

THE ART OF WRITING AND SINHALESE PALMLEAF MANUSCRIPTS

Ananda S.Kulasuriya

Although the art of writing has been known and practised in Sri Lanka for well over two thousand years, its study has not engaged the attention of scholars until comparatively recent times. The earliest accounts of writing, which are generally brief and fragmentary, are not more than a couple of hundred years old at most. There have been a few scholarly articles on certain aspects of writing, such as the origin and growth of the Sinhala script, some sketches on the process of writing and the materials used and some notices on the history of writing that have appeared, from time to time, in learned journals, periodicals and literary supplements of newspapers. These writings have been scoured for information and due acknowledgement of their contents made, wherever they have been utilized in the course of this paper. It is not proposed here to provide an account of the history of writing or even to fill the lacunae of those scholars who, each one from his particular point of view, have dealt with the subject. This paper was first conceived with the idea of giving an account of palm-leaf manuscripts and introducing the Sinhalese characters (i.e. the forms of the letters and signs) used in that writing. It became apparent that in order to provide an introduction to the letters and set it in proper perspective, it was necessary to sketch, however briefly and in many ways inadequately, the origins and growth of writing in India and to discuss the nature of the evidence for writing in Sri Lanka, before attempting to describe the actual procedure of writing, the preparation of the writing materials and the production of texts.

The paper is presented in five parts. The first deals with the question of writing in India while the second attempts to discuss the evidence for writing in Sri Lanka. Part three takes up the matter of the writing down of the Buddhist texts, the Pali canon and the commentaries. This is largely a historical account based on the evidence of the chronicles, the Pali texts and the commentaries. In a short fourth section the question of the script used in the writing of the sacred scriptures is raised. "What was the alphabet (the formal character of the letters) used in the writing?" A tentative answer to the question is proposed. The fifth, dealing with the Sinhalese script, is the core part of the paper. In a sense, the four preceding parts are intended to serve as background material for this part. The Sinhala script is here seen as a vehicle of expression or instrument of written communication for literary purposes. Literary records in the form of writings on palm-leaf are here distinguished from the earliest written documents available in Sinhalese in the form of lithic records. An account of the letters used in the manuscripts of the *Jataka Pota* follows. The forms of the letters there described and illustrated are primarily those encountered in the manuscripts that were read in the course of preparing a new edition of the said work; a few additional letters have been collected from other sources. The focus has been on the shape of the written characters and their diversity of form

more than on their phonetic value.

The Writing of Sinhalese Texts

1. Writing in India

The appearance of writing is a relatively late phenomenon in the history of Indian civilization. Some form of writing must have existed before the Aryan invasion, in the Indus valley civilisation but it perished with the destruction of that civilization. In the growth and development of Vedic culture in N.W.India in the second millennium B.C. no writing was employed, and in its absence the technique was evolved of preserving the entire Vedic literature by means of oral tradition. That technique had reached such a degree of perfection that even after the introduction of writing and materials had become available, the Indians do not seem to have wanted them, at least for the transmission of their religious literature, and preferred to continue for centuries with the method of oral transmission.

It is not definitely known when the art of writing was first introduced into India. So far as extant records go, its occurrence is attested only from the 3rd century B.C. when the two alphabets Kharosthi and Brahmi appear as fully developed forms of writing in the edicts of Asoka.¹

The Brahmi alphabet, which differs from the Kharosthi in being written from left to right is said to be the source of all later Indian alphabets as well as of those in foreign lands which formed a part of the area of Indian cultural expansion. This would include the alphabets of such countries as Burma, Siam (Thailand), Cambodia, Java (Indonesia) and Sri Lanka, besides the alphabets of the different peoples of the Indian sub-continent. It has been suggested that it may have been introduced from some Semitic area by means of the trade routes to the ports of Western India presumably around 500 B.C.²

¹ The fact that the earliest examples of writing in India are the inscriptions of Asoka has found general agreement among scholars and has not been disputed. A recent scholar A.H.Dani *Indian Palaeography* 1963 p. 30 says that one cannot be certain of the date when writing was introduced into India "but the inscriptions of Asoka contain the earliest Brahmi at present known to us".

² Burrow, J., *The Sanskrit Language*, London 1955 p. 64. The view that the Indian alphabet derived from a Semitic source is generally held by western scholars. But the exact source and the period of introduction remain uncertain.

The earliest reference to writing is a tract called the *Silas* embodied in each of the thirteen discourses which form the first part (*vagga*) of the first division of the *Dighanikaya*. This tract must have been in existence as a separate work before the discourses (*Suttanta*) by the early disciples within the first century of the Buddha's demise. The tract gives lists of things a member of the Buddhist *samgha* would not do among the items mentioned in a list of games, one of which is called *akkharika* ("lettering"), which is explained as "guessing of letters traced in the air, or on a playmate's back". The context reveals that the list refers to a number of children's games and this too was therefore regarded as such. Since the name of the game is called lettering it is reasonable to assume that a knowledge of an alphabet was prevalent at the time.³

The foregoing instances refer to a knowledge of an alphabet and not to the art of writing. Rhys Davids points out that the earliest references to writing (*lekha*) are to be found in Buddhist texts.⁴ Writing is praised in the *Vinaya* along with sealing or stamping (*mudda*) and counting (*ganana*) as a noble art (*ukkattham sippam*):⁵ and

