

## SINHALA WRITING AND THE TRANSMISSION OF TEXTS IN PRE-MODERN TIMES

"The Sinhalese write very neatly and expeditiously, with a sharp pointed iron style, and they colour the characters they have scratched by rubbing them with an ink of lamp-black and a solution of gum. Their books are all manuscripts, and actually formed of leaves of trees and confined by boards. The leaf most used, as best adapted to the purpose, is the immense leaf of the talipot-palm, occasionally nearly thirty feet in circumference. It is well and slowly dried in the shade, rubbed with an oil, and cut into pieces of suitable dimensions, the length of which always greatly exceeds the width; near the two extremities each piece is perforated, that they may be connected by means of a cord, to which the boards are attached, to form a book. The boards are generally neatly painted and decorated. Occasionally, but rarely, their books are made of thin copper plates.

The material of their writings are durable, and they last much longer than ours, particularly in Ceylon, where our paper is so apt to be destroyed by insects, and our ink to fade. Their books are pretty numerous, and though much more expensive than our printed works, are very much cheaper than Mss. were in Europe before printing was invented".

These penetrating comments on the writing of the Sinhalese and the materials they used, came from the pen of John Davy,<sup>1</sup> physiologist, anatomist and travel writer, and brother of Sri Humphery Davy, the celebrated British chemist and inventor of the Miner's Safety Lamp. They give a clear idea of the process of writing and distinctive features of the material on which the writing was done. Coming as they do from the early days of the British occupation of the island and from the pen of a foreigner who had been here but for a couple of years, Davy's observations are remarkably accurate for the time they were made. Strangely enough, in a reference made by Diringer<sup>2</sup> to the diverse materials used for writing such as "stone to wood,

---

1 John Davy was born in 1790 in Penzance, Cornwall, and was the younger brother of Humphrey, the famous scientist, who was two years his senior. He received his higher education at the University of Edinburgh, from where he passed out as a Doctor of Medicine. He joined the army as a surgeon and arrived in Sri Lanka in 1816. On his return to England after the Kandyan rebellion (1818) he published *An Account of the Interior of Ceylon and Its Inhabitants* (1821). Davy was one of the earliest English writers to travel widely in the island, not only in the central highlands but also in other parts of it, such as Minneriya and Trincomalee, Sabaragamuwa and Uva, Kurunagala, Kataragama and elsewhere. His descriptions are marked by a fine sense of observation and accuracy of detail. His attitude to the inhabitants of the island which had just been brought under subjugation has been described as "remarkably liberal for his time," and what he wrote as "carefully considered and free of any prejudice." His work on the interior of Ceylon has been hailed as "the finest written on the Kandyan Kingdom since Knox in 1681."

2. *op. cit.* p. 21.

clay, metal, leather, linen, parchment, paper and wax;" leaf, especially the palm leaf, has been omitted. Davy mentions it and even gives details of its preparation: selection of the leaf, drying it in the shade, rubbing its surface with an oil, cutting it into strips and perforation of two holes at the two extremities. He refers to the passing of a cord through the holes of the several strips thus collected and bound together to form a book. He describes the process of writing as "scratching" with a stylus and rubbing the surface of the leaf "with an ink of lamp-black and a solution of gum." Davy observes also that "the Sinhalese write very neatly and expeditiously."

Davy was not the only foreigner who had taken an interest in the language, literature and culture of the indigenous people from the early days of the British occupation. The Christian missionaries who had established themselves in Colombo and other places on the south-western littoral, such as Galle and Mataras, were studying the Sinhalese language mainly for the purpose of translating the Bible and other religious books like the Common Prayer Book and Catechisms. Some had taken to the study of Pali and Sinhalese grammar. Others had begun to inquire into the popular religion and folk lore. British Civil Servants had begun to learn Sinhalese, which they found necessary in order to transact their daily business. As teachers and informants in their work, they generally engaged ex-Buddhist monks, for it was in that class of people that persons versed in the indigenous languages could be found.

One such visitor to the country who appears to have shown a keen interest in indigenous languages and the study of Sinhalese was Rasmus Rask.<sup>3</sup> He arrived in Jaffna in November 1821 after having studied Sinhalese in Madras for three months. On his arrival here he began reading the language with a member of the British Civil Service, L.E. Layard, beginning with the Sinhalese translation of the New

- 
3. Rasmus Christian Rask (1787-1831) was a Danish student of Comparative Philology who embarked upon the study of Germanic languages. From his voyages in Sweden, Norway and Ireland, he produced his first scholarly work: *Risearches into the Origin of the Old Nordic or Icelandic Language* (Copenhagen, 1818). In 1816 he undertook a journey to India via Sweden and Finland, to St. Petersburg and thence in 1819 via Moscow, Astrakan, Tiflis and Parsia to India (Bombay) where he made a study of the language and customs of the Parsis. From India he proceeded to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) where he became interested in the languages and folklore of the Ceylon Buddhists and, as the comments made above show, he took to the study of Sinhalese.

Testament printed in Colombo in 1917. When he reached Colombo he began to study Pali with Mudaliyar George Nadoris de Silva, who had earlier been a monk at Dadalla Viharaya in the south, under the name of Rajaguru Dhammakkhanda.<sup>4</sup> In December of the same year Rask was made an honorary member of the Colombo Literary and Agricultural Society (which was in 1848 to become the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society); he wrote a paper entitled "On The Mode of Expressing the Indian, especially the Sanskrit and Sinhalese sounds in European Characters." He also prepared a sketch of Pali grammar using Tolfrey's translation of the *Bālāvātara*, *Abhidānappadīpikā* and *Dhātumanjusa*. In his study of old Sinhalese (Elu), Rask made use of Clough's tabulation of the *Sidatsangara* edited by Tolfrey. John Callaway<sup>5</sup> gave him a copy of his *Eluaksarādiya*.<sup>6</sup>

