

# THE ORIGIN AND HISTORY OF VATTEZHUTHU IN KERALA

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## ABSTRACT

A written language is superior to one merely spoken. It is because when former has greater fixity and progressiveness than the latter. The presence of characters in an idiom, gives it a distinct and characteristic shape. The form, as it were, the back - bone of the language without which it cannot to hold its own. The earliest known Malayalam alphabet is the Vattezhuttu. There are three theories as to the origin of the Vattezhuthu. Thoma's Theory Beame's Theory, Burnell's Theory, Vattezhuttu, being thus adapted for writing both the Tamil and Malayalam languages, came to prevail in the Pandya and Chera kingdoms alike. The earliest Vattezhuttu inscription known to scholars is the one in front of the Trivandrum Museum which records the death of a Malabar king at Viliinjam. It was the Chera and Kerala kings who used the Vattezhuttu alphabet uniformly in their grants. In the tenth and eleventh centuries of the Christian era, there were two varieties of the Vattezhuttu character, one of the southern and the other the northern. On an examination of the various Vattezhuttu inscriptions in Travancore.

**Keywords:** History, Vattezhuthu, Kerala

## Introduction

A written language is superior to one merely spoken, it is because when former has greater fixity and progressive than the latter. The presence of characters in an idiom, gives it a distinct and characteristic shape. They form, as it were, the back-bone of the language without which it cannot to hold its own. They study, therefore of an alphabet is instructive in the extreme, and every group of letters has its own admiring pupils. Prinses, Beames, Thomas, Senart and Buhler have cleared up the mysteries of most North Indian alphabets. The Dekhan, in this as in many other matters, lies very far behind and the only great scholar who studied Paleography in earnest was the lamented Dr. Arthur Coke Burnell whose name will be remembered with reverence by orientalists. Burnell published his work in 1878 and it is full quarter of a century since something in that line was done.

The earliest known Malayalam alphabet is the Vattezhutu<sup>1</sup>. In Travancore, it is commonly termed Malayam – Tamil Tekkan(Southern) Malayalam or the NanamMonam character. It is also known, at times, by the title of Malayazhama, a name which, till recently, was employed to denote the languages as well.

In the early years of the last century, it was termed old Tamil by European writers<sup>2</sup>. Afterwards, this was changed and while Burmell calls character Pandyan<sup>3</sup>. Dr. Hultzch, with even greater proerity, gives it the name of Cherapandya<sup>4</sup>. No system of writing anterior to the Vattzhuthu has been met within any part of Kerala or in Pandyan dominations<sup>5</sup>.

## Early Dravidian Culture

That the Dravido–Turadians who occupied Southern Indian in times of old were a highly cultured nation goes without saying. Unaided by the Aryans of the North, they developed “their own language, their own religion and a social organization of a quite peculiar character<sup>6</sup>. The Chola, Chera and Pandya kingdoms were in existence at least as early in the fourth century BC<sup>7</sup>. It is, nevertheless, doubtful whether the Dravidians were acquainted with the art of writing at the early period.

### **Writing in Ancient India**

In North India itself, though Nearchos says that at the time of Alexander the Great's invasion there was a writing paper made of cotton<sup>8</sup>. It has been thought that Megasthenes makes no clear reference to it in his *Indica* and as such it has been assumed that the earliest specimens of writing are the Piyadasi inscription of the third century BC<sup>9</sup>. Against this, however, it has to be said that Megasthenes has left us only an incoherent fragment and even this fragment does not altogether negative in the existence of writing in India in his time. It may also be said that the contemporary Sanskrit authors refer to writing as of divine origin<sup>10</sup> which they would not do, if it had been but recently introduced into their midst and that an unmistakable allusion to 'characters on stone' is contained in the Mahabharata epic which, even in its final stages, must be considerably older than Piyadasi's time<sup>11</sup>.

### **Source of Introduction**

There are three theories as to the origin of the Vattezhuthu. Each of these may be briefly referred to.

