



## SKANDA AS A GUARDIAN GOD OF LANKA THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TAMIL SLAB-INSCRIPTION FROM BUDUMUTTAVA

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The god of Kataragama identified by many as Skanda is one of the four guardian-gods of Lanka. These guardian gods occupy an important position in the Sri Lankan Buddhist tradition, and images of these divinities are found installed in many Buddhist temples. Besides, there are many separate shrines called devale dedicated for the worship of these divinities; also there are separate devalas dedicated only to these deities. One of the earliest of such shrines could be assigned to the 14th century. Many of them are endowed with lands granted by kings in former times. Each devale has a traditional system of management in respect of temple services and the administration of its endowments. The importance of the guardian gods is highlighted by the perahera or annual festival. In Kandy, four guardian-deities namely Skanda, Visnu, Natha and Pattini - are venerated annually in the of Esala Perahara in colourful procession held along with the procession of the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic. This festival has been conducted with an almost unbroken continuity since the 17th century<sup>1</sup>. This annual festival is said to have been re-organized on an elaborate scale under Kirti Sri Rajasingha in the 18th century.

The guardian-gods, during the period of three centuries preceding the 17th were Skanda, Upulvan, Saman Boksala and Vibhisana, and among them only Skanda was retained while the rest were superseded by others during the 17th century<sup>2</sup>.

The tradition of venerating a plurality of guardian-gods is not an ancient one. The earliest reference to such a practice is found in the Mahavamsa account of the events leading to Magha's conquest of Polonnaruva during the early 13th century<sup>3</sup>. The notice in the chronicle is brief and vague, and the deities are not referred to by name. In the inscriptions recording the endowments to the Lankatilaka temple, which was established in A. D. 1344, the names of all the four guardian gods are recorded<sup>4</sup>. In the architectural scheme of that temple provision was made for separate shrines accommodating the images of the four guardian gods. In the royal endowments made in A. D. 1344 the proportion of the income from the grants that had to be utilized for conducting worship and other services at these shrines was specified<sup>5</sup>.

Until recently the Lankatilaka inscriptions of A. D. 1344 have been considered as the earliest among the extant historical records pertaining to Skanda as a guardian god in the Sri Lankan Buddhist tradition. This position has to be reviewed and revised in the light of the considerable progress that has been made recently in the retrieval of the text of the Tamil Slab-Inscription from Budumuttava, which has been found to be one of the utmost importance as a source of historical information.

The inscription concerned was first noticed by Edward Muller in 1883, but he could not recognize any word or expression in it<sup>6</sup>. Later, when H.C.P. Bell, The archaeological commissioner, visited the site in 1911, he found the inscription to be "much damaged". He could recognize only two words : lokamata and viramakalam, which were, in his opinion, names of a goddess. S. Paranavitana, who visited the site in 1911, examined the slab-inscription found near the Bo tree at the Rajamahavihara, in Budumuttava, could not decipher even a single expression of the text. He remarks:

"Near the modern stupa there is Tamil slab inscription which is too weathered to admit of its being satisfactorily deciphered."<sup>8</sup>

On the persuasion or rather the insistence of Piyatissa Senanayake, a teacher in the Department of Archaeology, University of Peradeniya, the present author visited the site in July 1986 and on the basis of a preliminary examination of the inscription made the following observations:

"The present author's examination of the Tamil Sub-Inscription at Budumuttava has revealed that it records some transactions of the ainnuruvar and the military community allied to them. ainnuruvarpalli, patinenpumi and viramakalam are some of the expressions recorded in that inscription which enables one to identify the epigraph as one set up by the ainnuruvar and the warriors in their service.

