THE NOEN SA BUA INSCRIPTION OF DONG SI MAHA BO, PRACHINBURY

New evidence on cultural relations between Sri Lanka and Dvaravati kingdom

This writer, being invited by Matichon newspaper and Silpavathanatham monthly, Bangkok, conducted a research programme on cultural relations between Sri Lanka and Siam in ancient times in 1986. Accompanied by Michael Wright and Sujit Wongthes on a tour to Prachinburi, I had the opportunity to visit the ancient site of Wat Sa Morakot and Dong Si Maha Phot (Sri Maha Bodhi). For me there were three main attractions: The Buddha Pāda Lānchana, the imprint of Lord Buddha's Feet, recently discovered at Wat Sa Morakot; the Sri Maha Bodhi tree, which is believed to have grown from a sapling brought from Anuradhapura; and an inscription containing three delightful Pali stanzas in the Vasanta Tilaka metre.

With the first reading of these stanzas, the writer felt them very near and dear to him, so much so, that they were as if lying hidden in some corner of his memory awaiting to respond. This instinct kindled in him a determination to make an intensive study of the inscription, the results of which constitute this paper.

I

The Noen Sa Bua Inscription, as it is called, is inscribed on a stone slab today housed at the small museum at Wat Sa Morakot, Dong Si Maha Phot, Prachinburi Province. The inscription is in what is generally called Pallava Script, that is, post-Brahmi Script, almost identical with the Sinhala Script of the 7th and 8th centuries A.D., and consists of 27 lines. The space from lines 6-16 provides for the three stanzas. The rest at the opening and the close of the inscription are in the ancient Khmer language, and are not of concern in this article.

The latest edition of this inscription appears in the Caruk nai Prûthet Thai, vol.1. The plate and the final text as produced in Caruk and Silpavathanatham Journal are given below.¹

The final text

Yo sabbaloka mohito - karupādhivāso
Mokkham karosi amalam - vara puṇṇa cando
The italic words are the main concern of this writer and they will be examined in consultation with the plate, and the reading adopted by Caruk. mokkham karosi amalam

This does not appear to be grammatical in Pāli, karosi, being second person present tense singular verb, requires a corresponding subject like tvam, which is impossible in the context. mokkhamkarō² is clear on the plate, but the next three aksaras are not clear at all,³ though niramalam has been suggested, and corrected as si ama.⁴ If si is replaced with ti to make karoti, which is grammatically correct with yo, then mokkham karoti amalam does make sense, but in the relevant space on the plate, it is impossible to discern a and the aksara looks more like vi, and then it reads as mokkham karoti vimalam yet ti, vi, ma three aksaras are not free from doubt.

varapunna cando

This seems to be read and restored correctly, but vara punna cando without a qualifying adjective does not yield a complete sense and also does demonstrate poor poetry. Since the first three aksaras of line 6 on the plate are clearly visible as lam, va, ra and if va can be read as ba, then we can make lambara and read together with two preceding aksaras vima, it makes vimalambara, which yet is open to doubt. Anyway, let us tentatively restore the second line as mokkhamkarō su vimalambāra punna cando.

tiranālayassa, line, 1, verse, 2

tiranālayassa looks clumsy and meaningless, tiranālaya can be considered a compound with ālaya and tirana as the two components, but the first word tirana is uncommon in Pali. Unfortunately on the plate too though ti and layassa are clear the two aksaras in between are very difficult to decipher. The space demands one short and one long syllable—to fit in to the Vasanta tilaka metre eg., ti—layassa. If the two syllables can be identified as dasā, then it makes tidasālayassa, arraying the whole line as sopanamalamamalam tidasālayassa meaning, (the Dhamma,) a flight of steps to the abode of the heaven of Tidasa (Tāvatimsa).
sambodha tiramapicuttara khemamaggam, line 3 verse 2

The whole line except for the last word khema maggam looks like a riddle, and difficult to read from the plate. Some aksaras which are very clear on the plate have to be replaced or totally rejected, if the line is to be read as proposed. For example yya has to be replaced with ma which is of an entirely different shape and jja has to be totally rejected if cajjatta is to be rendered as cuttara.

This being so, the whole line deserves to be read and interpreted afresh. The line starts with the third aksara of the eleventh line on the plate. The third and fourth are clearly visible as sabbā. The next aksara, in no way can be recognized as ra or dha. The aksara is of the shape \( \cap \) which easily can be identified as ga, and the next ti is clear. Thus we can form the word sabbagati, sabba + agati. The aksara next to ti has been read as ra, but a sharply focussed eye on the plate, would catch it as \( \lambda \) which can then be identified as bha; the next is very clear and correctly read as yya, thus making sabbagatibhayya, meaning “all fears resulting from evil”. The next aksara to yya is identified as pi, but as it appears on the plate there is no opening at the neck and the upper part of the aksara is also not broad enough to be identified as pi; this being so, it can be easily recognised as vi. The next aksara though read as ca, also can be va, as well. The conjoint aksara next, has been recognized as jja, but with the faint mark over the upper ja, it may be read as jji, and with the next conjoint ita the word forms itself vivajjitta. The last two words khema maggam are clear and correctly rendered. Thus we get the line as sabbagati bhayya vivajjitta khema maggam, “The path of safety to avoid fears of all evils.”

datva nara phalamulam ratanam saranti, line 2, vers 3.