#### **Thomas's Theory**

Mr. Thomas, the well-known editor of Prinsep's *Antiquities*, says that the South Asoka character was originally Dravidian and subsequently applied to the writing of North Indian languages. Dr. Burnell also was first disposed to think that the South Asoka character which is older than ArianoPali was itself "nothing more than an extension of this last. Viz, Vattezhuthu against this, however, the Doctor subsequently argued". As the Vattezhuthu is an imperfect alphabet it cannot be the origin of the South Asoka characters; for, if it were, the evidence of the extension and adaptation must be far greater than it is. It is plain that many of the aspirated letters in the South Asoka character are former from the corresponding unaspirated letters. It would have shown traces of a similar formation in the letters g, j, d and h for which there are no forms in the Vattezhuthu. But these letters appear to be primitive in the South Asoka character." It may be added that, as in those days, Egyptian, Persian, Greek, Roman and Phoenician merchants frequented the ports of Karachi, Surat and Broach with well-developed systems of writing, the Indo-Aryans, if they did not themselves invent their alphabet, could have more easily borrowed it from them than from the Dravidians whom they uniformly looked upon as savages and brutes.

#### **Beames's Theory**

Another theory begins by supposing that the Vattezhuthu was descended from the South Asoka character. The late Mr. Beames observes that all the Dravidian characters were formed by spreading out the ancient Indian letters of the Buddhists inscriptions into as elaborate maze of circular and curving forms. In other words, it is supposed that when the early Brahmins and Buddhists came to Southern India, no system of writing was found to prevail there and hence, as any letters as were required to represent the Tamil, Malayalam sounds were drawn from the South Asoka character to constitute the Vattezhuthu alphabet. Dr. Caldwell falls in with this view and remarks that "the fact that the Vattezhuthu alphabet makes no distinction between long and short 'e' and long and short 'o' but has only one character for each vowel like the Sanskrit alphabets and the modern Malayalam, while it has different characters for the long and short forms of other vowels a, i, u, tends to show that it was originally framed for the expression of Sanskrit sounds, not for those of the Dravidian languages.

This is nevertheless no conclusive argument. It only shows that the alphabet was not *suigeneris*, as the long and short sounds of 'e' and 'o' co-existed in the language from the earliest times; and if a system of characters were invented by the people, distinct letters to represent them would certainly be formed. All that may be premised, therefore, is that the original alphabet, whatever it be, was deficient in these letters. Now an examination of the alphabet in the tables given in Prinsep's *Antiquities*, Vol. II will convince us in Semitic, Phoenician and Bactrian there were no separate letters to distinguish the long and short sound of 'e' and 'o'. On the other hand, Dr. Caldwell himself admits that the provision in the South Asoka alphabet for the expression of the dental and lingual sounds respectively points to the origination of that alphabet among a people in whose system of sounds that difference was of more essential importance than in Sanskrit. It may therefore be inferred that the alphabet on the whole is of foreign origin. The arguments for the indigenous origin of Indian alphabets are clearly that after General Cunningham's death the theory claims but very few adherents.

#### **Burnell's Theory**

The Vattezhuthu was long believed in Europe to be an importation by the Red Sea traders from Phoenicia and was thus ultimately of Egyptian origin. Burnell thought that "The South Asoka and Vattezhuthu alphabets are independent adaptations of some foreign character, the first to a Sanskrit, the last to a Dravidian languages. There are, however, resemblances between the two that point to a common Semitic origin. The source of the introduction of this character into Southern India must have been Phoenician or Aramaic. This view is supported

by Andrew Le Fevre who thinks that the earliest Indian system of writing must have been borrowed from Phoenician and Arabian merchants.

On Professor Sayee examining the alphabet of the Babylonian Contracts in the British Museum some of which bear a date anterior to B.C. 640, it was found that the arrow headed characters of these writings exhibited a very close resemblance to the Vattezhuttu and SouthAsoka alphabets. Hence Dr. Burnell has finally concluded that the original of these alphabets must have been an Aramaic character current in Babylon in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C.

