala-Prakrit pottery inscriptions, from Tamilnadu, which bring out the interaction of Tamil-Brāhmī with other contemporary languages and scripts of South India and Sri Lanka.

The study deals comprehensively with the epigraphy, language and contents of the inscriptions. The texts are given in transliteration with translation and extensive word by word commentary. The inscriptions are illustrated with direct photographs in colour, together with delineations and estampages for comparative study. Palaeography of Tamil-Brāhmī is described in detail with the help of letter charts. The special orthographic and grammatical features of the earliest Tamil inscriptions are also described. A glossary of inscriptional words and several classified word lists have been added to aid further research.



## THE AUTHOR

IRAVATHAM MAHADEVAN (b. 1930) has published widely on Indian epigraphy, especially on the Indus and Brāhmī scripts. He was awarded the Jawaharlal Nehru Fellowship in 1970 for research on the Indus script and the National Fellowship of the Indian Council of Historical Research in 1992 for work on the Tamil-Brāhmī inscriptions.

His books, *The Indus Script: Texts, Concordance and Tables* (1977), and *Early Tamil Epigraphy* (2003) are recognised internationally as major source books for research in these fields.

He has received many awards including, more recently, the title *Tamil Chemmal* from the Madurai Kamaraj University (1995), the Copper Plaque of the Tamilnadu Archaeological Society (1998), the annual award of the Federations of Tamil Sangams of North America (2001), V. Chelvanayakam Award, Colombo (2004), the P.L. Gupta Medal of the Tamilnadu Numismatic Society (2006), the Madras Sanskrit College Centenary Award (2007), the Dravidian University Award for research publications in Dravidian languages (2008), Padma Sri by the President of India (2009), D. Litt degree by the Tamil University, Thanjavur (2009), Tiruvalluvar Award by the Government of Tamilnadu (2010), the Lifetime Literary Achievement Award by the Tamil Literary Academy, Canada (2010), Tolkappiyar Award (Presidential Award for Classical Tamil) for 2009 - 10 instituted by CICT and the Campbell Memorial Gold Medal for 2010 - 12 by the Asiatic Society of Mumbai for distinguished service in Oriental research.

Iravatham Mahadevan joined the Indian Administrative Service in 1954 and retired voluntarily in 1980 to devote himself to academic pursuits. He lives in Chennai.

## CONTENTS

<i>Foreword</i>	
<i>Preface</i>	xi
<i>Introduction</i>	xiii
<i>Credits for illustrations</i>	xvi
<i>Detailed table of contents</i>	xviii
<i>List of tables</i>	xxxix
<i>List of figures and charts</i>	xxxix
<i>List of plates</i>	xxxix
<i>List of maps</i>	xxxix
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xxxix
<i>Scheme of transliteration and diacritical marks</i>	xli
<i>Table of conventional symbols</i>	xlii
<b>Part One: Early Tamil Inscriptions</b>	
1. Discovery	3
2. Decipherment	93
3. Language	137
4. Polity	151
<b>Part Two: Studies in Early Tamil Epigraphy</b>	
5. Palaeography	205
6. Orthography	265
7. Grammar	293
<b>Part Three: Corpus of Tamil-Brāhmī Inscriptions</b>	
Corpus (with Plates)	343
Commentary	553
Appendices	649
<b>Bibliography</b>	693
<b>General Index</b>	713

## INTRODUCTION

*Early Tamil Epigraphy: From the Earliest Times to Sixth Century A.D.* (henceforth *ETE*) was first published in 2003, in separate but identical editions, by Cre-A; Chennai in India and the Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies, Harvard University, USA. The book has been well received by scholars and students alike, as indicated by the large number of reviews in academic publications in India and abroad, and by the fact that the Indian Edition was sold out within a year of its publication. Two seminars were held in 2004 on the progress in Tamil-Brāhmī studies and related areas, one by the Madras Institute of Development Studies (MIDS), Chennai, and the other at the Tamil University, Thanjavur. An increasing number of publications on Tamil-Brāhmī have appeared in recent years in Tamil and English attesting to the heightened interest in this developing field. I am gratified that the main objectives of the book to provide reliable documentation and a definitive edition of the texts of the Tamil-Brāhmī cave inscriptions have been substantially fulfilled.