Although not directly associated with palmleaf manuscripts or the teaching of Sinhalese, Vaskaduve Sri Subhuti, Nayaka thera<sup>7</sup> (2378-2460 B.E./1835-1917 C.E.) occupies a prestigious place in the history of writing in Sri Lanka. His name is associated with those of an illustrious band of other indigenous scholars from whom several European (and native) scholars acquired a knowledge of Pali, Sinhalese and sometimes Sanskrit. In the early days of his monastic training, the young samanera Subhuti is said to have copied out himself the religious texts he had to learn. That was at a time when printed copies of such works were not available. On the

4. Nadoris de Silva had been at Ava in Burma from where he had brought Pali books in Burmese characters to his temple. It was there that he had received the title of Rajaguru from the Burmese king Mahadharmaraja. See also Godakumbura *op. cit.* xl iii. Buddhadatta Mahathera adds, quoting P. de S. Weerasuriya's *Devundara Itihasaya*, Colombo 1962, p. 181), that he was ordained at the request of Maha Mudaliyar Rajapaksa of Dadalla and his wife and handed over to Valpola Gurunnanse for his education. As a *bhikkhu* he was known as Kapugama Dhammakkhanda Mahathera, founder of the Dadulu Paramparava, a sub-sect of the Amarapura Nikaya. In 2351 B.E./1808. C.A. in the company of four other monks, Dhammarakkhita, Dhammadinna, Gunaratana and Sumana, two samaneras, Sanghatissa and Janananda, and three lay devotees, he embarked on a voyage to Amarapura in Burma for the purpose of receiving the higher ordination. See Buddhadatta Mahasthavira *Samipatitayehi Buddha Cāryayo*, Colombo, 1964. pp. 28-33, and "Lakdiva Burumanikaye Itihasaya in *Paranavitana Felicitation Volume* (PFV.) ed. N.A. Jayawickrama, Colombo, 1965, pp. 37-49, by the same author.
5. Author of several handbooks on Sinhalese and a work on folklore, he wrote also *Hints on the Cingalese and English Languages*, 1821), *A Cingalese Spelling Book*, 1825, and *Yakun Natanava*, 1829. He also compiled the *Elu-aksaradiya*.
6. See note 5 above.
7. Buddhadatta Mahasthavira, *op. cit.* pp. 126-131.

completion of his preliminary education at Kalamulla in Kalutara under Saranapala Silakkhandha Mahathera, he was sent to Pa'madulla in Sabaragamuwa for further training under the tutorship of Hikkaduve Sri Sumangala Mahanayaka thera, Chief Monk of Sri Pada and Sabaragamuwa, where he remained for seven years. In the eighteen sixties when R.C. Childers arrived in the island to take up a position in the Civil Service it was Subhuti Mahathera who played the role of Pali teacher to him. Childers<sup>8</sup> received instruction from the learned monk both by postal correspondence and personal meetings. Subhuti thera's native pupils were drawn not only from the neighbourhood of Valitara and Kosgoda but even from further areas as Badulla and Valapane.<sup>9</sup> He counted among his pupils students from Burma, Siam, Cambodia and China who had come here to study Buddhism and the history and culture of the Sinhalese. Mudaliyar Abraham Mendis Gunasekera is said to have studied Sinhalese under him while L.F. Lee was an Englishman who learnt the language from him.<sup>10</sup> His scholarship and erudition had, by the latter half of the nineteenth century received wide recognition abroad. An index to his Pali *Nighandu* which had been published for the second time in 1883 was arranged to be published in 1893<sup>11</sup> through the intervention of Childers and R. Rossette, then Librarian of the India Office Library, London.<sup>12</sup> King Chulalankorn of Siam sent him two crates of books of the Abhidhamma Pitaka and later, on the occasion of His Majesty's Silver Jubilee Anniversary of the accession to the throne, a complete set of the Tripitaka printed in Siamese.<sup>13</sup> Besides Childers, the eminent scholars Fausboll, Max Muller and Richard Morris corresponded with him.

Intimately linked with the name of R C Childers is that of Yatramulle Dhammarama Mahathera (2382-2415 B E /1829-1827 A.C),<sup>14</sup> his long-time friend, teacher and mentor. It was from him that Childers acquired a knowledge of the Pali language.

8. *Ibid.* There is an informative note by Childers (*A Dictionary of the Pali Language*. London, 1909, ix. n.1) on his inquiry from the learned thera regarding the matter of the transmission of Buddhist texts, prior to their committal to writing in the first century B.C., and the thera's reply thereto; the latter gives an insight to the monk's scholarship and Childers recognition of it.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