This is not unlikely, as in the last centuries before the birth of Christ a considerable amount of commerce was carried on between Babylon and India. Mr. James Kennedy who has made the latest authoritative pronouncement on the subject observes that the Indians chow the alphabetic form of the Babylonic system of writing and brought it over India about 500 B.C. The last difficulty may be said to be solved by Don Marilino Da Zilao Wicker – mashinghe who remarks, what had already been hinted by Burnell that in the South Asoka inscriptions themselves there are traces of their once having been read from right to left and thus it ought to be considered as being Semitic in origin. Probably if the earliest specimens of Vattezhuttu were discovered they too might be presumed to present an identical phenomenon; and at least the practice of writing consonants following one another without the intervention of a vowel on the same line and not perpendicularly, followed in Vattezhuttu lend some little support to this surmise. One important resemblance is the imperfect system of marking the vowels. They have no doubt initial characters for them but the vowel letters in the middle of words are merely marked by additions to the preceding consonant. Though, the early Semitic neglected to mark the duplication of consonants, the Aramaic, current in Babylonia was strict in this respect and the Vattezhuttu has closely followed the latter. Though therefore on the whole it might still be said with Caldwell that “the question of the origin of the South Indian characters is one which requires further research.” It is more than probable that the Dravidians derived their earliest alphabet from North – Western Asia.

#### **Early Vattezhuttu**

Vattezhuttu, being thus adapted for writing both the Tamil and Malayalam languages, came to prevail in the Pandya and Chera kingdoms alike. The Cholas were not much in favour of the alphabet, nor were they of any power in Southern India till the tenth century of the Christian era. The earliest Vattezhuttu inscription known to scholars is the one in front of the Trivandrum Museum which records the death of a Malabar king at Viliyam. Its date has not been ascertained, but it is supposed by archaeologists to be older than the Malabar era. The characters are more arrow headed than round, probably thereby pointing out their Babylonian parentage and appear to be ornamentally written. It is only after this that the Cochin plate of Bhaskara Ravi Varman comes. This grant was issued in the thirty – sixth year of the reign of that sovereign. While the Tirunelveli plates of the same monarch are dated ten years later. Burnell assigns the first to the beginning of the eighth century A.D., but the question of date in this matter must still be said to be open. As Dr. Hultzsch says, there are indications in it of the commencement of separation between Malayalam and Tamil. It is important to note that in this grant the letters are written in Grantha, the former three being quite well – developed and the last almost so. The Vattezhuttu of the Tirunelveli grant is the same in form as that of the Cochin plate. There also we find the three letters with which the deed opens, and written in Grantha.

The date of the Kottayam plate of ViraRaghavaChakravarti, which is the next Vattezhuttu document we possess, has been ascribed by Burnell to A.D 774 but, Mr. Venkayya takes some objection to it on paleographical grounds. He writes ‘The Vattezhuttu character of this grant appears to be more modern than the Cochin plates of Bhaskara Ravi Varman and the Thirunelli plates. The document is finally assigned by him to the fourteenth century A.D. But this argument, though entitled to some consideration, cannot be accepted, as the science of paleography is yet in its infancy and, in this particular case, the original document to have been tampered with by subsequent epigraphy. A notable peculiarity of the document is that not only Sanskrit, but even Vernacular words and phrases in it are written in many places in the Grantha character. In no other document of that early date even we find some parts written in Grantha instead of Vattezhuttu. The Kottayam plates of Sthanu Ravi belong to the ninth century A.D and, though not grave, there are slight differences between the Vattezhuttu characters employed in this and Bhaskara Ravi Varma’s grants.