Weber originally put forward the theory which was later extended and confirmed by Buhler (in Part III of his *Indian Studies*, 2nd edition, 1898 and *Indische Paleographie*, 1896) that a certain proportion of the oldest Indian letters are practically identical with letters on certain Assyrian weights, and on the so-called Mesa inscription of the 7th and 9th centuries B.C. About one third of the 22 letters of the so-called Northern Semitic alphabet of the period are identical with the earliest forms of the corresponding Indian letters. Another third are somewhat similar. And the remaining third, with great difficulty, can be more or less harmonized. Other scholars have made similar comparisons between the Indian letters and those of the Southern Semitic alphabet. The conclusion generally drawn, however, has been either with Weber and Buhler that the Indian alphabet has been derived from the Northern Semitic; or with Deecke and Issac Taylor and others that it is derived from the Southern Semitic. See Rhys Davids T.W. *Buddhist India* (1903) Reprinted. Calcutta, 1950, pp. 70-71 and note.

³ Rhy. Davids. *op. cit.* p.66

⁴ *Ibid.* p.67

⁵ The *Vinaya Pitakam* (ed.) Oldenberg, London 1882. Reprint Pali Text Society 1964, iv 7.

whereas the sisters of the Order are, as a rule, to abstain from worldly arts, there are exceptions and one of these is learning to write (*anapattilekham pariyapunati*)⁶ A criminal "who had been written up in the King's porch" was not to be received into the Order (*na likhitako coro pabbajetabbo*).⁷ In a discussion of a suitable career for a growing lad, the parents express the view that if he were to adopt the profession of a "writer" he will live at ease and in comfort, but add that his fingers will ache.⁸ If a member of the Order were to write to a man setting out the advantage of suicide, then, for each letter in the writing, he commits an offence.⁹

It is clear from such statements that writing was practised at the time these texts were composed; that the ability to write was held in high esteem and writing considered to be a distinguished and honourable profession that it was a recognised form of learning for all classes of people, that it was used in official proclamations and written communications between private individuals, and that it had been in some form however rudimentary, sufficiently widespread to have been the basis of even a children's game.

But it is a big move forward from the use of writing for public notifications and private communications to its use for the purpose of writing books and the production of an extensive literature. And the very same texts that have been cited above (and others that have not been cited) show, in an indisputable manner, that writing, however well known, had not yet come to be used for such *literary* purposes. For if, in the period in question, books had been known, the manuscripts themselves and the whole industry connected with them must surely have played an important part in the daily life of the members of the Buddhist Samgha. The extant rules of the Order, as laid down in the Vinaya, give precise details of the property of the Community and of its constituent members. Every movable article, down to the smallest and most insignificant domestic utensil is mentioned. Other articles of use among the lay folk, but not permitted to