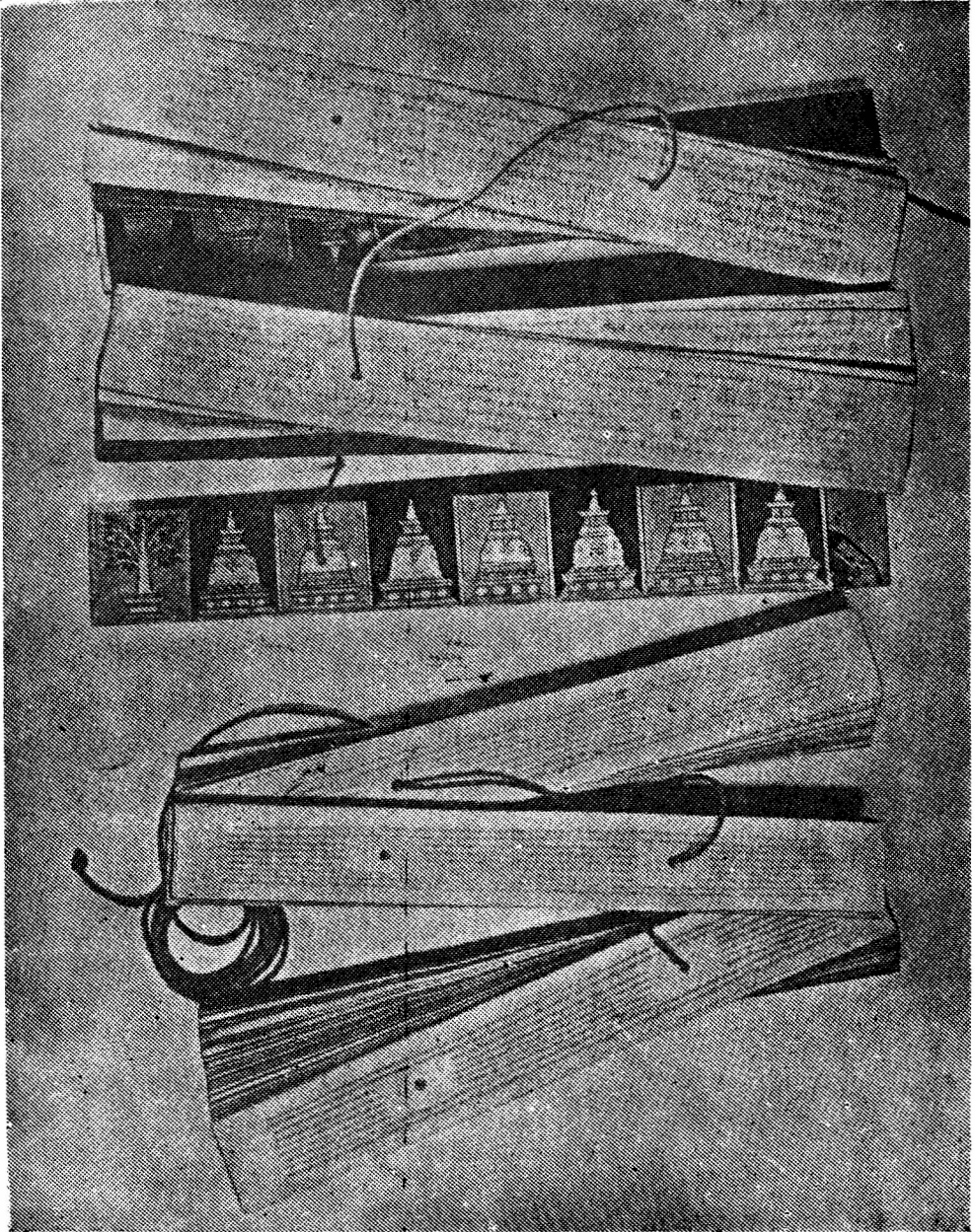
11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*

14. Buddhadatta Mahasthavira, *op. cit.* pp. 131-136. Yatramulle Dharmarama was a brilliant Pali scholar who met with an untimely death at the age of forty three. He is reputed to have been the author of Sinhalese glossaries to several Pali works such as the *Khuddhaka-pātha*. At the time of his death he was in the course of compiling a lexicon of terms occurring in the Pali course. His letters, written in Pali, Sinhalese and English, as well as his other writings are to be found, according to Buddhadatta Mahasthavira, to this day at the Vanavasa Viharaya, Bentota.

PLATE I



Opened palm leaf manuscripts showing written pages; and painted cover boards.

soon after he arrived in the island in 1862, at the age of twenty four. Yatramulle Mahathera was a teacher of that celebrated Pali scholar, T.W. Rhys Davids, founder of the Pali Text Society. Childers was later to produce the first Pali-English Dictionary, a scholarly work which was printed and published in England in two parts, the first in 1871 and the second in 1876, the year of his death. Pupils of the learned Pali scholar, Bentara Atthadassi Mahathera,<sup>15</sup> he excelled in his studies quite early and was appointed a pupil-teacher when he was yet a novice (*sāmanera*). In his twenty-fourth year he received the higher ordination (*upasampadā*) at the Malvatta Viharaya, Kandy. Among the others who were admitted to the higher ordination on that occasion were the Mahatheras Mavalle Dhammananda, Kommala Indasara, the physician-monk, Potuvila Indajoti, Bopitiye Silavamsa and Ambagahavatte Indasabha, founder of the Lanka Ramanna Nikaya.

Childers pays a glowing tribute to the depth of learning and erudition of this learned man, when he acknowledges his indebtedness to him and two other Sinhalese scholars, one of whom, Vaskaduve Sri Subhuti, has been referred to earlier. "From three Sinhalese Buddhists I have received" he says,

"valuable contributions in the shape of letters replying to questions on points of scholarship and interpretation. They are first the priest Dhammarama of Yatramulle whose premature death in January 1872, deprived the Buddhist Church of one of its brightest ornaments; next the priest Subhuti of Vaskaduve well known to European Palists as the able editor of *Abhidhānappadīpika*; and lastly the Mudliar L. Corneille Vijesimha, a scholar of much learning and originality. During the progress of this work I have received from almost all the communities in Ceylon proofs of sympathy and appreciation, but from none more than the Buddhist clergy, a generous and enlightened body of men, towards whom I am under many and deep obligations."<sup>16</sup>

Rhys Davids makes a similar acknowledgement of his indebtedness to the erudite scholar in his *Hibbert Lectures* delivered in 1881. He records his impression of him as "a thin and diseased-looking monk, rather mean in stature," and that when he first saw him "the hand of death was already upon him" and that "he was sinking into the grave from the effects of a painful and incurable malady." So much for the impressions that the physical condition of the monk created in the mind of Rhys Davids. But what the latter has to say with regards to his scholarship and learning require no apology for being quoted at length:

15. *Ibid.* pp. 64-70.

16. Childers, R.C., *A Dictionary of the Pali Language*, London, 1909. xviii. This statement was made much earlier than the year of publication of the Dictionary mentioned in the note, for the second part of the work was first published in 1876. See also note 8 above.

