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THE ORIGIN OF THE ALPHABET OF CAMPĀ

BY

PROF. K. A. NILAKANTA SASTRI,

Madras.

In the course of a very useful and comprehensive discussion of the palaeography of the inscriptions of Campā,¹ Prof. R. C. Majumdar of Dacca discusses the question of the origin of the alphabet employed in the earliest of these inscriptions, that of Vo-Canh, and reaches the conclusion that the first colonists of Campā had a North Indian origin,—more precisely, that they must have gone forth from the central region of Northern India. He adds that Cham traditions and other arguments tend to the same conclusion and refers his readers to his work on *Campā*.² A reference to this book will show, however, that while there is much evidence of contact between Bengal and Northern India on the one side and the Hindu colonies of the East on the other, there is nothing to establish a North Indian *origin* for the Colonies. To prove 'a close association of Bengal with Indian colonies in South and East throughout the Hindu period' or 'a far more intimate connection between Bengal and Indian colonies than has yet been recognised'³ is one thing; to hold that Northern India was the home of the earliest colonists who went to the East is quite another proposition, and it is this that Majumdar seeks to establish by the argument drawn from palaeography. Our object is to examine the validity of the new view propounded by him.

We may start with some general considerations. Though not with any specific reference to his theory of the origin of the Vo-Canh alphabet, Majumdar has expressly stated that his conclusions must be treated as only provisional, subject to confirmation by a more complete study calculated to lead to more definite

1. La Palaeographie des Inscriptions du Campa, BEFEO., xxxii, (1932) pp. 127-39.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 138-9.

3. Majumdar: Champa, p. xvii.

results.¹ But opinions provisionally stated often tend to become accepted as definite results in a short time; and the conclusion regarding the northern origin of the Campā alphabet is sought to be sustained by a detailed argument in the course of which are urged a number of considerations which, if correct, would render the conclusion almost self-evident. For these reasons it seems worth while to determine if sufficient cause has been shown to abandon or modify the older view of the South Indian origin of this alphabet.

Palaeography, we should remember, is only one of the considerations, though an important one, likely to indicate the original home of the colonists.² Social institutions, religious practices, architectural features, and above all the general trend of events in history are also factors that must be taken into account before a final decision is reached on the question of the original home of the emigrants. And we should not forget that South Indian culture was largely inspired by northern influences, and that the common presence of broad general traits in all Hindu societies, Indian or overseas, is only to be expected. Any argument that seeks to decide between the North and South of India must proceed with caution and enter into details of striking significance; that Majumdar is well aware of this is seen from the careful elaboration of his palaeographic arguments.

Even with palaeography pointing decisively in one direction, if we find other considerations pointing in another, the solution of the problem is not likely to be easy. As I understand the matter, very few analogies have been traced between specifically North Indian customs, institutions or legends, and those of Campā and Kambhōja. With the exception of a far-fetched interpretation put on a passage in the Arthaśāstra of Kauṭilya by Jacobi,³ an interpretation which to my mind seems wholly improbable and which has not received general assent, I doubt if there has been any evidence (excepting of course the evidence in Majumdar's paper now being discussed) produced in support of a northern origin for the early Indian colonists. We shall be led too far afield if we attempted to trace the similarities between South India and the colonies; but we may note a few salient points. The spread of the Nāgī legend, as we may conveniently designate