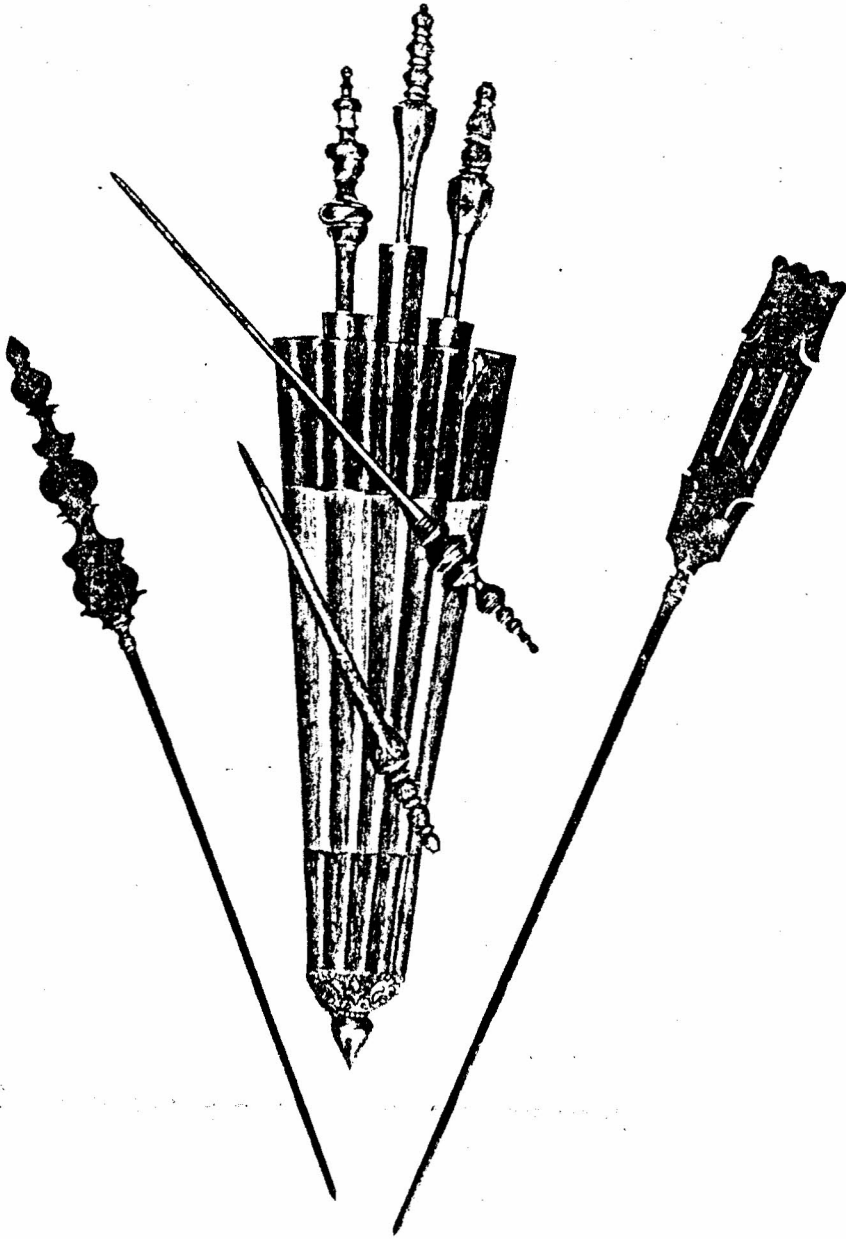
⁶ *Ibid.* iv. 305

⁷ *Ibid.* i. 75

⁸ *Ibid.* 1. 77. The Pali Text reads as follows: *Sace kho Upali lekham sikkheyya evam kho Upali amhakam accayena sukham ca jiveyya na ca kilameyyati. Sace kho Upali lekham sikkissati, anguliyo dukkha bhavissanti.* The statement recurs in iv. 128-129.

⁹ *Ibid.* III. 76 where the text reads: "*lekhaya samvanneti nama, lekham cindati yo evam marati so dhanam va labhati yasam va labhati saggam va gacchatiti, akkarakharaya apatti dukkatassa*".

PLATE I



STYLES USED IN WRITING ON PALM LEAF; AND A STYLE CASE.

members of the Order are also mentioned. But no mention whatever is made of manuscripts. This argument from silence is really decisive. This negative evidence, the absence of the mention of something which could have been reasonably expected, is good evidence. But positive evidence which tends to confirm the absence of written documents, is not entirely lacking. For there are references to the existence of texts, not indeed as written texts, but as existing in the memory of those who had learnt them by heart. This is an adequate explanation of the prevailing situation regarding the texts and their transmission.

Rhys Davids gives two reasons why the Indians, who had been acquainted with letters and the art of writing and who made use of writing for literary purposes, namely for the recording of their sacred literature. He says they were not ready to give up their tried and tested practice of memorization and oral transmission, a practice they had brought to a perfection unparalleled in human history for a new-fangled experiment. The second reason was that at the time they came to know of writing, they were yet unfamiliar with the necessary materials for writing lengthy records. The first of these reasons seem plausible though there are hardly any grounds for accepting the other; the texts, especially the canonical texts and other post-canonical literary works contain references to writing materials.

An important line of evidence suggestive of the date of the introduction of writing in India is the prevalence of continued and extensive trade in the 7th century B.C., between Babylon and the ports of Western India. It is suggested that any such trade before that period was very improbable and also that it was unlikely that the Indian merchants who went to Babylon went further inland from there to the west, that they continued their voyages as far as Yemen or that they reached Babylon overland through the passes across Afghanistan. On these grounds the derivation of letters and writing to India is assigned to the 7th century B.C. or earlier.

Writing therefore is seen to be a relatively late introduction to India. The art of writing as it is understood today, was known and practised among the members of the Buddhist community in the Buddha's own time. It appears as a fully developed, systematic and conscious mode of communication and expression in the edicts of Asoka. Among the early Buddhists it was recognised as an honourable profession. And although it had been in use for official proclamations and written communications in private correspondences it had not been employed for literary purposes, that is for the production of literary texts, until much later.

2. Evidence of Writing in Sri Lanka

Writing in some form was known in Sri Lanka from the earliest days of her Aryan colonization, that is from about the first century of the Buddhist era. Although the earliest extant records have to be assigned to a somewhat later period, "it is quite probable" as P.E.E.Fernando observes, "that when the first Aryan speaking people migrated to Ceylon from North India about the 6th century B.C., they brought with them a knowledge of the system of writing, which was in use in their homeland at the time".¹⁰ The script then in use and introduced here by them was a form of Brahmi, a knowledge of which would have been acquired by at least some of the immigrants who arrived in the island over two thousand five hundred years ago.¹¹

Although the bulk of the early inscriptions were recorded in caves and on pillars upon rock surfaces the common material used for writing seems to have been the leaf of the palmyra palm, dried and prepared in a special manner for purposes of writing. There is at least one clear statement in the Chronicle about the use of writing with reference to the period in question. It is stated in the *Mahavamsa* that the messengers of Prince Vijaya, the first traditional Aryan ruler of Sri Lanka, who went to Madhura to solicit the daughter to King Pandu to be the queen of their lord, carried with them besides gifts a letter (*lekham*) to be given to the Indian king. A similar letter was sent in reply to Prince Vijaya by King Pandu.¹² Vijaya despatched a letter to his brother Sumitta too with the intention of handing over to him the reigns of government.¹³ It is worth noting that in all these instances the same word *lekham* (= letter) is used by the chronicles.