#### **Old Tamil and Vattezhuttu**

It was the Chera and Kerala kings who used the Vattezhuttu alphabet uniformly in their grants. It is even probable that the Pandyans got their alphabet from the Cheras. The Cholas however were thoroughly unacquainted with the Vattezhuttu. Conjeveram was one of the earliest centres of Brahmanical influence. The Brahmans there made

another system of character, suited to the Dravidian languages from the Grantha alphabet. A few Vattezhuttu letters such as and not found in Grantha were also borrowed to complete the new Dravidian alphabet. This old Tamil became the court character of the Cholas and all the old Tamil inscriptions of Southern India may be directly or indirectly traced to the influence of these sovereigns. When Raja Raja Deva, RajendraChola conquered Tamilakam or the Tamil country, in the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries of the Christian era, old Tamil inscriptions became common in Madura, Tinnevely and South Travancore as well. That this old Tamil belonged to the Cholas may be most distinctly seen from an examination of the South Travancore inscriptions; for, as the Cholas conquered the country only as far as Viliyam, an old seaport twelve miles to the south of Trivandrum, no inscriptions in old Tamil are met with to the north of it. The Chola monarchs, wherever they marched, not only altered the characters of the inscriptions, but also introduced their own place names and era. The Pandyas were long under the supremacy of the Cholas; and so, with the eleventh century, Vattezhuttu in their country was nearly supplanted by the new Grantha Tamil. By the fifteenth century it became totally extinct. On the Malabar Coast, however, it never lost its hold. Even when the Cholas ruled over South Travancore, inscriptions in Vattezhuttu were written on its temple-stones. When the Chola power wanted, old Tamil also went out of use while the Vattezhuttu continued to enjoy its undisputed sway till almost the end of the seventh century of the Christian era.

### **Progress of Vattezhuttu**

In the tenth and eleventh centuries of the Christian era, there were two varieties of the Vattezhuttu character, one of the southern and the other the northern. On an examination of the various Vattezhuttu inscriptions in Travancore, it will be found that the characters became rounder and rounder with the advance of ages and there was really a sliding, as it were, from the southern to the northern style. The round style might have been easily brought into prominence by the writing materials that were used, the style in forming it would split the leaf, because being a palm, it has a longitudinal fibre going from the stalk to the point. Moreover, the style being held in the right hand, and the leaf in the left, the thumb of the left hand serves as a fulcrum, on which the style moves and thus imparts a circular form to the letters. In the early Vattezhuttu alphabet there were but they few Grantha letters. When the Grantha alphabet was formed in the Chola country, all the Sanskrit words in the Tamil and the Vattezhuttu inscriptions began to be written in that character in the Pandyan kingdom, but on the Malabar Coast, writing continued to be independent as the people converted them uniformly into Tathavas and wrote them in the Vattezhuttu character.

### **Notice of Vattezhuttu in Medieval Works**

By Marco Polo's time Malayalam became thoroughly separated from Tamil. He was well acquainted with both the Malabar and Coromandel Coasts and observes "The people of Malabar have a language of their own and a king of their own and pay tribute to nobody". IbnBatuta in the fourteenth century refers to some inscriptions on the gates of Malabar cities proclaiming "the gate of safety for such an one probably in the Vattezhuttu character, Purchase in his pilgrims clearly affirms that only one kind of writing was known in Malabar in the Sixteenth century and it may be presumed that this must have been Vattezhuttu. He says "The Malabars are generally of one language and one kind of writing. This, their writing, is in leaves of palms which they call Ola, two fingers broad and long as the matter they intended, written on both sides with a style of iron which they wind up in Books between two boards in greater or lesser form as they please. Their writing is from the left to the right. It would thus seem there were many Granthas in Vattezhuttu in the sixteenth century though all of them have been now rewritten in the modern Malabar character. Dr. Fryer in his new Account of East Indies gives a specimen of the Vattezhuttu character. But curiously enough the specimen of Vattezhuttu that he gives is one of Telugu and that of Telugu is one of Vattezhuttu. These latter characters were all perfectly round and so the author could not distinguish the Malabar alphabet from the Telugu. At any rate, it clearly, shows that in the latter decades of the seventeenth Century, Vattezhuttu was the character prevalent in Malabar. In the Mackenzie Manuscripts it is said that the NasraniMappilas or native Christians of Travancore possessed a book written in the Vattezhuttu character, four centuries ago. Again a transcript of a letter in the Vattezhuttu character is taken from Heer Van Rheede's Hortus Malabaricus and engraved in the Alphabetum Grandonico Malabaricum published in Rome by the Propaganda at the close of the eighteenth century, where it is ridiculously called "Infimum scribendi Cenus" because it is not applicable to the writing of Sanskrit. Bishop Medlycott suggests that the first book in Malayalam was printed in Vattezhuttu, but of this, unfortunately there is no positive proof.