1. BEFEO., xxxii, p. 139.

2. Cf. BCAIC., 1909, pp. 223-4.

3. BEFEO., xii, 8: 1-4.

the story which ascribes the origin of ruling dynasties to a casual meeting between an earthly prince and a water-nymph, from South India to the Eastern Colonies has been frequently studied by scholars.¹ There are many traits in common between the Śaivism of South India and that of the Colonies, one of the most significant among them being the naming of liṅgas and shrines after the ruling monarch. Then we have the -varman endings of royal names which has been frequently traced to a Pallava source. Again, Majumdar himself said not many years ago in his discussion of the origin of Cham art: 'We need not hesitate to trace the origin of the Cham style to Indian temples at Bādāmi, Conjeevaram and Māmallapuram—particularly as this part of India was the nearest by way of sea to the Kingdom of Campā'.² Then we have the use of the Śaka era and the amānta reckoning of the months. Again I do not know if any part of Northern India ever adopted the distinction between what are known as right-hand and left-hand castes; but this was one of the most permanent divisions in South Indian society, and one legend (there are others) ascribes its origin to the fact that on one famous occasion the partisans to a dispute laid it before the king, one party standing to his right and the other to his left. This curious division into right-hand and left-hand sections was known among the officials of Fu-nan.³ Facts like these raise a presumption in favour of a South Indian origin of the principal culture elements of the Colonies.⁴ And in the face of such facts we shall not be wrong if we decline to accept a North Indian origin for the Campā alphabet unless the case for it rests on very clear and decisive evidence. We may now turn to a detailed examination of the points urged by Majumdar in support of his position.

After summarising the views of Bergaigne on the script of the Vo-Canh inscription, Majumdar observes that while Bergaigne's conclusions on the date of the record are remarkably just, considering the materials he had at his disposal, his discussion suffers not only from the paucity of data at his command, but from his preconceived notion of the southern origin of this alphabet. "In fact", he says, "it seems to me impossible to consider

1. BCAIC., 1911, pp. 32 ff. BEFEO., xi, 391-3; xxiv, 501ff.

2. Champa, pp. 273-4.

3. BEFEO., III, p. 282.

4. Cf. Burnell's remarks *re* Java in South Indian Palaeography, pp. 132-3.

the inscription of Vo-Canh as of the same palaeographic type as that of Rudradāman at Gīrnār or that of Sātakarṇi at Kaṇhēri as Bergaigne suggested". Majumdar bases his opinion on the absence in the Vo-Canh inscription of two characteristics found in the inscriptions of Gīrnār and Kaṇhēri and in all later inscriptions of the southern type. These two characteristics are:

(1) the reascent to the left of the lower end of the verticals of *a*, *ā*, *r* and of the medial *u* and *ū* (2) the bend towards the left of the upper end of the vertical of *l*.

It may be noted in passing, that after the southern origin of the alphabet of Campā was postulated by the older generation of scholars to which Burnell, Kern, Bergaigne and Barth may be taken to have belonged, this question has been re-examined systematically by Vogel in his well-known edition of the Yūpa inscriptions of Mūlavarman, and in part by Finot when he edited the Hon-cuc and Myson inscriptions of Bhadravarman. Neither of these two eminent epigraphists seems to have experienced any difficulty in upholding the conclusions reached earlier by Bergaigne and his contemporaries.

The first of the two features noted above is rightly designated by Vogel as 'the little hook attached, on the left, to the foot of the long verticals', and he traces the development of this trait of the Southern alphabets in the following words:¹ 'It is interesting that similar little hooks or curves are found in the Pallava Prākṛt grants of the fourth century, whereas in Simhavarman's charters of the fifth century those excrescences are unusually prolonged so as to reach up to almost half the length of the vertical².... It is noteworthy that in the Campā

1. Yūpa Inscriptions: pp. 223-4.

2. In Amarāvati Nos. 2 and 8 the letters *r* and *a* show the curve very clearly, and this feature becomes even more pronounced at Nagārjunikoṇḍa (ASSI. I. pl. lvi and EI. xx and xxi). These inscriptions represent a fairly early stage in their development. Note also the form of *ra* in *mahārājyasya* in an inscription of Huiṣka—EI. viii, p. 182 which shows that this curve is not exclusively South Indian in the early stages of its development. In fact there is much waywardness in the adoption of these ornamental excrescences when they first come into vogue. A period of uncertainty precedes the definite adoption or rejection of the trait concerned.