"The most important detail in the inscription pertains to the ainnuravan-palli, a Buddhist monastery named after the ainnuravar. A major portion of the inscription is badly damaged on account of the fact that the stone slab had been used roughly for different purposes. The concluding portion of the inscription which consists of twenty-seven lines of writing could be deciphered if an estampage of it could be prepared. The slab is also of unusual interest on account of the variety of symbols depicted on it."<sup>9</sup>

These impressions have been confirmed by the efforts made by A. Velupillai to decipher this inscription on the basis of an estampage prepared and supplied to him by H.M. Piyatissa Senanayake. Commenting on the present state of the inscription he says:

"The markings of twenty-eight lines can be recognized and letters can be made out only in about twenty-two lines. The beginning of the inscription is unfortunately lost. Of the readable portion of twenty two lines, the first eighteen cover the entire breadth of the slab while the last four lines are small. The last three lines can be made fairly accurately. In every other line, some letters cannot be made out. So, the translation of the text is impossible."<sup>10</sup>

These remarks were endorsed with some reservations by the present author, who, on the basis of personal examination of the inscribed stone formed the impression that the initial portion of the text of the inscription is a brief version of a panegyric or the prasasti of a merchant guild called Nanadesis. Some further progress in our understanding of the contents of this epigraphic record was facilitated by a further scrutiny of the stone on our second visit to

the site in March 1993, when the expression vikkiramacalameka-puram was identified on the inscribed slab.

On the basis of the studies made on this slab inscription the present author presented a paper at the Ceylon Studies Seminar, Faculty of Arts in 1993, in which he articulated the view that the slab-inscription found at Budumuttava records the activities of a military community within the confines of a market town established by the Nanadesis otherwise called ainnurrar. The significance of the inscription as a historical record was also highlighted in that paper, which was later published in The Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities"

A major effort on the decipherment of the inscription was undertaken by an international team of historians, archaeologists and epigraphists led by the Japanese historian Noboru Karashima and supported by the Taisho University of Japan. The stone was cleaned and sophisticated methods were employed in the preparation of estampages, separately by the Indian and Sri Lankan members of the team. Some of these estampages were taken to India where they were deciphered by Y. Subbrarajulu and P. Shanmugam whose competence as Tamil epigraphists is presently unrivalled. Their successful decipherment has resulted in the retrieval of almost the entire text<sup>12</sup>. Consequently, some historical information which was not noticed earlier has come to light. The present paper which is a postscript to the present author's earlier contribution is based on that information.

The text of the inscription as deciphered by the team of specialists under the guidance of Karashima records an arrangement made by the Virakkoti, the military community engaged in service under the nakaram of Vikkiramacalameka-puram otherwise called Makal (Magala). The military community adopted a resolution to the effect that the monetary contribution and lamp-oil collected by them within the town shall be granted to Paramesvari and that of porperuncettiyar at ainnuravan palli

This grant was made by the military community as a measure of reciprocation to the honours conferred on them and the relief provided to them by the perumakkal, the governing body, of the pattinam (town). They are said to have been once attacked by a hostile party and when it was found that they were in a precarious position the perumakkal had taken timely action to relieve them by sending reinforcements. Besides, the temple of the Mother-goddess, Paramesvari, was named viramakalam after the name of a body of troops.

The inscription refers to two temples, the temple of Paramesvari and the ainnurruvan-palli. One of these was a Hindu inscription while the other one was a Buddhist one. They were both founded and / or supported by the merchant community and their associates. The expressions ainnurruvan palliyil lokap peruncettiyar are of exceptional significance. They could be construed only in the light Buddhist tradition found in Sri Lanka. The ainnurruvan palli was doubtless a Buddhist temple named after the merchant community called Ainnurruvar established at Magala. In this temple there was a shrine of porperumcettiyar meaning "the golden and eminent cetti". This expression is not recorded anywhere else and from the context in which this expression occurs it is clear that it is applied to a deity. That particular deity may be identified as Skanda / Murukan on the basis of a reference in one of the hymns of the Saiva saint Cuntaramurti nayanar on the temple of Tiruvarur. In that hymn he describes Siva as cettiyappan the father of cetti.<sup>13</sup> In Tamil lexicography the expression cetti is explained as an appellation of Skanda/Murukan. The expression Por-perum-cettiyar found in the Tamil Slab-

Inscription could therefore be explained as a description of Skanda / Murukan. Such an explanation presupposes that there was a shrine of Skanda in a Buddhist temple at Magala during the early 12th century when the inscription concerned was indited.<sup>14</sup> It is thus clear that Skanda had been accommodated into the Buddhist pantheon of deities and had emerged as a guardian deity by that time. It is significant that the earliest reference to Skanda in that capacity is found in a record of a mercantile community of South Indian extraction.