## Conclusion

Many inscriptions are found in the Vattezhuttu in almost all Travancore temples dating from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The Chief of them are Cape Comorin, Tiruvattar, Trivandrum, Kalaikuttam, Varkallai, Kathinamkulam, Mannar, Tirunakkar and Tiruvalur. So again, they are to be found in several old Churches and mosques. The belief of the masses is that these are the writings of antediluvian Bhutans (Sprit) and no one was able to read the character, until Deyden, one of the oldest of European orientalists, attempted to do it, The late Mr. W.F. Ellis, who has written essays on all the four prominent South Indian languages read the Jewish and Syrian Christian documents. Gundert published a more scholarly version of them in the Madras Journal of Literature and Science, and after Burnell's table of Vattezhuttu saw the light of day in the pages of the Indian Antiquary in 1872 the road is very clear and but little difficulty is felt. Still the Vattezhuttu letters are of such a fluctuating character that the inscriptions of one century are in form scarcely like those of another. Professor Kielhorn of Cotingen and Dr. Hultzch and Mr. Venkayya of the Madras Archaeological survey have recently expressed the advisability of publishing every Vattezhuttu inscription in leading antiquarian journals, to compare with them with one another accurately, and hence it may be supposed that its development will be more clearly seen after a few more years.

From a passage in Mr. Ellis's Essay, it would appear that the Vattezhuttu characters were in use in Malabar even at the beginning of the nineteenth century, for he observes; "The Vattezhuttu, the clipped or abbreviated letter, is the writing of the former conveyances, bonds legal instruments and generally all transactions between man and man necessary to be recorded are written in this character. But this is evidently wrong and the alphabet that Mr. Ellis refers to can only be the Kolezhuttu. A similar criticism is applicable to the remark of Mr. Balfour who says in his Cyclopaedia of India that Vattezhuttu was in use in Malabar till very recent times. That character is now scarcely known except to antiquarians, but as long as there are inscriptions to be deciphered and copper-plates to be read, it may be safely presumed that the alphabet will not be absolutely lacking in students.

## References

- Literally round writing. It is so called because many letters in that alphabet especially are round. It is sometimes wrongly termed vattezhuttu or clipped writing from a supposition that it was only used for epigraphical purposes.
- Madras Journal of Literature and Science Vo, XIII., Part I p. 116 See also Sewell's List of Antiquities, Vol. pp. 256-261 where most of the inscriptions said to be in illegible old Tamil and really in Vattezhuttu.
- South Indian Paleography, second edition, p. 47 and Maoleane's Madras Manual of Administration, Vol. I. p.49.
- The Chera alphabet was current only in Coimbatore and Salem in the early centuries of the Christian era.
- Featherman's Social History of Mankind, Vol. I. p.3
- Sewell's Sketch of the Dynasties of Southern India, p.1
- McOrindle's Ancient India; Invasion by Alexander the Great p. 186.
- There are clear references to Mile-stones and Calenders.
- Among others Narada, I 70, Brihaspati VII 2, Yajñvalkyā, II 22, Vishnu, VI 23 and Vasishtha, VII 10.
- Mahabharata, Udyogaparva, Bhagavadgītā Ch. LXXVI