inscriptions of Bhadravarman which otherwise betray so marked a palaeographical affinity to those of Koetei, the long verticals show no trace of the little hook. In this respect they represent an earlier stage of writing than the Koetei inscriptions, a conclusion which is confirmed by other observations'. We see then, that the reascent of the lower end of the vertical, as Majumdar calls it, is the result of a gradual development of the Southern alphabets, and the earliest Sanskrit inscriptions of Campā, Borneo and W. Java are generally taken to be among the earliest specimens of these alphabets, the Vo-Canh record being absolutely the earliest so far known. Anyone who looks at the record last mentioned and those of Bhadravarman will see at once that the Vo-Canh record is clearly an earlier specimen of the same type of script, and that, as such, it stands at the commencement of the whole series of these records. If therefore we miss the little excrescence of a hook below the verticals of these letters in the Vo-Canh inscription, and if, in the Gīrnār and Kaṅhēri records it is only a slight bend to the left, this can be only a proof of the high antiquity of the Vo-Canh record and cannot disprove the southern origin of its alphabet, if such an origin is established on other grounds. Attention may, however, be drawn to the letter *ra* in l. 14 of the Vo-Canh record in the word *bhaviṣyairāpi*, and to the *ra*-s in the Mi-son inscriptions which betray a tendency to thickening at the foot of the vertical. Note also the *ka* in *mamā-nukampārtham* in Mi-son l. 11-A and the two *a*-s in lines 8 (*ayanna*) and 9 (*atha*) of Mi-son B, the latter *a* showing a clear curve of the vertical to the left, the vertical in the former being straight.¹ It is clear from the two forms of *ra* in the Yūpa inscription (A) that this particular development had not yet become quite fixed even at a much later date than that of Vo-Canh.

The second fact noted by Majumdar is the absence at Vo-Canh of the bend towards the left of the vertical of *la*; a reference to the facsimile of the inscription shows that this feature is clearly present in l. 10 (*kulanandanena*), and l. 11 (*lokasyāsyā*) of the Vo-Canh record, and Majumdar himself marks it in one of the

XV.ii

1. ISSC., pl. 18, BEFEO., ~~XVII~~, pl. 18 and BEFEO., ii, plate next to p. 187.

forms he gives of *l* in column I of his table.¹ A comparison of this form with that in the inscriptions of Bhadravarman and Mūlavarman shows once more that Vo-Canh is the oldest record of the series. Thus we see that the attempt to deny a southern origin of the Vo-Canh alphabet has not fared very well so far.

The next step in Majumdar's argument is to trace in the Vo-Canh inscription features which are not present in the South Indian alphabets and to point out that some, if not all, of these are seen to be present in North Indian scripts, particularly Kuṣāṇa and Central Indian. We must now consider each of these features.

(1) Curvature of the horizontal member of *Ka*. Majumdar himself notes that this feature, absent in Kaṅhēri, has begun to appear in Gīrnār. A comparison of the facsimiles of Gīrnār and Vo-Canh will show that the curvature of the horizontal stroke is by no means more pronounced in the latter than in the former. There is therefore nothing in the shape of *ka* in Vo-Canh to invalidate Bergaigne's comparison of the record with the Gīrnār praśasti. I may add that the curved horizontal stroke is found in the Nāgārjunikoṇḍa inscriptions. A perusal of the seventh row in Bühler's table III shows that the horizontal stroke in *ka* developed on identical lines both in the northern and southern scripts.

(2) The elongation of *śa*. It is surprising that Majumdar should have sought to base his argument on this letter which does not occur in the Vo-Canh inscription at all except in the ligature *śrī*. It is true that Bühler traces a characteristic development of this letter, which Majumdar has designated elongation, in the Kuṣāṇa inscriptions;² but we have no means of judging if the Kuṣāṇa *śa* was adopted in Campā. On the other hand, we find a little hook attached to the right hand stroke of *śa* instead of the cross-bar, 'a feature of special importance as it is peculiar to the alphabet of the Pallava inscriptions...(and) mentioned by Bühler among the chief characteristics of what he calls the archaic type of the grantha alphabet.'³ This feature indeed does not appear in col. 1 of the table which accompanies Majumdar's article, but

1. This curve, however, is not present in the Andhau inscription which precedes the Gīrnār inscription by only twenty years and comes from the same region-EI. xvi, plate facing pp. 24 and 25.

2. Ind. Pal, p. 41 sec. 19B. 14.

3. Vogel, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

is fairly well-marked in the facsimile of the Vo-Canh record.¹ In fact the ligature *śrī* here seems to differ little from that in the Bhadravarman records.

(3) Omission of the central vertical member of *t*. It is difficult to discover what Majumdar means by this. He is not supported either by the facsimile of the Vo-Canh record (cf. *ta* and *ti* in l. 11 and l. 12 in *putre*), or even by his own table where, though the central vertical appears shorter than in the inscription itself, it is still not more so than, say, in column X of Bühler's table III.