"I had heard of his learning as a Pali scholar, and of his illness, and was grateful to him for leaving his home under such circumstances, to teach a stranger. There was a strange light in his sunken eyes, and he was constantly running away from questions of Pali to questions of Buddhism. I found him versed in all the poetry and ethics of the Suttas, and was glad to hear him talk. There was an indescribable attraction about him, a simplicity, a high-mindedness, that filled me with reverence. I used sometimes to think that the personal impression of Yatramulla Unnanse might have led me to colour my judgment of him too highly, but Mr. Childers told me, after my return to England, that the dying Buddhist scholar had made a similar impression upon him. We are not likely to have been both mistaken." (pp. 186-187)

It should be apparent from remarks made above that, even during colonial times, there were learned monks who remained in their temples and a few lay scribes associated with them who carried on the tradition of writing and copying books. It is to them that we are indebted not only for the production of manuscripts but for their preservation as well.

The next direct reference to writing and the preparation of manuscripts comes from Emerson J. Tennent who wrote about four decades after Davy.<sup>17</sup>

"The books of the Sinhalese are formed today," Tennent says,

"as they have been for ages past, of olas or strips taken from the young leaves of the Talipot or Palamyra palm cut before they have acquired the dark shade and strong texture which belong to the fullgrown frond. After undergoing a process (one stage of which consists in steeping them in water and sometimes milk), to preserve their flexibility, they are submitted to pressure to render their surface uniformly smooth. They are cut into strips of two or three inches in breadth and from one to three feet long. These are pierced with two holes, one near each end, through which a cord is passed so as to secure them between two wooden covers, lacquered and ornamented with coloured devices."

Gerard A. Joseph, Librarian of the Government Museum and Honorary Secretary of the Royal Asiatic Society, in a paper on "Ola Mss. and the Government Oriental Library" (1894) quoting Tennent at length, adds here the following note:

---

17. Tennent, E.J. *History of Ceylon* 2 vols. 2nd edition, London, Longmans 1859; re-ed. 1860, 1977, vol. 1. p. 513.

"In some of the old temples, these covers are highly ornamented, and even enriched with precious stones or embossed in gold or silver."

The leaves thus strung together and secured form a book.

On these palm leaves the custom is to write with an iron stile held nearly upright and steadied by a nick to receive it in the thumb-nail of the left hand. The stile is sometimes richly ornamented, shaped like an arrow and inlaid with gold, one blade of the feather serving as a knife, to trim the leaf preparatory to writing. The case is sometimes made of carved ivory bound with hoops of filagreed silver.

The furrow made by the pressure of the stile is rendered visible by the application of charcoal ground with a fragrant oil, to the colour of which the natives ascribe the remarkable state of preservation in which their most sacred books are found, its aromatic properties securing the leaves from destruction by white ants and other insects".

This lengthy quotation confirms, in broad outline, the principal facts regarding the traditional mode of writing given by Davy. It could well have been that Tennent had himself read what Davy had written earlier. Tennent, of course, provides additional details of the process and the materials used.<sup>18</sup>

A growing interest in the history and culture of ancient peoples, one result of which was a serious endeavour to collect and preserve for posterity ancient manuscripts written in the indigenous languages of Asian peoples appears to have arisen among scholars in the latter half of the 19th century. Not only government officials but even private individuals seem to have shared that interest.

Concern for indigenous manuscripts from Sri Lanka and the urge to collect them have an interesting history. Some time in the years 1866, M. Grimbolt, Vice-Consul for France in Ceylon, made a collection of Sri Lankan manuscripts and sent them to France. The collection attracted the attention of scholars in Europe, and the *Saturday Review* of London, in its issue of 26 July 1866, seized the occasion to draw the attention of the Government to the importance of Buddhist manuscripts found in Ceylon. The *Review* had this to say:

---

18. The details regarding writing given here are not always correct. as. for instance, the steeping of the leaves "in water and sometimes in milk", or the "colouring" of the written surface (කළු මැදිම) "by the application of charcoal ground with a fragrant oil. The other details are remarkably accurate.



"That Ceylon is one of the principal seats of Buddhism, that Buddhism is one of the most important religions of mankind, that the Buddhist Priests possess a Sacred Literature which dates from several centuries before the Christian Era, all this is perfectly well known. But it is well known that though, since the beginning of this century, Ceylon has been an English Colony, hardly anything has been done by the English Government to collect these interesting relics of an ancient Literature, to deposit them in our Public Libraries, and thus render them accessible to Oriental Scholars while the French Government - say, it would seem an individual French gentleman - has during the last six years accomplished all that could be desired".<sup>19</sup>

Barely two years had elapsed when Louis de Zoysa, Maha Mudaliyar and Chief Translator to the Government of Ceylon, was asked to report on the necessity for the inspection of the libraries of temples (*Pansalas*). Mr. de Zoysa made his report early in 1869, in the course of which he stated as follows:

"If some such scheme as that adopted by the Indian Government be applied not only to the Sanskrit but also to the Pali and Sinhalese Manuscripts of the Country, there is every reason to believe that many important historical and other works which are not now accessible to the learned may be brought to light".<sup>20</sup>

- 
19. Quoted in de Silva, *op.cit.* vii. These remarks make it quite plain that the early interest in manuscripts was inspired by an interest in Buddhism and Buddhist literature, the original sources of which were held to be found in Ceylon. The fact that a member of another imperial government had taken the initiative in the search for indigenous texts may also have been a contributory factor for Englishmen too to take an interest.
20. *Ibid.* Louis de Zoysa's *A Catalogue of Pali, Sinhalese and Sanskrit Manuscripts in the Temple Libraries of Ceylon*, Colombo, 1885 was the first of such catalogues to be published. It preceded Don Martino de Silva Wickremasinghe's *Catalogue of the Sinhalese Manuscripts in the British Museum*, printed by the order of the Trustees, British Museum, 1900, and H.M. Gunasekera's *Catlogue of Pali, Sinhalese and Sanskrit Manuscripts in the Colombo Museum Library*, Colombo, Govt. Printer, H.C. Cottle, 1901 by a clear 15 years. The other catalogues of Hugh Nevill and W.A. de Silva were published more than 50 years after the appearance of de Zoysa's *Catalogue*.

