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## THE EARLIEST INSCRIPTIONS OF INDO-CHINA

The earliest inscription of Indo-China was written in Sanskrit and it has been found in Vo-cañh, a place in South-Annam, in the province of Nha-trang. On palaeographic grounds this inscription has been placed by some scholars in the third century A. D. Bergaigne made the following remarks on the date of this inscription : "Comparable in many respects to that of the celebrated inscription of Rudradāman at Girnar, dated in the year 72 of an era which appears to be the Śaka era, or of the contemporary inscription of Vāsishṭhiputra Sātakarṇi at Kanheri, it represents, in the development of the alphabets of Southern India, a period which seems to be in no way later than the third century A. D."<sup>1</sup> Later he also added, "It appears to be almost certain that this inscription is anterior to the fourth century A. D. and it is possible that it goes back to the second century A. D. On the whole, third century may be considered to be approximately the most probable date."<sup>2</sup>

This southern origin of the alphabet of the Vo-cañh inscription originally suggested by Bergaigne did not find favour with some and so Dr. R. C. Majumdar<sup>3</sup> has tried to show that this alphabet had been derived from the Kushāna script used in the third or fourth century A. D. in the central part of North India. But this view has been challenged by N. K. Sastri<sup>4</sup> according to whom the alphabets of Further India originated from South India with a predominant influence of the Pallava script. But we must remember in this connection that although the two scholars were not agreed on the question of the origin of this alphabet, none of them had refuted the earlier view that this inscription of Vo-cañh is the earliest of all the inscriptions of Further India and that the alphabet should be referred to the second or third century A. D. Generally speaking, scholars have arrived at this chronological succession of kings after a close study of the early Sanskrit inscriptions of Further India : Bhadravarman of Champā, Mūlavarman of Borneo and Pūrnavarman of Western Java. Prof. Kern hesitated between the fourth and fifth centuries A. D. and finally proposed 400 A. D. as the approximate date for the Kutei inscription

1 Bergaigne—Inscriptions Sanskrites de Champa et de Cambodge. p. 192.

2 Ibid, p. 195.

3 R. C. Majumdar—La Paleographie des Inscriptions du Champa, BEFEO, XXII, pp. 127-189.

4 N. K. Sastri—L'origine de l'Alphabet du Champa, BEFEO, XXXV, pp. 393-441.

of Mulavarman. J. Ph. Vogel who made a fresh study of the inscriptions of Mulavarman accepted this view. "As the intervening period between the two kings may be roughly estimated at half a century, the inscription of Bhadravarman would belong to the middle of the fourth century A. D., a somewhat earlier date than that proposed by M. Finot who has assigned them to approximately 400 A. D." Now, N. K. Sastri has rightly shown that the Vo-cañh inscription should be considered as the earliest in date in this series of inscriptions.<sup>6</sup> It is to be noted that in the inscriptions of Bhadravarman which show a close palaeographic affinity to those of Kutei, the long verticals show no trace of the little hook. We see thus that the mounting up of the lower extremities of the vertical traits, as Majumdar says, is the result of a gradual development of the alphabets of the South, and the most ancient inscriptions in Sanskrit of Champā, of Borneo and of the western part of Java are generally considered as being the earliest specimens of these alphabets, the state of Vo-cañh being veritably the most ancient document known uptil now. Whoever studies this last and those of Bhadravarman, finds immediately that the stele of Vo-cañh constitutes distinctly the earliest specimen of this same type of script, and that, in this respect, it is the first in date of the whole series. If, consequently, we do not find in Vo-cañh the small addition in the form of a hook in the lower part of the vertical letters, and if, in the inscriptions of Girnar and of Kanheri it is only a slight curve towards the left, this can only be a proof of the great antiquity of the inscription of a Vo-cañh.<sup>7</sup> Thus in this respect the Vo-cañh inscription may be placed even earlier than the Girnar inscription of Rudradāman whose date is the middle of the second century A. D. Even if we assign the Vo-cañh inscription to a period much later than that of the Girnar inscription, we have to make allowance for a sufficiently wide interval for the gradual development of some characteristics which we do not find in the Vo-cañh inscription but which appear in the later inscriptions of Bhadravarman. From this point of view, the Vo-cañh inscription may well be assigned to the third century A. D., a date which falls

<sup>5</sup> Chatterji and Chakravarti—India and Java, part II, p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> N. K. Sastri—L'Origine de l'Alphabet du Champā, BEFFO, XXXV, pp. 282-241.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 286.

between the time of the Girnar inscription and that of the inscriptions of Bhadravarman.