The script and the mode of writing them introduced by the early colonists spread with the advent of Arahant Mahinda and the establishment of Buddhism in the 3rd century B.C. But between the first Aryan colonization of the island in the third, writing

¹⁰ "The Beginnings of the Sinhala Alphabet" in *Education in Ceylon, A Centenary Volume*, Colombo, Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs (1969) Part I - Ch. 3. p. 19.

¹¹ Godakumbura says that there were Buddhists among the first Aryan colonists when he states. "It is clear that there were groups of Buddhists among the Aryan settlers..." *Catalogue of Ceylonese Manuscripts* (CCM). The Royal Library, copenhagen, 1980, p. xvii.

¹² VII. 50-52, 57

¹³ Ibid. VIII 2-3

was in vogue and practised by the inhabitants. There is a reference in the *Mahavamsa* where King Abhaya writes to his brother Prince Pandukabhaya bidding him not to cross the Mahaveli Ganga.¹⁴ There is also the view that the Brahmi script had been introduced to Sri Lanka before the arrival of the missionary monks under the leadership of Arahant Mahinda. This view and the evidence therefore deserves to be examined more closely.

A firm piece of internal evidence for the existence of a script anterior to the period of the advent of the Buddhist missionaries is to be found in the earliest examples of Brahmi writing extant in Sri Lanka. It has been observed that there are some features in it that have not been noticed in the Brahmi script employed in the inscriptions of the emperor Asoka, the earliest examples of Brahmi writing in India. For instance, the initial vowel *i* found in the Asokan inscriptions consists of three dots placed in such a manner as to form the corners of a triangle, thus . . . , whereas in the earliest extant Brahmi inscriptions of Sri Lanka, it is represented by a vertical stroke on either side of which are placed two dots half way up the vertical stroke thus . . .¹⁵ Many forms of the letter *ma* are employed in the Asokan inscriptions, but the form of the letter occurring in the Sri Lankan Brahmi records does not resemble any of them. It is formed of a U-tube like curve with a horizontal cross bar terminating at the middle of the vertical arms of the tube in this manner U. another feature pointing to the greater antiquity of the Sri Lankan Brahmi writing is the occurrence of the aspirated form of the letter *ja* in places where the de-aspirate is normally required. For example the word *raja* (king) is spelt with the aspirate *jha* as *rajha* in our inscriptions. This practice which is not evidenced elsewhere points to a variety of the Brahmin script employed here which differs from the script employed here which differed from the script employed in the Asokan records. Another characteristic of the local Brahmi which distinguishes it from the Asokan is the absence of the sign for the medial vowel *a*. In the Asokan records the medial *a* is regularly employed wherever it needs to be graphically represented.

¹⁴ X 48. The relevant text in Buddhadatta Maghathera's *Unapuransahito Mahavamsa* reads - *raja lekham kumarassa sarahassam sa pahini*, which translated means "the king sent the prince a secret letter" Geiger has *sahassanca* instead of *sarahassam sa*, which if adopted would render the meaning of the line as "the king sent the prince a letter together with a thousand (pieces of money)."

¹⁵ Fernando, *op.cit.* p.20 The remaining details of the Brahmi letters found in the Sri Lankan record, which are given in this paragraph are based on the same source.

Thus, there is evidence to show that the type of Brahmi used in the earliest Sri Lankan records is derived from a source different to the inscriptions of Asoka and that the script was introduced to the island at a period interior to the arrival here of the mission sent by the Emperor Asoka.

Once the Brahmi script was introduced to the island, it was influenced by other elements probably after the arrival of the first missionaries. This explains why the characters of the early cave records share some features of the Asokan script in the inscriptions situated in the western and southern parts of India, such as Girnar, Siddhapur and Brahmagiri. There are also instances in the early indigenous records of letters resembling those of the Asokan inscriptions from the central and the eastern parts of India such as Topra, Jaugada and Rummidei. Influences from the northern and eastern parts of the sub-continent can be explained on the basis of the existence of two well-known routes to Sri Lanka from North India - a western route and an eastern one. Differences due to the influences resulting from these two streams of immigration also are reflected in the Sinhalese language. "However" as P.E.E. Fernando notes, "the possibility is there that the eastern and western elements were integrated in India itself and that these influences reached Ceylon after this integration had taken place." ¹⁶ Or, it may also be that the integration took place after the two streams had independently reached the island.

There is no doubt, however, that it was only after the arrival of Buddhist monks from India in the reign of King Devanampiya Tissa and when the Brahmi script they had introduced had been enriched with further influences brought about by their literary activities, that the script became popular and widespread in its use. This is borne out by the presence of a fairly large number of cave records scattered throughout the land.