PLATE II

The accompanying list of letters compiled from the Epigraphia Zeylanica, Vol. IV, Part III, from "South Indian Paleography by Burnel" and from modern manuscripts illustrates the influences that contributed to the development of modern Sinhalese characters.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
u			𑀩					𑀫	𑀬	𑀭
ga			𑀧	𑀨	𑀩	𑀪	𑀫	𑀬	𑀭	𑀮
da			𑀯	𑀰				𑀱	𑀲	𑀳
na	𑀴	𑀵	𑀶	𑀷			𑀸	𑀹	𑀺	𑀻
ta	𑀼	𑀽	𑀾	𑀿	𑁀	𑁁	𑁂	𑁃	𑁄	𑁅
da	𑁆	𑁇	𑁈	𑁉	𑁊	𑁋	𑁌	𑁍	𑁎	𑁏
pa	𑁐	𑁑	𑁒	𑁓	𑁔	𑁕	𑁖	𑁗	𑁘	𑁙
ya	𑁚	𑁛	𑁜	𑁝	𑁞	𑁟	𑁠	𑁡	𑁢	𑁣
la	𑁤	𑁥	𑁦	𑁧	𑁨	𑁩	𑁪	𑁫	𑁬	𑁭
va	𑁮	𑁯	𑁰	𑁱	𑁲	𑁳	𑁴	𑁵	𑁶	𑁷
ṣa			𑁸	𑁹			𑁺	𑁻	𑁼	𑁽
Sha			𑁾	𑁿			𑂀	𑂁	𑂂	𑂃
sa	𑂄	𑂅	𑂆	𑂇	𑂈	𑂉	𑂊	𑂋	𑂌	𑂍
ha	𑂎	𑂏	𑂐	𑂑	𑂒	𑂓	𑂔	𑂕	𑂖	𑂗

(1) English transliteration, (2) Fifth Century Sinhalese, (3) Fifth Century Chera, (4) Seventh Century Sinhalese, (5) Seventh Century Western Calukya, (6) Eighth Century Sinhalese, (7) Eighth Century Cola Grantha, (8) Ninth Century Sinhalese, (9) Fourteenth Century Grantha, (10) Modern Sinhalese

The officer administering the Government of Ceylon at the time, Lieut-General S. Hodgson, issued a circular to the Government Agents of the provinces suggesting "the possibility of accurate catalogues of manuscripts in the Pansalas being obtained, and inquiring what steps should be taken for ascertaining the contents of the Libraries of various Pansalas with a view to the discovery of any interesting unknown manuscripts, Pali and Sinhalese as well as Sanskrit."<sup>21</sup>

James De Alwis, member of the then Legislative Council, was asked by the Colonial government to undertake that task of collecting the required information. De Alwis, however, did not favour the idea of examining temple libraries and the preparation of a catalogue, and instead recommended to the Government the formation of a Government Library, which suggestion the Government accepted. Having accepted the recommendation, the Government requested De Alwis himself to prepare a detailed scheme for the establishment of an Oriental Library. In 1870 the Government voted funds for such a project and, in the same year, a Government Oriental Library was set up and Louis de Zoysa was appointed Librarian.

Two years earlier (i.e. 1868) an event of capital importance in the history of manuscripts in Sri Lanka took place. A group of influential and learned Buddhist monks, at the invitation of influential Buddhist laymen, assembled at Sudassana Dhammasala in Palamadulla,<sup>22</sup> Sabaragamuwa, to prepare a revision of the books of the Vinaya Pitaka, both texts and their commentaries. The bhikkhus who engaged themselves in that task included the Venerable Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala Thera, Valigama Sri Sumangala Thera<sup>23</sup> and Vaskaduwe Subhuti Thera. The assembly of

21. *Ibid.* The action taken by the Officer administering the Government of Ceylon followed the publication of an order issued by the Viceroy and Governor General of India, dated 10th May 1868, for collecting the catalogues of Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian books in existence in many parts of India. See also de Silva *op. cit.*

22. See Buddhadatta Mahathera, Polvatte, *Samāpatītavāsi Buddhācāryayo*, Colombo, 1964. pp. 85-87, 121, 129.

23. A Pali passage which mentions this event appears at the end of a mss. copy of *Parivara-patha* and quoted by W.A. de Silva *op. cit.*, xii and 3 reads as follows:  
Buddhassa Bhavavato parinibbānato catusatādhikānaṃ dvinnāṃ vassa sahaṣṣānaṃ upari ekādasame vacchare Lankāvipavāsinaṃ Upālivamsikānaṃ ceva Marama-na-vamsikānaṃ ca dhammavinayakovidānaṃ theradināṃ yatināṃca gahaṭṭha-pañḍitānaṃ ca Saphārāgāma-janapade susajjitaya Sudassānābhidhānaya dhammasālāya upaṭṭhitasabhāya Sapharagāma-vāsinaṃ jabh.jjanena ussahitaya satthakatham vinayapitakam samsodhitam”.