Dr. D. C. Sircar,<sup>8</sup> however, wants to bring down the date of the record to a later period. He argues that as the record is composed in a developed Kāvya style and in the ornate Sanskrit metre Vasantatilakā, the period to which this record can be assigned cannot be earlier than the first half of the fourth century A. D. According to him, the evidence of the Junāgaḍh inscription of Rudradāman (150 A. D.), the Ayodhyā inscription of Dhanadeva (not much earlier than the first century A. D.), etc. shows that Sanskrit was sometimes, though very rarely, used in inscriptions during the early centuries of the Christian era in the north-western quarter of India upto Ayodhyā in the east and Avanti in the south. He is of the opinion that Prakrit was the language of the royal records of that period in all other parts of India; it was supplanted by Sanskrit in South India only about the middle of the fourth century A. D. He further argues that Sanskrit was not popular even at the Śaka courts is proved by the fact that the inscriptions and coin-legends of Rudradāman and his successors are largely in Prakrit. He is also not inclined to believe that the metre Vasantatilakā could be used in an inscription in Indo-China before the first half of the fourth century A. D.<sup>9</sup>

It is, however, difficult to accept these views. That Sanskrit was gradually taking the place of Prakrit in the field of epigraphy can be well testified to by a number of inscriptions written in Sanskrit and in the ornate metre in the early centuries of the Christian era. Besides the evidence of the Junāgaḍh Inscription of Rudradāman (150 A. D.), G. Coedès<sup>10</sup> has drawn our attention to a Mathurā Brāhmī inscription of the time of Soḍāsa (15 A. D.) published by Lüders.<sup>11</sup> As this record is in classical Sanskrit and in the ornate metre Bhujāṅga-vijimbhita, the occurrence of the Vasantatilakā metre in the Vo-cañh inscription in the third century A. D. is not at all surprising. We can name some more inscriptions written in Sanskrit in the early centuries

<sup>8</sup> D. C. Sircar—Date of the Earliest Sanskrit Inscription of Champā JGIS, VI, 1989, pp. 58-55. Again by the same writer—Date of the Earliest Sanskrit Inscription of Champā, IHQ, XVII, 1941, pp. 107-110.

<sup>9</sup> D. C. Sircar—Date of the Earliest Sanskrit Inscription of Champā JGIS, VI, 1989, p. 55

<sup>10</sup> G. Coedès—The Date of the Sanskrit Inscription of Vo-cañh, IHQ, XVI, 1940, p. 486.

<sup>11</sup> Seven Brāhmī Inscriptions from Mathurā and its Vicinity, 1938, p. 194 ff.

of the Christian era. The Ghosūṇḍī Stone inscription of king Sarva-tāta<sup>12</sup> discovered near Nagari in Rājputānā, was written in Sanskrit in about the second half of the first century B. C. The Kānākheṛā stone inscription of Śrīdharavarman<sup>13</sup> which has been found near Sāñchī, Bhopal State, was written in Sanskrit in the Śaka year 201 (i. e. 279 A. D.) and there is a verse in Śārdulavikrīḍita metre. With regard to this inscription Dr. D. C. Sircar has admitted that "the verse in Śārdulavikrīḍita is an early instance of a classical metre being used in an inscription. Two Mathurā records of the first century A. D. are known to be written in classical Sanskrit and in the ornate metres Śārdulavikrīḍita and Bhujāṅgavijimbhita. These records prove the developed stage of the Kāvya literature in the early centuries of the Christian era, though apparently Sanskrit was not then quite popular in Indian courts."<sup>14</sup>