With the exception of single letters incised possibly as marks of identification of bricks and pieces of pottery, unearthed at sites such as Gurudeniya in Kandy and Dalivala near Rambukkana, the earliest specimens of Brahmi writing extant in the island are the epigraphies engraved on the drip ledges of caves which served as dwellings for monks from very early times. "Among these inscriptions," the same writer observes, "the records which can be identified as the oldest with certainty are some cave inscriptions at Mihintale which refer to a king named "Gamani Uti Maharajaha," who can be identified as King Uttiya, brother of King Devanampiya Tissa. There are also some other inscriptions at Mihintale which refer to a king named "Devanampiya Maharajha" and "Gamani Tissa Maharajha". There is evidence to show that the king referred to in these records is King Devanampiya Tissa and if this identification is correct these records

¹⁶ *op. cit.* p.22

should prove to be the earliest identifiable written records to be found in Ceylon."¹⁷

By the end of the pre-Christian era several changes manifest themselves in the indigenous Brahmi script. One striking development in the appearance of the so-called serif, a short horizontal stroke at the upper end of the vertical stroke of a letter. Another is the general tendency of letters and medial vowel signs to be cursive. There are also noticeable deviations from the normal line of development in the form of exotic letters appearing from time to time. An example of a rare form of ornate Brahmi is found in the Ruvanvalisaya Pillar Inscription of King Buddhadasa 337-365 A.C., where for the first time in an epigraphy of the pre-Christian era is noticed the use of a ligature, *tra*. In the fragmentary Pillar Inscription from Jetavanarama, Anuradhapura, the script used bears a striking resemblance to the script used in the inscriptions at Nagarjunikoda in South India. The script of the Kandakadu Rock Inscription of Upatissa II, 517-518 A.C. is characterised by a ring-shaped head-mark which is not noticed elsewhere, though a script in which the letters carry a square-shaped head-mark is found in some contemporary records of Central India. Arcaic traits are to be observed in the Rock Inscription of King Dathopatissa, 639-650 A.C., where the script which, on palaeographical grounds, could be assigned to the 3rd century A.C., in fact belongs to a period when the Brahmi script was losing its archaic features and was on the verge of becoming the Sinhalese script of later times.¹⁸ The evolution of that script was the result of the gradual development of the Sri Lankan Brahmi script from about the 3rd century B.C. to about the 7th century A.C.

3. The Writing of the Pali Canon and the Early Commentaries

Neither the number and variety of the Brahmi inscriptions of Sri Lanka nor their wide distribution reflects the richness and comprehensiveness of the script that was actually used in the country.¹⁹ During the period under review when the Brahmi system appears to have been used as the sole system of writing, there was a vigorous literary activity. It was the period when the commentaries (*atthakatha*), both in Sinhalese and Pali, on the Canon, the histories (*vamsa*) kept in the principal monastic establishments which furnished materials for the later Pali chronicles, and the Pali Tripitaka itself needed to be committed to writing. Although the practice of memorization reached a high

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p.23

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

level of perfection, historical factors necessitated that the Pali Canon together with the commentaries there on, be committed to writing. Scholars have discussed in detail the factors that contributed to the writing down of the canon and the commentaries;²⁰ it is not necessary to enter into a discussion of them here. But it is to be observed that when once a stage has been reached when a body of texts transmitted orally has assumed considerable proportions, the necessity of a written text arises, and Fernando is right when he says: "It is indeed difficult, if not altogether impossible, for a person to commit to memory any literary work of some length without the aid of a written text".²¹ In course of time the Canon was formally committed to writing in the reign of Valagam Aba (Vatthagamani Abaya, circa 103 B.C.) "The significance of this event" it has been observed, "is that, for the first time the canon has been subjected to editorial handling before it was put into written form, although parts of it may have been written down earlier. It is further stated that the available exegetical material too was written down at the same time."²² Later in the 5th century A.C., several sinhalese *athakathas* (*helatuwa*) were edited and translated into Pali by Buddhaghosa, with necessary additions and modifications. Somewhat earlier in the same century, the same author compiled the *Visuddhi-magga* while the *Dipavamsa* and the *Mahavamsa* made their appearance sometime afterwards. There were also works in the Sanskrit Language that were written by Sri Lankan scholars. Such extensive literary activity presupposes the existence of a developed system of writing adequate to express graphically "a wide variety of sounds peculiar to old sinhalese Pali and even Sanskrit..."²³

Mention has been made above of the *vamsa* literature, those writings comprised historical records of a religious character there were also collections of satires such as the Jatakas and the narratives of the Dhammapadatthakatha. All of these went under the

²⁰ Adikaram E.W., *Early History of Buddhism in Ceylon* as revealed by the Pali commentaries of the 5th century A.D. Nigoda, D.S.Puswella, 1946, ref. 1953; Rahula W., *History of Buddhism in Ceylon*, 3rd Century B.C. - 10th Century A.C. Colombo, 1956, 2nd ed. 1962, Paranavitana, S. "The Mahavihara and other Ancient Seats of Learning" in *Education in Ceylon A Centenary Volume*, Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs, Colombo 1969, pp. 51-59; Jayawickrama, N.A. "Literary Activity in Pali" in *Education in Ceylon* (supra) pp. 61 - 73.

²¹ op.cit. p.24

²² Jayawickrama, N.A., op.cit. p.64

²³ Fernando. op.cit. p.24

general name of *atthakatha* or commentary, as distinguished from the Pitakas which were taken as the actual words of the Master²⁴ *buddhavacana*, *pavacana* in Pali, *srimukapali*, *srimukhadesana* in Sinhalese).