It was hitherto believed that the entry of Skanda into the Buddhist pantheon of deities was a result of Hindu influences operating in the island. In the light of the evidence from the inscription under scrutiny this view has to be revised, and there is a strong possibility that the tradition of accommodating the image of Skanda in a specially constructed shrine had originated in the Buddhist tradition in South India. There has been a close interaction among the Buddhist centres of Sri Lanka and South India until the days of Portuguese conquest and much of this interaction was sustained through the agencies of merchant communities.

The slab-inscription from Budumuttava is of the utmost importance for the history of religion in Sri Lanka. Its significance in relation to other fields has been highlighted earlier.

### Notes and References

1. Robert Knox, A Historical Relation of Ceylon, Maclehouse, Glasgow, 1911, p.27.
2. Nikaya Sangrahaya, English translation by C.M. Feranando, Colombo, 1908
3. Culavamsa, part II, translated into German W. Geiger, translated from German into English by Mabel Rickmers, Colombo, 1953; 80: 54-60
4. S.Paranavitana, "Lankatilaka Inscriptions" (45 pages) University of Ceylon Review, Volume 18, Nos. 1&2, p.11
5. *ibid*, p.22
6. E. Muller, Ancient Inscriptions I Ceylon, London, 1833, p.60.
7. H.C.P.Bell, Archaeological Survey of Ceylon Annual Report, 1911-12, Colombo, 1915, p. 115.
8. S.Paranavitana, "Two Tamil Pillar Inscriptions from Budumuttava", Epigraphia Zeylanica (EZ), Vol. 3, pp.302-312.
9. S. Pathmanathan, "The Nagaram of the Nanadesis in Medieval Sri Lanka, Circa A. D. 1000-1300", The Sri Lanka Journal of Humanities, University of Peradeniya, Vol. XX, Nos. 1&2 (1984 : published in 1987),p. 125-126.
10. The text as deciphered by A. Velupillai is incomplete with wide gaps and defective at some places. He did not have the benefit of a good estampage nor has he ever visited the site and personally examined the stone.

11. A.Velupillai, "A Note on A Fragmentary Inscription of the Virakkoti from Budumuttava", Journal of Tamil Studies International Institute of Tamil Studies, Madras (December 1987), p.57-65.
12. S. Pathmanathan, "The Tamil Slab-Inscription of the Virakkoti At Budumuttava, Nikaweratiya : Urbanization At Magala", The Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities, Vol. xx, Nos. 1&2, (1994 : published in 1995),pp. 15-30.
13. E. Cupparayalu, Pa. Canmukam, "ilankaiyil ainnurruvar kalvettukal", avanam, itai:9, tamilakat tolliyal kalakam, Tancavur (July 1998), pp. 37-38.
14. The relevant passage runs : "katarar katarcur tatintitta cetti appanaic - celva aruranai ...."
15. It translates : " The Lord of the prosperous city of Arur, the father of Murukan, who, on account of his compassion for the gods, destroyed Curan, who had assumed the form of a mango tree in the ocean.
16. cuntaramurtti cuvamikal arulic cepta tevarat tirupatikankal 1964 : Tarumaiyatinam, Tarumapuram. Modern lexicographers define the expression cetti as one of the appellations of God Murukan Madras Tamil Lexicon, Vol. III University of Madras, 1982, p. 1583 :
17. The relevant portion of the inscription runs : "putinenpumi Vaisravana (rai Vayiru) vaytta lokamatavai viramakalamenru per cattinamajyalum paramesvarikku munnurruvan palliyil loka (p) perun cettiyarkku nankal unnakkatava panamum vettatun tiruvilakkennaiyum vittom".