Further, it is really difficult to hold with Dr. Sircar that "that Sanskrit was not popular even at the Śaka courts is proved by the fact that the inscriptions and coin-legends of Rudradāman and successors are largely in Prakrit."<sup>15</sup> In our opinion such an idea is hardly tenable and appears to go against evidence. Long ago Sylvain Lévi and Buhler had rightly pointed out that the Śakas had played a decisive role in the definite constitution of the Sanskrit literature. While discussing some terms used in the inscriptions of the Kshatrapas, Sylvain Lévi made the following remark: "But a group of serious indications tends, on the other hand, to assign equally to the epoch and to the court of the Kshatrapas the formation of literary Sanskrit. All Indianists know that the first inscription in literary Sanskrit is precisely the inscription of mahā-kshatrapa Rudradāman at Gīrnar, which I have considered several times in course of this work."<sup>16</sup> There can be no doubt about the fact that after Rudradāman the known inscriptions of the Kshatrapas are all in Sanskrit. Again, Sylvain Lévi added: "Rudradāman, in his inscription, boasts or lets

<sup>12</sup> Epigraphia Indica, XVI, p. 27.

<sup>13</sup> Epigraphia Indica XVI, p. 282.

<sup>14</sup> D. C. Sircar—Select Inscriptions, Vol. I., p. 181, p. 10.

<sup>15</sup> D. C. Sircar — Date of the Earliest Sanskrit Inscription of Champā, IHQ, XVII, p. 108.

<sup>16</sup> Sylvain Lévi — Sur Quelques termes employés dans les Inscriptions des Kshatrapas IA 1902, p. 109.

himself boast of his ability to compose, in prose as in verse, works which satisfy all the exigencies of Rhetoric ( sputalaghumadhura-chitrakāntasābasamayodārālmākritagadyapadya—Junāgaḍh inscription of Rudradāman I. 14), and the evidence of the inscription even leads to believe that it is a question of Sanskrit compositions<sup>17</sup>. Buhler, while tracing the antiquity of Indian artificial poetry with the help of inscriptions, did not fail to note the literary merit of the Junāgaḍh inscription of Rudradāman and drew some conclusions which deserve attention: "Now, if we take the author ( of the inscription ) on his word, and suppose that he is stating only facts, nothing more nor less, then it would follow that Rudradāman must have devoted himself to the cultivation of court poetry like Samudra-gupta and Harshavardhana. Then the passage in question would further prove that the Kāvya literature, in the second century, had been developed to such an extent, that even the grandson of a foreign Satrap like Chashtrana could not escape its influence. On the other hand, if it is thought more advisable to understand the expressions of praise in the prasasti, with a qualification, and to think that these expressions regardless of actual facts, only concern themselves with representing Rudradāman as an ideal Indian prince — as the poet's fancy was pleased to depict, even then we would be justified in drawing this conclusion at least, that during the second century it was the custom at Indian courts to occupy oneself with Kāvya..... Further, as regards the characteristics which the prasasti prescribes for gadya-padya 'the compositions in prose and metrical form', it is to be noted, that they essentially agree with those which are given by Daṇḍin for the Vaidarbhī rīti, in accordance with an old tradition".<sup>18</sup>

The most striking feature of Dr. Sircar's arguments, however, is that while as regards India he takes all these occurrences of Sanskrit in inscription as a very rare use in a particular portion of the country, with regard to Indo-China the evidence of the inscriptions of Vo-cañh makes him believe that Sanskrit was the predominant epigraphic language and style in the Far Eastern countries. Even such

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 111.