Godakumbura explicitly states that "the earliest historical writing in the Sinhalese language goes back at least to the 3rd century B.C. when the island became Buddhist and sacred shrines of the religion and monastic institutions were established. The earliest Sinhalese historical records are the histories of these institutions. Out of these grew the chronicles of the *Vamsa* literature which were translated into Pali and then later re-translated into Sinhalese".²⁵ Although there is no direct evidence, in the form of surviving literary works to support such an assertion the reference made here appears to be to those Sinhalese literary work on the basis of which the later commentators compiled their own works; they were, as noted above, translated into Pali. It is difficult to reject the statement *in toto* when certain matters concerning the education of the people in the time of King Devanampiya Tissa are taken into consideration. At the Vinaya recital which the king arranged as a part of the process of propagating the *Sasana*, the king asked the Venerable Mahinda whether the doctrine, was established in the island.²⁶ The latter replied, "Great king, the *Sasana* in established but it has not taken root" Questioned further as to when and how it would take root, Arahant Mahinda explained: "When a person born of parents

who belong to *tambapannidipa*, enters *pabbajja* in *tampapannidipa* - learns the *vinaya* in *Tambapanidipa* and recites the same in *Tampannidipa*, then will the *sasana* take root in the land."

The *bhikku*, *Maha-arittha* possessed the requisite qualifications, and arrangements were made for the recital of the *Vinaya*. A pavilion was erected on the spot where the *parivena* of the Minister *Meghavannabhaya* stood. The description that follows

²⁴ Godakumbura, C.E. *Sinhalese Literature* Colombo, 1955, p.3

²⁵ Godakumbura, C.E. "Historical Writing in Sinhalese in Philips, C.H. (ed.) *Historical Writings on the Peoples of Asia: Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon*, London O.U.P. 1961 Ref. 1962 pp. 72-86.

²⁶ *Samantapasadika*, I. 102 quoted by Adikaram in "Introduction of Buddhism and Its Influence of Learning". *Education in Ceylon*. Pt. I. p.15. The details of this Council given in this paragraph and the reference to the original source are taken from the same article.

as Adikaram observes,²⁷ is modelled on that of the first council held at Rajagaha. Sixty eight mahatheras, each having a following of one thousand bhikkus assembled at Thuparama. The object of this "Thuparama Council was the teaching of the Vinaya by a Sinhalese bhikkhu, which is a distinctive feature of the latter. Mahaaritta assumed the role of Vinaya teacher and five hundred bhikkhus with Mattabhaya Thera, a younger brother of the king, received the teaching. The king too, with his retinue (*sarakika ca parisa*) was present at the recital. The Sasana was thus firmly established in the island. The Thuparama Council is significant for another reason, namely on account of the influence that the introduction of Buddhism had on the education of the people. Following the example set by Maha arittha thera, Sri Lankan monks became proficient in the teaching of the Buddha and the village monastery became the centre of learning. Teaching the people was one of the primary duties of the monk. Besides informal teaching, monks were engaged in the more formal tasks of preaching. The earliest mention of such organized preaching goes back to the time of Dutugamunu who instituted " the preaching of religions

discourses to be kept up in the viharas in various parts of Lanka, supporting the ministers of religion who were gifted with the power of preaching"²⁸

The procedure adopted at such a preaching of the doctrine (*dhamma-desana*) is given in the *Manorathapurani* the Commentary on the Anguttara Nikaya where it is recorded that the thera who preached during the day time (*divakathika-thera*) finished his discourse in the evening. The turn of the reciter of words (*padabhanaka*), whose task was perhaps to recite word by word the scriptural passage which had to be expanded came next. Finally, there came the preacher of the night who had to explain the doctrine in detail.²⁹

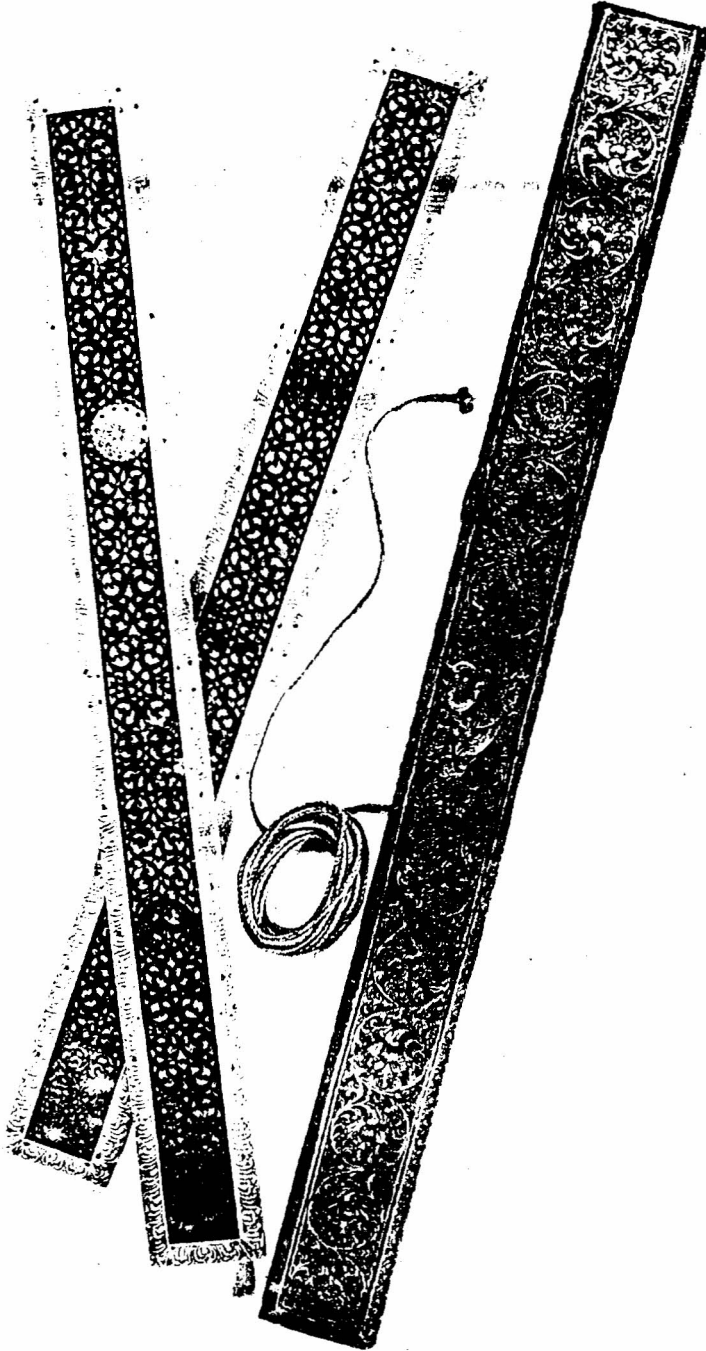
It is not unreasonable to infer from such details pertaining to the teaching of the doctrine, that there was in existence some kind of written material which was used in the process of teaching.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.* p.16