This translated means:

“Through the efforts of the chief residents of Sabaragamuwa, an assembly was held at the Sudassana Dhammasala, of saintly monks, theras and others, versed in the Dhamma and the Vinaya, belonging to the Upalivamsa (i.e. the Siamese Sect), and of learned laymen, in the year 2411 B.E. when the entire Vinaya Pitaka, together with its commentaries, was revised.

monks completed the task of revision in one year. The assembly was convened. It is stated, "for the purpose of the revision of Buddhist texts which had been copied from time to time and which had not been for some time revised and corrected by any learned assembly." The names of the learned bhikkhus who participated and the revision of the first book of the Vinaya and the part of the commentary thereon was entrusted to a committee consisting of Hikkaduve Sri Sumangala Nayake Thera of Sri Pada, Puvakdandave Sumangala Thera and Pandit Batuvanudāve; the second book and the commentary to Lankagoda Sri Saddhammavamsapāla Dhammananda Thera, Vīṭira Dhammāṅkāra Thera, Vaskaduve Subhūti Thera and Kodagoda Paññasekkara Thera; the third book and commentary to Hikkaduve Sri Sumangala Thera and Mulleriyāve Gunaratana Thera; the fourth book and the commentary to Dodanduve Piyaratanaṭissa Thera, the fifth book and the commentary to Valāne Siddhartha Thera, while the Parivāra-Atuvāva was entrusted to Hikkaduve Sri Sumangala Thera. The learned laymen who organized the assembly were Iddamaligoda Abhayakōṇ Atapattu Mudyanse Ralahami, Ratamahatmaya of Navadun and Kukulu Korales and Basnayaka Nilame of Maha Saman Devāle of Ratnapura, Eknaligoda Mahipala Akkarakuruppu Wikramasinha Basnayaka Mudyanse Ralahami, Basnayaka Nilame of Boltumba Devale, Eknaligoda Mahipala Akkarakuruppu Wikramasinha Basnayake Mudyanse Ralahami, Ratamahatmaya of Kuruvita Korale, and Mahavalatanne Wikramasinha Candrasekara Seneviratna Mudyanse Ralahami, Ratamahatmaya of Kadavata and Māda Korales.

A set of rules was framed for the due care of the revised books of the Vinaya Pitaka, which were deposited at the Palmadulla Viharaya. The first of the eight rules which were enacted and confirmed by the learned bhikkhus and laymen who had assembled on that occasion, states that the revision of the books was undertaken for the promotion of the welfare of the Buddha Sasana and therefore should be preserved for the benefit of the Buddhists, both bhikkhus and laymen.

Copies of the revised books, which were obtained for the Oriental Library, Colombo, are authenticated by an endorsement on each of them that the manuscript was copied in 1872 for the said library under the supervision of L.C. Vijesinha from the books revised by the assembly of learned bhikkhus held at Palmadulla in 2411 B.E. (1868 A.C.).

The Galle and Matara Committees worked under the supervision of the Venerable Bulatgama Dhammalankara Sri Sumanatissa Thera and Mudaliyar É. R. Gunaratna.

A detailed examination of the history of manuscripts does not fall within the scope of this paper. But even to get the record of an outline straight, it is pertinent to make some comments on the state of affairs in the twentieth century. The available records show that the interest in manuscripts shown among official and learned circles continued to draw the attention of scholars and administrators in the early decades. The Historical Manuscripts Commission appointed in 1930 noted that there were in existence documents of importance to students of the island's history and antiquities in various parts of the island, that "some of these were in danger of

disperal and destruction," and that "any further delay in collecting information about such documents might well lead to irreparable loss."<sup>24</sup> When the matter was brought up at a meeting of a learned society, it was recommended that a Historical Manuscripts Commission be constituted for the objects primarily of discovering and preserving such documents. Two general conclusions which the Commissioners drew give some idea of their perceptions:

(1) "With few exceptions the people of Ceylon generally, though hoarding their documents have not safeguarded them against the ravages of insects and unfavourable climatic influences, and political disturbances in the past have militated against the accumulation of large libraries of documents such as are found in some other countries."

(2) Many of those who possess valuable or interesting documents, particularly among the more ignorant inhabitants of rural districts, display profound reluctance to make them available, or even to disclose their whereabouts.<sup>25</sup>

The main criticism here is that generally speaking people have not protected their documents from the ravages of insects and damage from adverse climatic influences, whilst tending to hoard them, and that "political disturbances" have militated against the accumulation of large libraries. The first statement may be considered factual and an accurate description of a prevailing state of affairs in the country, in so far as there has been little or no evidence of a positive effort to protect manuscripts from the ravages of insects and unfavourable climatic conditions. But whatever was meant by hoarding in the afore-mentioned comments, it must be observed that it was in temple libraries mostly that any documents the resident monks had inherited from their predecessors or collected from other quarters were stored and preserved, usually under lock and key. The "political disturbances" referred to above may themselves partly account for the tendency to hoard and an unwillingness on the part of the custodians of such documents to disclose them too readily, not to speak of parting with them or making them available to strangers. The reluctance to make the documents available or disclose their whereabouts may be dismissed as a pardonable shortcoming of ignorant villagers. The lack of readiness to comply with the wishes of outsiders and to part with existing documents shown by the chief monks of temples is understandable, especially in view of the manner in which they have been removed from monastic establishments in the last century (and even in the present one). The point to be made here is that it was the temple monks themselves who took charge of the manuscripts and other documents in their custody and continued to preserve them for posterity by storing them; they were, along with the scribes

24. *First Report of the Historical Manuscripts Commission*, Sessional Paper Colombo, 1933. p. 4

25. *Ibid.* p. 8.

who assisted them, instrumental in the writing and production of manuscripts. It was they again who continued the work of writing and preservation all through the difficult times and left behind the fruits of their labours in the temples where they lived, in the form of many fine manuscripts written in the Sinhalese script, unpretentious monuments to the industry and devotion of their authors. In the light of such considerations an event like the Palamadulla Convention referred to earlier assumes an added significance.

The commissioners, however, later in the course of their survey refer to the existence of collections of manuscripts such as the Rambukpotha Collection<sup>26</sup>

The first literary records in Sinhalese are generally assigned to the 12th century A.C. and the earliest extant Sinhalese manuscripts to the 13th. The *Dhampiyā Atuva Gūtapadaya*, a prose exegesis on the Pali commentary *Dhammapadatthakathā*, was written by King Abā Salamevan Kesub (Kāsyapa) in the first half of the century, while the *Siva-Bas-Lakāra*, a verse composition on poetical theory based on Dandin's *Kavyadarsa* was composed also by a king, who bore the name of Salamesen (Silāmeghasena) or Salamevan (Silāmeghavarna) and who has been variously identified with one or the other of the King Senas who ruled the country during the 9th and 10th centuries of the present era; the work could therefore have been written either in the 10th century or in the first half of the 9th, depending upon the identification of the author. The earliest extant manuscript of a Sinhalese work is a copy of the *Pūjāvaliya*, a prose work belonging to the 13th century, the manuscript of which is assigned to the same period. There is thus a difference of at least two hundred years between the date of the earliest literary documents and the appearance of the first available manuscripts.