<sup>18</sup> Buhler — The Indian Inscriptions and the Antiquity of Indian Artificial Poetry Indian Antiquary, 1918, pp. 192-193.

rate use of Sanskrit and ornate metres in some portions of India had certainly a significant bearing on the spread of the language and style of India in these countries. It is an established fact that the phenomenon of Indian colonization in the Far East had allowed many different successive waves, many local currents of varied origins.<sup>19</sup> Different regions of India took part in this work and it is not at all surprising that a particular feature of the culture of one particular portion of India will be met with in the Far Eastern countries. In fact, there are reasons to believe that the first colonizers mostly went from Western India and the Śakas were instrumental in transplanting Indian ideas in South-East Asia. We know that due to the Kushan conquest of India, the Śakas being ousted from North-West India moved to Western and Southern India where they founded new kingdoms. These Śaka adventurers were upholders of the orthodox Hindu culture in India proper, and they appear to have established many of the early Hindu settlements in South-East Asia; and Bhṛigukachchha, one of the busiest ports of India, was situated in their territory. According to the old Javanese legends, the first Hindu king of Java was Aji Śaka; he and his descendants came from Gujarat. The local legends as quoted by the Chinese historians place this event in 56 A. D. This traditional date falls within a period which has just begun to see the disintegration of the Śaka empire due to the Kushan conquest. In any case, it cannot be doubted, as Dr. Sircar<sup>20</sup> has done, that the early Hindu civilization of the Far Eastern countries might have been largely indebted to the people of the Mathurā region, and if it is once admitted, the evidence of the Mathurā inscription of the time of Sodāsa may offer an argument in favour of an early date of the Vo-cañh inscription.

Moreover, Coedès has rightly drawn our attention to the fact that in these countries "there was no long Prakrit tradition as in India. It is a noteworthy fact that in the linguistic Indianisation of Indo-China neither the Prakrits nor the vernacular languages did play any part."<sup>21</sup> Thus it is highly probable that Sanskrit would be used as the language of the inscriptions from the very beginning. As there were close and

19. Coedès—Les États Hindouisés d'Indochine et d'Indonésie 1948., p. 62.

20. D. C. Sircar—Date of the Earliest Sanskrit Inscription of Champa, IHQ, XVII, 1941, p. 109.

21. Coedès—The Date of the Sanskrit Inscription of Vo-cañh, IHQ, XVI, 1940, p. 485.

frequent contacts between India and Further India in ancient times, it can be easily explained why Sanskrit was used in Indochinese inscription not much later than its earliest occurrence in the inscription of India proper and it is not necessary at all to make allowance for the lapse of a wide period of time between the respective uses of Sanskrit in the two countries.

In order to show the great antiquity of this inscription of Vo-cañh Coedès<sup>22</sup> has tried to find out some Chinese synchronism for the king of the line of Śrī Māra at whose order the inscription was composed. In 1921 A. D. Louis Finot formulated the hypothesis that the Hindu settlement of South Annam that has left the inscription of Vo-cañh (200 A. D.) was a small vassal kingdom of Fu-nan and older than the foundation of the kingdom of Champā in this region.<sup>23</sup> Coedès went further and identified Śrī Māra mentioned in the Vo-cañh inscription with the king of Fu-nan called Fan She-Man who, according to the Chinese annals, ruled over Fu-nan in the end of the second and the beginning of the third century A. D.<sup>24</sup> Dr. D. C. Sircar<sup>25</sup>, however, is not inclined to accept this identification. Recently E. GasparDONE<sup>26</sup> has challenged this identification with some fresh arguments.

So far as the equation Fan = Varman is concerned, we fail to understand why Dr. Sircar has presumed that Coedès has believed in the existence of a Varman dynasty (i. e. a line of kings with names ending in Varman) in Champā in the second and third centuries A. D. What we have to consider here is that the main part of the Sanskrit name i. e. Śrī Māra was transcribed into Chinese as She-Man and the Chinese could most naturally add the term Fan to this Śrī Māra in order to show that he was a Kshatriya ruler. We, therefore, need not suppose that Varman was attached to the name of Śrī Māra and also the hypothesis that there was a Varman dynasty in Champā at this epoch is absolutely unwarranted. A study of some ancient Indian texts would show that the Kshatriyas were known as Varmans from the