²⁹ *Manorathapurani* II. p.249

PLATE II



ORNAMENTED AND ENGRAVED COVER BOARDS OF PALM LEAF MANUSCRIPTS.

The authenticity of the stories and episodes recounted in the chronicles, especially those relating to the period prior to the introduction of Buddhism to the island, has sometimes been doubted whatever be their historical value, it is indisputable that they contain sufficient evidence to show that writing was known in Sri Lanka from about the 5th century B.C., that the art of writing began to spread after the advent of Arahant Mahinda and his companion monks and the acceptance of the Buddhist teachings by the people during the reign of King Devanampiya Tissa, and that there are donative lithic records dating from the time of the venerable Mahinda himself.

Although many of the existing records were inscribed on rock surfaces, it is known that there were other writing materials. The Buddhist texts which were committed to writing at Aluvihara in Matale must of necessity, have had to be written on some such material. In the 2nd century B.C., we read of a prince in the Kingdom of Kalaniya (P.Kalyani) sending a love-letter to a queen through a man disguised as a bhikku. One generation later, we learn that Prince Dutugemunu was writing letters at Magama in the deep south. It may be safely assumed that such letters were written on some kind of leaf. King Valagam Aba in the 1st century B.C., is said to have recorded a grant upon a *vatakeyya* (P.*Ketaka*) leaf.³⁰ The most important event in the history of writing in Sri Lanka took place in the reign of the same monarch: the writing down of the Pali Canon and the commentaries. It is mentioned in this commenting the texts to writing, "in order that the doctrine might endure caused them to be written down in books".³¹ We are further informed that these books were written on some leaf like that of the *tala*, the talipot or palmyrah palm, as it is stated that the king was asked by the monks to prepare a hall (for the monks to assemble) and supply the leaves for the books (*mandapam maharaja karapetum sabbam potthakapannam sampadeetum ca vattatiti*)³²

There is a definite statement to the effect that the *tala* (P.*tala*) leaf was used for writing on, during the period of evolution of the commentaries to the Pali texts (i.e. 3rd century B.C. - 5th century A.C.) The passage *maranavannam va samvanneyya* of the *Patimokkha* is commented on by Buddhaghosa in his *Kankhavitarani* as "*vacaya va talapannadisū likhivva va pakseyya*". The text and comment when translated means

³⁰ *Mahavamsa* XXXIII, 50

³¹ *op.cit.* XXII 100-101 Not "They wrote them down in books" as Geiger's translation says; quoted by Godakumbura CCM pp. XVIII pp.

³² *Saddhammasangaha* ed. Journal of the Pali Text Society, London, 1880, p.48, quoted by Godakumbura *supra*.

"whoever would proclaim the advantages of death, making such a statement as 'He who dies thus obtains wealth', saying the same by word of mouth or by writing it on materials like the *tala* leaf". Other materials such as metal sheets were also used. An inscribed gold plate belonging to the reign of King Vasabha (127-171 A.C.) has been found in a village in the Jaffna peninsula.³³

4. The Script of the Scriptures

What was the script used in the writing down of the Canon (*Tripitaka*) and the early commentaries which went by the name of *athakatha*?. The question does not seem to have been raised earlier and therefore an inquiry into the nature of the script used by the learned scribes who committed to writing what they had until then communicated and transmitted orally, the materials for writing and other matters connected with that historic event, has not engaged the attention of scholars. It is a reasonable assumption to make that the final act of putting down in writing at Aluvihara. Some time around the middle of the 5th century of the Buddhist era, the sacred lore which had for centuries been transmitted orally was a massive undertaking that involved collation, compilation and editorial workmanship on a grand scale, besides the physical task of writing itself, that it was the culmination of a process of writing that had been known and practised for some time, and that it presupposes the existence of written records albeit of a minor character and rudimentary form.