(4) The cursive form of *d*. I fail to see that *da* in Vo-Canh is more cursive than in the Gīrnār and other southern inscriptions cf., Gīrnār *divasa*, *sadisa*, *vadana* all in l. 3, with *tadevam* l. 14 and *viditam* l. 15 of Vo-Canh.

(5) *Na* and *Ṇa* with the two parts of the base forming an angle on the two sides of the vertical, the base being a curve at Gīrnār. Here Majumdar's table has unduly simplified the shape of *na* as it occurs in the Vo-Canh record; for while the peculiarity noted by Majumdar is visible in l. 10—*svajana* and in l. 12 *nantuka*, and l. 15 *anumantavyam*, the curved base also appears in l. 14 *namṣriya*, and in l. 14—*mayānujñātam*. The letter *ṇa* is formed with the usual horizontal base in *kariṇo* l. 11, it takes the form noted by Majumdar in l. 12—*samikaraṇa* and in *ruṇa* in l. 13. A perusal of Bühler's table III, columns XIII (Nasik) XV (Kuda) and XVII (Jaggayyapeṭṭa), will show that the forms of *na* and *ṇa* in the Vo-Canh inscription are closely paralleled by these letters in the Southern inscriptions. Both forms of *ṇa*² occur in the Kaṇhēri inscriptions.

(6) Medial *ā* and *o* marked with oblique strokes, while Gīrnār and Kaṇhēri conserve the horizontal strokes. It may be observed that this feature has been noted also in Jaggayyapeṭṭa and some Pallava charters, e.g. Uruvapalli. The *ṇo* in *Kariṇorvareṇa* of l. 11 is a fair approximation to the same letter figured by Bühler from Jaggayyapeṭṭa.

We see thus that all the traits traced by Majumdar as present at Vo-Canh, but not in the two Indian cases (Gīrnār and Kaṇhēri) are either not present in the Vo-Canh record or are found

1. ISCC., pl. 18. This trait is, however, not noticeable in the plate in BEFEO. XV.

2. ASWI. V. pl. li cf. *ṇas* in Nos. 5 and 15.

in South Indian inscriptions of an age not much later than the Gīrnār and Kaṇhēri records. In fact, there is no reason why we should now confine ourselves to the Gīrnār and Kaṇhēri records in talking of South Indian inscriptions. We have sought in the few remarks under each of the items considered above (and these remarks are by no means meant to be exhaustive) to show that the progress in our knowledge of South Indian epigraphy tends to confirm the remarkably sound judgment of Bergaigne regarding the original home of the Campā alphabet. And in the frequent references we have made above to Bühler's tables, we have only followed the line suggested by Majumdar himself. For after enumerating the six traits discussed above, he says: "Now, these peculiarities which characterize the inscription of Vo-Canh, in relation to those of Gīrnār and Kaṇhēri, recur in the Kuṣāṇa inscriptions of Northern India, and a general comparison of the alphabets does not permit any doubt that the alphabet of Vo-Canh belongs to the Kuṣāṇa type. One can assure oneself easily about this by comparing my column I with columns III—V of plate III in Bühler's *Indische Palaeographie*". Only in making the comparison we have preferred a direct reference to the facsimiles of the Vo-Canh inscription in the ISCC and in BEFEO to the table produced by Majumdar.

Next, Prof. Majumdar points out that Bergaigne attached great importance to the occurrence of the subscribed *ya* in a tripartite form in the Vo-Canh, Gīrnār and Kaṇhēri, but not in the Mathurā inscriptions, and he draws our attention to this feature found in the Kuṣāṇa inscriptions of Sārnāth.¹ It is enough to mention that Barth, while editing Bergaigne's work, drew pointed attention to the fact that the subscribed *ya* was not so sure a test as Bergaigne thought; he added that this did not vitiate the correctness of the sum total of Bergaigne's observations on the alphabet of the Vo-Canh record.² The position then is that the subscribed tripartite *ya* is not exclusively Southern in its provenance, but occurs in some Northern Indian records as well.