22 Ibid, p. 485

23 Journal Asiatique, cex, 1927, p. 186.

24 P. Pelliot—'Le Fou-nan', BEFEO III, pp. 257, 265, 291.

25 D. C. Sircar—Date of the Earliest Sanskrit Inscription of Champa IHQ, XVII, p. 109.

26 Emile GasparDONE—La plus Ancienne Inscrittion d'Indochine, JA, cc XLI, 1958, pp. 477-486.

beginning of the Christian era. Thus we find in Pāraskara's *Gṛīhyasūtra* that (the name) of a Brāhmaṇa, (should end in) Śarman, that of a Kṣatriya in Varman and that of a Vaiśya in Gupta (Śarma Brāhmaṇasya Varma Kṣatriyasya Gupteti Vaiśyasya — Pāraskara's *Gṛīhyasūtra*, 1, 17). Manu has recommended that such word as denoting a protector should be attached to the names of kings i. e., the Kshatriyas. (Śarmavadbrāhmaṇasya syādrājño rakshāsamanvitam— 2, 32). Later on Yamasāhita, however, enjoins the use of both Varman and Trātā as titles of the kings (Śarmā devaścha Viprasya Varmā trātā cha bhūbhujāḥ). Vishṇupurāṇa tells us that Varman should be attached to the names of the Kshatriyas (Śarmavadbrāhmaṇasyoktaṁ Varmeti Khatrasaṁyutam). But it should be wrong to suppose from all these mentions of the term Varman that this term became an integral part of the names of all Kshatriya kings in the early period. It appears to have been at that time a mere convention to call the Kshatriyas by the general designation 'Varman' and in a later period we find the term integrated as a part of the name in some cases. We can also show from a number of inscriptions that when Varman first came to be used as an integral part of the names of kings in India, it was not invariably used with the names in all cases and sometimes names of kings without the Varman title are met with. Thus we know that the name of the predecessor of the Kadamba king Kaṅga-varman was Mayūśarman<sup>27</sup> and not Mayūravarman. The name of the first known king of Vishṇukūṇḍins was Vikramahendra,<sup>28</sup> although names of all his successors ended with Varman. The predecessor of the Magha king Bhīmarvarman<sup>29</sup> was Vaiśravaṇa, a name with no Varman title. That Śrī Māra of the Vo-cañh inscription was not called Varman is certainly an index of the great antiquity of the inscription and the fact that there is no place for Varman in the inscription, as E Gaspardone would have us believe, strengthens our supposition that the record belongs to a period when the term Varman did not become an integral part of the names of kings. A close study of the names of kings of Fu-nan and Lin-yi given by the Chinese in the early centuries of the Christian era would show that at first there was no Fan attached to the names of rulers. In this connection Pelliot has made

<sup>27</sup> D. C. Sircar—Successors of the Sāuvāhanas, p. 289.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>29</sup> A New History of the Indian People, Vol VI, p. 45.

the following remark: "This patronymic Fan is isolated by the Chinese from the name, and sometimes it is used, sometimes it is omitted; it might happen that, considered once for all as the name of family of the Cham kings, it had been prefixed spontaneously to the real names, etc."<sup>80</sup> In about the fifth and sixth centuries A. D. there was a tendency to reproduce in Chinese the term Varman by the two characters Pa and Mo. Possibly there was a fresh contact between India and these countries in this period and the gradual introduction of the term Varman in India as an integral part of the names of rulers was reflected in these transcribed names with Pa and Mo; possibly there was an attempt on the part of the Chinese to reproduce correctly this integral part Varman and the result was the use of Pa and Mo.

Gaspardone also has not accepted this identification of Fan She-Man with Śrī Māra. He thinks, "In all appearance, the name of the king of Fu-nan must have been Fan Man, and not Fan She-man."<sup>81</sup> For, according to him, the name of the successor of Pan-huang, at first noted as "Fan She-man", is reduced to "Man" and not to "She-man" in the following statements. He points out that it is current in Chinese to abridge a proper name at the time of repetition, and if the name has two characters, it is not the first, but it is the last one which is repeated. If the name has three characters, and if the name of the family, which precedes naturally, is simple, it is the last two characters which are repeated forming an inseparable name consisting of two terms. Although both in the *Liang Shu* and the *Nan she* we find the name as Fan Man, there is no difficulty in taking this name to be originally as Fan She-Man, as we know that in Chinese it is customary to drop often some part or parts of the proper names in case of repetition. The mere fact that Man and not She-man is repeated in the following statements points to nothing, because there is nothing to show that She (Śrī) and Man (Māra) formed together an inseparable name of two terms.