The Revised and Enlarged Second Edition is being published by the Central Institute for Classical Tamil (CICT), Chennai, an autonomous institution functioning under the Department of Culture, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, New Delhi. The CICT is implementing an ambitious programme for the digitisation and preservation of Classical Tamil texts and survey of heritage monuments. One of the projects included in this larger programme is the documentation of Tamil-Brāhmī cave inscriptions. The CICT has entrusted the execution of the project to the Centre for Plans, People and Ecosystems (CPPE), Chennai. The technical details of the project and consequent improvement to the quality of documentation are described by M. V. Bhaskar, Project Co-ordinator, in his 'Report on the CICT Photographic Survey' included in this volume (pp. 123 - 136). The critically important feature of the project is replacing the Plates produced from the manual tracing of the inscriptions in *ETE* 2003, with *in situ* delineation and digitisation. A welcome bonus is that the current Edition has an electronic counterpart with many interactive features for the reader, facilitating an even closer study of the inscriptions (See Plates 1 - 96).

The present publication, Volume I of the Revised and Enlarged Second Edition, deals only with Tamil-Brāhmī inscriptions including the newly discovered stone inscriptions (Nos. 90 - 96) and, selectively, other Tamil-Brāhmī inscriptions on pottery, coins, seals and rings (Annexure A to Chapter 1). Two new Sections have been added dealing with Prakrit inscriptions on pottery and other inscribed objects and, Sinhala-Prakrit inscriptions on pottery, both from Tamilnadu (Annexures B & C to Chapter 1). I hope that the additions will lead to a wider and deeper perspective on early Tamil epigraphy and its interaction with other contemporary languages and scripts in South India and Sri Lanka.

This volume retains the basic format of *ETE* 2003 in the numbering of the Tamil-Brāhmī stone inscriptions in the Corpus and of the inscriptional words in the Commentary to maintain continuity and facilitate citation. Newly added Tamil-Brāhmī stone inscriptions are placed in the Addendum to the Corpus and allotted new Reference Numbers in continuation of those in *ETE* 2003.

Early Vaṭṭeluttu inscriptions included in *ETE* 2003 have been omitted from the present volume to provide more space for the additional material on Tamil-Brāhmī. Further, to do full justice to Vaṭṭeluttu will

need a separate volume. The proposed volume would also include more Early Vaṭṭeluttu inscriptions, especially the two long inscriptions from Pulankurichi and herostone inscriptions up to 6th century C.E., which could not be accommodated in *ETE* 2003. However, the brief account on the origin, evolution and decline of the Vaṭṭeluttu script included in the survey of early Tamil epigraphy has been retained in the present volume to provide the link between Tamil-Brāhmī and Vaṭṭeluttu scripts.

I am happy to report that the delineations reproduced in the present volume have confirmed the accuracy of the earlier tracings in *ETE* 2003 with but a single exception. The first two letters in an inscription (No. 27) which were earlier traced as a 'single broken letter *mā*', have now been corrected as *ū ta* in the personal name *Uttira-antai*. There are some other minor variations like, for example, the addition of the medial vowel marker *-ā* (No. 24), the suffix *-i* (No. 48), and the *puḷli* (No. 68), which do not, however, materially alter the readings or interpretations. There are also a few cases (Nos. 10 & 15) of letters missing, wholly or partly, due to disintegration of the rock surface by natural or manmade causes. Each such variation, however minor, between the earlier tracings and the present delineations, has been recorded in the footnotes under the respective inscriptions in the Corpus.

There are also a few instances of modified interpretation of words in the Tamil-Brāhmī texts in the Corpus. These changes have been discussed in detail in the Commentary on the respective inscriptions. The more significant revisions are briefly noticed below (Reference Numbers to the inscriptions in brackets):

*piṇa(v)u* (3) 'drip ledge'.

*tāraṇi* (44) 'drip ledge' (loanword from Indo-Aryan).

*iv-kunṛa-* (60) 'this hill'; cf. *iv-mūla-u-kai-y* (90) 'this cave'.

*kuṇā-* (89) A place name now identified with Trikkāṇā (*Tiru-k-kuṇā*) in Kerala, known in ancient times as Kuṇavāyil. The identification leads to a re-examination of the probable date of *Cilappatikāram* from an epigraphical perspective (pp. 190 - 193).