The remarks that follow in Majumdar's paper relate to some obstacles he has encountered in formulating his new hypothesis and the way in which he proposes to get over them. He says:

1. See, however, Sten Konow's remarks on the place of the tripartite subscribed *ya* in Kuṣāṇa records—K. B. Pathak Commemoration Volume, p. 264.

2. ISCC, p. 194, n. 1.

"The only characteristic of the Vo-Canh inscription which is found at Gīrnār and is not found in Kuṣāṇa inscriptions is the break of the left vertical stroke of *ṣ* and *ḃ*. It may be due to a western influence, but the general traits of the other letters lead us to place the writing of the inscription of Vo-Canh in the Kuṣāṇa variety of the Indian alphabet. It is only necessary to note that the curved strokes of *k* and of *n* always recall the more evolved Kuṣāṇa forms whereas *y* generally resembles the less evolved Kuṣāṇa form".

The 'break' (*fracture*) of the left vertical of *ṣ* and *ḃ* is a feature which has struck other writers as of somewhat greater significance than Majumdar appears to believe. Vogel has discussed this feature fully in his *Yūṣṭa Inscriptions*¹ where he notes that the notched *ṣa* is even found in Kuṣāṇa inscriptions; says that 'the origin of this peculiarity can be traced back to the famous Gīrnār *praśasti* of Rudradāman'; and holds that 'here again the alphabets of Southern India, Indo-China and the Archipelago exhibit a parallel development'. Again, the difficulty touched on by Majumdar that on a comparison with the Kuṣāṇa alphabet, some letters of the Vo-Canh inscription present a less developed form while others appear to resemble more evolved forms of the Kuṣāṇa script, is a serious obstacle to our accepting his conclusion that the Vo-Canh alphabet belongs to the same class as the Kuṣāṇa; especially when closer parallels in form and development are available from Southern India as different scholars have repeatedly demonstrated.

The few resemblances with Northern scripts that have been traced in the Vo-Canh record by Majumdar and other writers as pointed out above, do not seem to be so significant as to outweigh the evidence of other features more distinctly southern in character. It would indeed be surprising if there were no features in common between any two scripts evolved out of the ancient Brāhmi script. It is only resemblances traced in detail in the shape and the development of individual letters that must be the means of determining the exact origin of any particular alphabet;² and judged by this test, I think, the case for the Southern Indian origin of the alphabet of Campā is indeed overwhelming. Some other southern features can be traced in Vo-Canh in an in-

1. Pp. 224-5.

2. Cf. Burnell—South Indian Palaeography, p. 132.

ipient form; for instance, the artificial development of the *serif* which culminates in the 'box-head' of letters, as in Bhadravarman inscriptions of Campā, might have begun in a thickening of the serifs of which we seem to have sporadic instances in the Vo-Canh record—witness the three letters *na-nut-ka* in l. 12, *ma* in *-ranumantavyam* in l. 15, *Sa* in *Sva* l. 10, and so on. The practice of writing the vowelless consonant in smaller type beneath the line is more common in South Indian records than in North Indian ones and is a very early feature;¹ this feature is also traceable in the Vo-Canh record (l. 8).

The result of Majumdar's investigation is to suggest that the original home of the Vo-Canh alphabet was in Central India of the third or the fourth century A. D. where the script had already acquired some of the Southern characteristics, but not the feature of turning upwards (to the left) the vertical strokes of *ka*, *ra* etc.; and to argue further that the Campā alphabet became more and more southern in character for a time thereafter, and then once again the southern features began to disappear. I have sought to show that the evidence cited by Majumdar in support of his thesis does not stand the test of a close examination; and it seems to me also that his conclusion does not emerge from his argument. I have confined myself to the Vo-Canh inscription on which rests the whole argument for the new view of the origin of the Campā alphabet. I do not follow up the further history of its development as envisaged by Majumdar, because if, as I consider, the older view of the origin has not been disproved by his argument, there is no need to explain the southern traits in the relatively later records of Campā. The gradual disappearance of Indian features and the emergence of local variations not only in script but in the whole culture of Indo-China and the Archipelago is the chief trend in the secular development of life in Hindu colonies of these regions.

1. Cf. Vogel, *op. cit.*, 227-8.

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