Again, Gaspardone's another argument<sup>82</sup> is that the character Man of Fan Man has got two pronunciations. The most ancient pronunciation attested in the *She King* and the histories and only noted by Karlgren in the *Grammata Serica* is not Man, but Wan. But

<sup>80</sup> P. Pelliot — Deux Itinéraires de Chine en Inde, BEFEO, IV, 1904, p. 194, n. 2

<sup>81</sup> E. Gaspardone — La Plus Ancienne Inscription d'Indochine, JA, 1953, p. 482

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 489.

the pronunciation of Ancient Chinese, the language of the 6th century A. D., given in Karlgren's Analytic Dictionary<sup>88</sup> apply more correctly to the times with which we are concerned and if any one consults the table of pronunciations of Ancient Chinese, one will at once find that the pronunciation of Man was *mīwən* and not Wan.

Thus taking all these into consideration we find no reason why the identification of Śrī Māra with Fan She-Man should not be accepted and why the date of the Vo-cañh inscription should be brought down to a later date such as the fourth century A. D. The script of the inscription and the Chinese synchronism speak strongly in favour of an early date such as the third century A. D. and other evidences do not go against it.

Coedès has proposed that the issuer of the inscription who was a descendant of Fan She-Man, might have been Fan Chan, the son of the sister of Fan She-Man.<sup>84</sup> It can also be suggested that the issuer of the inscription was Fan Hiong,<sup>85</sup> the grandson of K'iu-lien, the ruler of Lin-yi, through the female line. If this identification is correct, it is reasonable to infer that there was a rapprochement between the royal families of Fu-nan and Lin-yi and in that case we can easily understand why Fan Hiong renewed the attacks about 270 A. D. helped by Fan Siun, king of Fu-nan, against Jenan. We do not know anything about the father of Fan Hiong. It is also possible that Fan Hiong might have descended from Fan She-Man through the paternal line. It is not at all improbable that Fan Hiong borrowed from his father's side the title Fan which was used only by the generals of Fu-nan.

Finally, we may say that the Chinese texts testify to the great expansion of the kingdom of Fu-nan in the time of Fan She-Man. It is said that Fan She-Man wanted to subjugate the kingdom of Kin-lin or Frontier of Gold. This Kin-lin can be located in Kiao-che (Tonkin).<sup>86</sup> The Saddharma-Smṛtyupasthāna-sūtra gives a list of peoples and places and locates an island called Suvarṇakūḍya or

<sup>88</sup> B. Karlgren—Analytic Dictionary of Chinese and Sino-Japanese, p. 191

<sup>84</sup> Coedès—Les États Hindouïsés d'Indochine et d'Indonésie, 1948, p. 76 and p. 78

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. p. 79

<sup>86</sup> P. Pelliot—'Le Fou-nan', BEFEO, III, p. 267, n. "Le K'ang-hi-tsen-tien dit que Kin-lin est le nom d'un lieu au Kiao-che (Tonkin), et son intreprétation a passé dans le Dictionnaire de Giles."

"high wall of Gold" in the South-East of India.<sup>87</sup> As some of the peoples mentioned in the sūtra can very well be placed in Jenan, Yunnan, or Central Annam, we can reasonably hold that there was a Kin-lin to the east of Fu-nan. In that case it becomes clear that Fan She-Man's conquests extended in the east of Fu-nan and it would be quite natural that an inscription of one of his descendants should be found in South Annam.

Kalyan Kumar Sarkar

<sup>87</sup> R. A. Stein—Lo Lin-yi, Han-Hiue, Bulletin du Centre d'Etudes Sino-logiques de Peking, 1947, Vol. II, pp. 812-815.