The newly added Tamil-Brāhmī inscriptions include four on herostones (Nos. 91 - 94), marking a major turning point in the history of early Tamil epigraphy. K. Rajan and his colleagues in the Tamil University, Thanjavur, discovered the inscribed herostones in 2006 in megalithic urn-burial fields in two villages in the upper Vaigai valley. This important discovery extends the Tamil-Brāhmī period into the late megalithic age linking the latter with the succeeding early historical period attested in the Tamil Caṅkam poetry. The inscriptions, especially the one (No. 93) mentioning a cattle raid (*ā-kōḷ*), corroborate the vivid accounts of erecting herostones in *Tolkāppiyam* and the Caṅkam anthologies. It is significant that the language of the Tamil-Brāhmī herostone inscriptions has no Prakrit element and the contents do not reveal any association with Jainism.

The newly discovered Early Tamil-Brāhmī inscription (No. 95) in a cave on the Samanarmalai hill at Kilkuyilkudi near Madurai is also of exceptional interest. The location forms part of the extensive complex of caves marking the earliest settlement of Jaina monks in the Pāṇṭiya country. Samanarmalai is also associated with the famous Jaina monastery (no longer extant) at Tirukkāṭṭāmpaḷḷi, which was considered to be the central seat of authority for the Jainas of the Tamil country (p. 172).

Yet another interesting Tamil-Brāhmī inscription (No. 96) from Edakal in Kerala, was discovered most recently (2012) by M. R. Raghava Varier. This is a brief label inscription affixed to an anthropomorphic figure forming part of the prehistoric rock art in the cave. I have read the inscription as *i palama* ‘this (is) ancient’, and identified it as the earliest known inscription in Malayalam, dated in the 4th or 5th century C.E.

Among the newly discovered Tamil-Brāhmī pottery inscriptions included in the present volume (Catalogue AI, Chapter 1), the most significant are those from the recent excavations at Pattanam in Kerala, identified with Muciri, the ancient seaport of the Cēra rulers and main entrepôt for trade with the West in classical times. Kodumanal (ancient Koṭumaṇam) in Tamilnadu continues to be a veritable cornucopia of Tamil-Brāhmī pottery inscriptions, yielding hundreds in each session of excavation, but represented in this volume only by a few examples for want of space. The extraordinarily high numbers of Tamil-Brāhmī pottery inscriptions offer the most conclusive evidence for widespread and popular literacy in the Tamil society of the Caṅkam Age.

More Tamil-Brāhmī pottery inscriptions have been found from recent excavations outside India. Pride of place among them must be given to the inscription reading *tiraḷi muri* ‘written agreement (by) the assembly’ found at Tissamaharama in southern Sri Lanka, which has been assigned to 200 B.C.E. (No. 20, Catalogue AI, Chapter 1). The evidence it provides for the existence of a trade guild of Sri Lankan Tamil merchants at this site known for its prolific yield of gemstones, is noteworthy. Perhaps it is this trade guild which issued the lead coins or tokens with Tamil-Brāhmī legends found earlier near this site (Nos. 7 - 10, Catalogue AII, Chapter 1). Other ancient sites abroad which have yielded Tamil-Brāhmī pottery inscriptions from recent excavations are Quseir al-khadim and Berenike on the Red Sea Coast of Egypt, Oman in the Southern Arabian Peninsula and Thailand in South East Asia (Catalogue AI), providing new evidence for the extensive maritime trade by the Tamils of the Caṅkam Age.

Special mention must also be made of the discovery of a gold ring at Karur with a Prakrit legend assigned to 1st century B.C.E. on palaeographic evidence (Fig. 5.2A, p.212). The most remarkable feature of the legend on the ring is the occurrence of the special *-ā* medial vowel marker, the diagnostic feature of the Bhattiprolu script, for the first time outside the Stupa site in Andhra Pradesh. The unexpected find coming more than a century after the discovery of the casket inscriptions at Bhattiprolu offers good evidence for the connection between the earlier TB-I orthographic convention of Early Tamil-Brāhmī inscriptions and the later orthographic convention of the Bhattiprolu script (see discussion pp. 266 - 269).

Even as the manuscript of the present volume was getting ready for the press, more discoveries of Tamil-Brāhmī inscriptions have been reported including yet another caveside inscription from Tirupparankunram, another herostone inscription at Porpanaikkottai near Pudukkottai and further quantities of Tamil-Brāhmī pottery inscriptions from the inexhaustible trenches at Kodumanal. It has not been possible to include these recent discoveries in the present volume. I hope *Early Tamil Epigraphy* will develop into an open-ended, multi-volume series, arranged thematically and updated periodically, to keep abreast of the ever increasing number of discoveries in this field.