The expressions "first literary records" and "earliest literary documents" above need some qualification. In this paper the two expressions have been used to mean the same thing, namely writings of a literary character written on palm-leaves. They thus exclude other writings of a literary character, not written on palm-leaves but scratched or engraved on some other surface. In fact, we have in Sinhalese writings of the latter sort, the unique collection of 700 verses written, (or more correctly scratched), on the rock surface of the mirror-wall (*kātapat pavura*) at Sigiriya. They antedate the earliest written texts by at least two centuries, the earliest verses coming down from about the 7th century. In content and spirit, the compositions are decisively literary, while the form of writing which they display demonstrate beyond doubt a developed stage in the evolution of the Sinhalese script. But since we are concerned here with the script as depicted in palm-leaf manuscripts, we have been compelled to leave them out.

26. See *Second Report of the Historical Manuscripts Commission*, (1935), Sessional Papers XXI. p. 62, where reference is made to other such collections, and also *Third Report of the Historical Manuscripts Commission*, (1951). Sessional Paper XIX.

PLATE III

ക	കി	കീ = കി	കി = കി	ക	ക = ക	ക
ക	ക	ക = ക	ക = ക	ക	ക = ക	ക
ക	ക	ക = ക	ക = ക	ക	ക = ക	ക
ക	ക	ക = ക	ക = ക	ക	ക = ക	ക
ക	ക	ക = ക	ക = ക	ക	ക = ക	ക
ക	ക	ക = ക	ക = ക	ക	ക = ക	ക

Different formation of initial vowels *virāma* with the flag; nasals, *pali-eyanna*, *sabba-bayanna*, and *maha-mayanna*; *sanyoga* special use of *su*; medial *u* = *u*, and other signs

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40
41	42	43	44	45	46	47	48	49	50
51	52	53	54	55	56	57	58	59	60
61	62	63	64	65	66	67	68	69	70
71	72	73	74	75	76	77	78	79	80
81	82	83	84	85	86	87	88	89	90
91	92	93	94	95	96	97	98	99	100

It should also be noted that the literary records mentioned above refer to the earliest surviving records; they do not, therefore, mark chronologically the date of the first written texts nor do they preclude the probability of literary productions having appeared much earlier.<sup>27</sup> In like manner the mention of manuscripts implies a reference to extant manuscripts in Sinhalese.

*The Script.* The word "syllabary" has been used here to mean a list of characters or sound symbols representing syllables in writing a language, in preference to "alphabet". The Sinhalese script is a phonetic writing where we have the graphic counterpart of speech, that is to say, that "in such a system of writing each element corresponds to a sound (or sounds) in the language which is being represented."<sup>28</sup> A direct and inseparable relationship has been established between the written symbol and the spoken letter (or word). Phonetic writing may, of course, be syllabic or alphabetic. Syllabic writing or a syllabary is "based upon the fact that the smallest unit into which any spoken word or series of sounds can be subdivided is the syllable,"<sup>29</sup> whereas in alphabetic writing a letter represents a single sound (a vowel or a pure consonant). It has been said that "in a true alphabet each sound is represented by a constant symbol."<sup>30</sup>

27. It is worth remembering that commentaries on the Pali Canon, written in Sinhala, existed up to the 5th century A.D. Selections from them were made and translated into Pali by Acariya Buddhaghosa who undertook the work of translation in order to make suitable to (Theravada) Buddhists outside Sri Lanka a corpus of writing which could serve as an aid to the understanding of the sacred scriptures. Note also the extensive collections of stories in early Sinhala and original poems with a religious content which were later turned into Pali. As examples of the first category may be mentioned the story collection(s) which formed the basis of Velcha Thera's *Rasavāhini*, and as an example of the second, the Sinhalese poem referred to as *Elu Daladā Vamsaya* which served as the basis of Dharmakitti Thera's *Dāthāvamsa*.

28. Diringer, David. *Writing* (Ancient Peoples and Places ed. G. Daniel, vol XXV), London, Thomas and Hudson, 1962, p. 23. It is instructive to note that Fevrier in *Histoire de l'Écriture*, Payot, Paris, 1948, pp. 331-372, describes Indian systems of writing as syllabic and classifies the latter lists of those languages as syllabaries as contrasted with alphabets. He refers to the Phoenician and Aramaic as alphabets and the Indian and Ethiopic scripts as syllabaries.

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.* p. 49.



It is appropriate at this point to consider the matter of the Sinhala script, the number and form of the letters used. Viewed in historical perspective, the script appears to have evolved in two different directions and thus produced two sets of symbols or syllabaries. The first is the Elu syllabary of 32 letters, made up of 12 vowels<sup>31</sup> and 20 consonants, a set of letters used in verse composition. The other is the Sinhala syllabary of 54 letters, made up of 18 vowels and 36 consonants; this latter, which was used in the writing of prose texts, has had a wider currency than the former, and is the one that receives special attention here. The first is generally referred to as the "pure or unmixed" syllabary, as against the other, which is called the "mixed" one. The latter must surely have been in existence from very early times when the first literary documents - the Canon and its commentaries, - were committed to writing. Many of the vowels and a majority of the consonants were used in the writing of Pali texts, while additional letters were used in the writing of Sanskrit texts. The sounds would have, in the early stages, been represented by some sort of Brahmi characters which later developed into the Sinhalese letters of the present day. The greatest number of characters was used in writing Sinhalese prose, which thus produced a syllabary that is numerically larger than that of either Pali or Sanskrit or of any other Indian or south-east Asian language.