The question is relevant from the point of view of the development of the Sinhalese language especially its script and the characters used in writing. It is a historical fact that the teachings that were recorded on that occasion and put into a literary form consisted of the Canon together with the commentaries must have been in the indigenous language of the people, viz. Sinhalese or more precisely the language in its early unmixed form of Elu. In the absence of extant examples of the early Elu (Sinhala) commentaries (*P.Sihalaattjakatha*, *Sinh.helatuva*), it is not possible to say anything definite about the nature of that language. The surviving fragments of those writings found in early Sinhalese texts are often so corrupt and mutilated that they are sometime unintelligible and nearly always defy interpretation. Those commentaries certainly included Pali texts (for it was the doctrine in Pali that required explanation) as some of the examples clearly show, but the explanatory matter, elucidations and exegeses were undoubtedly in Sinhalese. In all likelihood, they were made up of a melange of Pali and Sinhalese writings.

³³ *Epigraphia Zeylanica*, Vol. V pp. 224 - 237; quoted by Godakumbura *ibid*.

As the remarks made earlier on in this paper suggest, there was current, from early times, a *vamsa* literature or traditional historical writings in the indigenous tongue. The extant such histories compiled in the Pali language, at a later period, such as *Bodhivamsa*, *Thupavamsa*, *Dathavamsa* and *Dhatuvamsa* explicitly state, each and every one of them, that they are based on Sinhalese originals. They would necessarily have had to be written texts and not mere oral transmissions.

It is generally assumed, with some justification, that these documents under review, were written in Brahmi characters akin to the letters used in the inscriptions of the Emperor Asoka. The Brahmi script, modified to suit the demands of the indigenous population and by external influences as well, was the parent script of the Sinhalese language, a script that is generally held to have evolved and come into use for literary purposes around the 7th century A.C. The evolution of this script has been traced from the days when it was first introduced, century by century, up to the time when the first literary documents in the shape of the Sigiri Graffiti begin to appear.³⁴ Its development from that period onwards up to the appearance of the modern Sinhalese script in the 13th century A.C. has been examined in considerable detail.³⁵ Whatever the shape and number of the characters employed, they must have been adequate to express the sounds of the Pali language.

Conclusion

An attempt has been made in the foregoing pages to trace in outline the evolution of Sinhalese writing from its early beginnings up to modern times, with a view to introducing the sounds and symbols of the syllabary which were used in the writing of manuscripts, and setting them in historical perspective. In the first part of the paper, the question of when writing was first introduced to India was taken up; its purposes and the materials used were discussed. It was noted that writing was introduced relatively late,

³⁴ See Nicholas, C.W. "Palaeographical Development of the Brahmi Script in Ceylon from the 3rd century B.C. to the 7th century A.C." *University of Ceylon Review* (U.C.R) Vol. VII (1949) No.1. 60-64, Fernando, P.E.E. "Palaeographical Development of the Brahmi Script in Ceylon from the 3rd century B.C. to the 7th century A.D." *U.C.R* Vol. VII (1949) IV 282-301.

³⁵ "Palaeographical Development of the Sinhalese Script from 8th century A.D. to 15th century A.D." *U.C.R.* Vol. VIII (1950) IV. 222-243.

long after the art was known in recorded history. There is evidence to show that it was first known and practised by members of the Sangha in the Buddha's own time, that it was a fully developed, systematic and conscious mode of expression in the edicts of Asoka, and that although writing had been regarded as an honourable profession and had been used for official proclamations as well as private communications, it had not been employed for literary purposes until much later.

The second part was concerned with the evidence of writing in Sri Lanka. It was pointed out that when the first Aryan-speaking people migrated to Ceylon from north India, they brought with them a knowledge of the system of writing which was in use in their homeland. The script which they introduced was a form of Brahmi. It was also remarked that the type of Brahmi found in the earliest Sri Lankan inscriptions had certain features which differed from the script had been introduced to the island at a period prior to the arrival here of the mission sent by the emperor Asoka. It was however only after the advent of Buddhist monks in the reign of King Devanampiya tissa that the script became popular and widespread. The evolution of the modern Sinhalese script was the result of a gradual process of development from about the 3rd century B.C. to the 7th century A.C.

Part 3 missed the issue of the Buddhist texts of the Pali Canon and its commentaries in the first century B.C. Attention was drawn to five points in particular:

- i. that there existed evidence to show that some kind of writing was known in Sri Lanka from *circa* 500 B.C.;
- ii. that art of writing began to spread after the advent of Arahant Mahinda and his companion monks;
- iii. that there exist donative lithic records dating from the time of the venerable Mahinda himself;
- iv. that other writing materials besides rock were known;
- v. that the writing of the canon and its commentaries was significant for the development of writing.

In Part 4 the question of the symbols or characters of the syllabary used in the writing of the Canon was taken up. It was shown that the characters used were very probably those of a modified Brahmi, adopted to meet indigenous requirements. The writing of the *Tripitaka* was itself the culmination of a process that had been known and practised for some time.