There are, in addition to the letters listed above, a large number of others and, which are variously referred to as "conjunct consonants," "conjuncts" or "ligatures." As the names suggest, they are signs representing two letters joined, which is what a ligature means. They are usually two consonants, the first of which is without a vowel sound: *pra*, *stha*, *cca* and *jña* are examples. They are found in Pali and Sanskrit words and in Sinhalese loan words borrowed from those languages. Conjuncts are not, of course, confined to words borrowed from other languages. They are found in native Elu words too. In fact, the third consonant of each of the five series of consonants beginning with *ka*, *ca*, *ṭa*, *ta* and *pa* respectively, namely *ga*, *ja*, *ḍa*, *ḍa* and *ba*, combined with the half-nasal of each group as the first member of each of the five conjuncts *ṅga*, *ñja*, *ṅḍa* *ṅḍa* and *mba* is a conjunct. They are sounds and characters peculiar to the Sinhala syllabary. In Sinhala manuscripts they are represented by the signs  $\omega$ ,  $\epsilon$ ,  $\omega$ ,  $\epsilon$ , and  $\omega$ . Besides the primary sound value indicated above, each of these letters has an additional phonetic value when it comes to be used in words of Pali or Sanskrit origin and words of mixed ancestry.

It was just stated that certain consonants have more than one phonetic value. This feature is not restricted to consonants alone. It is to be found in vowels too. For instance, the letters  $\epsilon$  and  $\omega$  represent both the short and long sounds of each: *e*, *ē*, and *o*, *ō* respectively.

31. It is to be noted that the *Sidatsangarava*, the classical grammar of the Sinhalese language, mentions only 10 vowels - actually 5 basic vowel sounds whose lengthened forms are also included, thus making a total of ten. cf.

"Panakuru pasek eda luhugur beyin dasa ve"

The vowels *ā* and *ā* though frequently occurring in the work, are not included among the vowels in the list of letters. These transliterations correspond to the Sinhala vowels  $\epsilon_1$  and  $\epsilon_2$ .

This trait is shared by certain other letters of the syllabary. The palatal *śa* represented as  $\text{ශ}$  has two phonetic values: (i) = *śa* and (ii) = *sā* ( $\text{සා}$ ). The cerebral consonant *l* with vowel *u* has a separate sign  $\text{ළ}$  in Sinhalese. Its lengthened form is represented as  $\text{ළූ}$  (= *lū*). The alternative form  $\text{ළූ}$  could be read as the equivalent of the latter.

The converse of this tendency is also to be met with, thus contributing to augment the number of letters in the syllabary. A single sound may be represented by a variety of signs. Thus the long vowel *ī*, which is now written as  $\text{ඈ}$  taken besides the usual form indicated here, the forms  $\text{ඈ}$   $\text{ඈ}$  and  $\text{ඈ}$ . The vowel *r* usually written  $\text{ඞ}$  is sometimes represented as  $\text{ඞ}$ . Short *e* has two forms  $\text{ඞ}$  and the usual  $\text{ඞ}$ ; long *e* which is usually written  $\text{ඞ}$  sometimes occurs as  $\text{ඞ}$ . Long *ē* usually written  $\text{ඞ}$  is found in rare instances as  $\text{ඞ}$ . This is not restricted to initial vowels but occurs even in other instances e.g. *mē* usually written  $\text{ඞ}$  sometimes occurs as  $\text{ඞ}$  or rarely  $\text{ඞ}$ .

Consonants too lend themselves to a variety of forms: cerebral *t* has two forms  $\text{ඞ}$  and  $\text{ඞ}$ ; *ḍum* has the variant forms  $\text{ඞ}$  and  $\text{ඞ}$ ; *ḍim* has both  $\text{ඞ}$  and  $\text{ඞ}$ , while *ḍim* has  $\text{ඞ}$  and  $\text{ඞ}$ . Dental *l* occurs as  $\text{ඞ}$  and while *li* which is usually written is found in certain other instances as  $\text{ඞ}$ ; *-rva*, which is usually written is very often written which is really *-rrva* marking the tendency to resuplicate the consonant which is preceded by the pure consonant *r*- as the first member of a conjunct formation.

Certain other peculiarities may also be noted. The sign often represents the conjunct  $\text{ඞඞ}$  -*cca*. This letter called the "Palicayanna (since it occurs most often) in words of Pali origin is not to be confused with the cerebral *da* for which too the same sign is used;  $\text{ඞ}$ , known as 'maha mayanna' represents the conjunct  $\text{ඞඞ}$  = *mma*, besides having its normal phonetic values of *-ma*;  $\text{ඞ}$  known as "sabba bayanna" represents *-bba* and is not to be mistaken for *=na* which it redembles; which is a conjunct formed with the halfnasal *n* as the first member plus the palatal *śa* represents both *nśa* as well as *mśa*.

This paper attempted to trace briefly the use of Sinhalese writing in pre-modern times and the transmission of texts written in the language. It also sought to introduce the sounds and symbols of the syllabary which was used in the manuscripts. Another article entitled "The Art of Writing and Sinhalese Palm-leaf Manuscripts" appearing elsewhere<sup>32</sup> deals with, among other things, the introduction of writing in

32. Kulasuriya, Ananda S. *The Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities*, Jubilee Number vol. xvii (1991) forthcoming.

India, the evidence of writing in Sri Lanka, the writing of the Buddhist texts in the first century of the Christian era, and the nature of the script used in that writing. The present paper focused specifically on the rise of the first extant literary records, the earliest manuscripts and the evolution of the Sinhalese script, drawing attention to the existence of two syllabaries, the Elu and the Sinhala, whilst giving a brief sketch of writing and palm-leaf manuscripts in modern times

**Ananda S. Kulasuriya**