Plalamulam is uncommon in textual Pali language. Saranti appears to be incompatible in the context, where a close examination of the plate will help recognize the first two aksaras as labha making the word labhanti;

Elongation of vowels and duplication of consonants a peculiar phenomenon

As evident on the plate there are some vowels elongated without reason, such as to keep pace with the metre, as for example: yātha, in line 13; dātvā, line 14. Also at some places consonants are duplicated unnecessarily; for example bhayya and vivajjitta in line 11, ratahaam in line 14, and mita in line 16.

How can we explain this phenomenon? Could it be due to the peculiar way of Pali pronunciation adopted by the ancient people of Dvaravati? If so, it can be surmised that the scribe executed his engraving while somebody was reciting the stanzas, and that he incised aksaras as he heard them.

II

After the preliminary survey outlined above, one fine evening, when the writer was reciting these stanzas aloud, while relaxing alone, it suddenly dawned on him that he had read some similar stanzas in the Telakatahagatha which he had committed to
memory when reading for his first Degree. Being excited with this thought I rushed to the library and was surprised to note that these stanzas form part of the opening verses of the *Telakatahagatha*, in which they run as follows:

**TELAKATĀHAGĀTHĀ**

**Ratanattayam**

1. Lankissaro jayatu vāranarājagāmi
   Bhogindabhogarucirāyatapīṇabāhu
   Sādhūpacāranirato gunasannivāso
   Dhamme ṭhito vigate kodhamadāvalepo

2. Yo sabbalokamahito karupādhivāso
   Mokkhākarohavikulambarama puṇṇacando
   Neyyodadhīm suvipulam sakalāṃ vibuddho
   Lokuttamaṃ namathā tam sīrasā munindaṃ

3. Sopānamalam amalam tīdasālayassa
   Sāṃsāraśāgarasamuttaranāya setuṃ
   Sābbāgatibhayavijijatakhemamaggam
   Dhammaṃ namassatha sadā muniṇa paniṇam

4. Deyyam tad appam api yattha pasanna citta
   Datvā nara phalamulārataram labhante
   Taṃ sabbāda dasabalenapi suppasatthaṃ
   Sanghaṃ namassatha sadmitapunnakhettaṃ

5. Tejobalena mahatā ratanattayassa
   Lokattayaṃ samadhidgacchati yena mokkhaṃ
   Rakkhā na ca’ṭthi casamā ratanattayassa
   Tasmā sadā bhajatha taṃ ratanattayam bho.

It is clear that the three stanzas appearing in the Noen San Bua inscription are identical with opening stanza 2, 3 and 4 of the *Telakatahagatha*. Before introducing and examining the authenticity and content of the *Telakatahagatha*, let us attempt to restore the inscription, relying faithfully on the aksaras appearing on the plate, refining the reading given in *Caruk* and the rendering suggested above by the author, comparing them with the stanzas of the *Telakatahagatha*.

**The reading proposed by Caruk nai Pradet Thai, line by line**

4. Sri yo sabbalōkamohito ka -
5. runādhivāso mokhaṃ karo (nirama) -
6. lam varapuṇṇacando noyyo da (mo na) -
7. vikulaṃ sakalāṃ vibuddho lokuttaro
8. nammatha tam sīrasā munendam //
9. sopānamālamamalam tiranā -
10. layassa samsāraśāgarasamuttaranāya
11. setum sambbāaratirāyyapi cajjattakhemama (ggāṃ)
Let us examine whether the reading and the editing can be improved further with the help of the Telakatahagatha:

**Line 4** in *mohito, mo* aksara is correctly read and editing as *mahito* is justified.

**Line 5** in *mokhāmkaro* a dot like mark over the aksara *kh* is not seen on the plate, and the rest *mokkhākarō* is correctly read and editing it as *mokkhākarō* is justified. The last three aksaras read as *nirama* and edited as *si ama* by the editor of *Caruk*, and *tivima* by us, demand further revision in the light of the *Telakaṭahagāthā*. As noted above these three aksaras are almost totally defaced, but with the scarcely visible sines in the relevant space *raviku* as given in the *Tela* can be easily accommodated in the context of the plate.

**Line 6** The first two syllables can be read as *lamba*, and read together with the last three aksaras of line 5 it makes *ravikulambara* as given in *Tela*. *punacando* reading is correct and editing it as *punnacando* is justified.

*Noyyo* reading is correct and should be edited as *neyyo*, the last two aksaras read as *mo na* need revision. If one were to decipher more carefully one would discover the aksara *dhim, su*, which then will tally with *heyyodadhim* in the *Tela* which means “the ocean of what should be understood.”

**Line 7** The second aksara is read as *ku*, and taken together with two aksaras on either side it makes *vikulam*, but in *Tela* we get the word *suvipulam*’ with *su* as has been suggested to be the last aksara of Line 6. On the plate the remnants of the second aksara resemble *ku* more than *pu*, but *suvikulam* or *navikulam* does not yield a sensible meaning. On the other hand such a word is uncommon in textual Pali. Under these circumstances while we can accept *suvikulam* to be the correct rendering of the plate, it can be edited as *suvipulam* to be meaningful. This rendering tallies with the *Tela*.

The last aksara is read as *ro*, but looked at more carefully, *ma* with a dot over it, comes out clearly making the word *lokuttamaṁ* exactly as it appears in the *Tela*.

**Line 8** *namatthi* is faithful to the plate and editing as *namatha* is desirable. *ne* in *munendam* is correctly read but may be edited as *munindam*, since
muni + indam should combine as minindaJn, which is the word in the Tela.

Line 9 The last two aksaras already suggested above as dasā tallies with the Tela.

Line 11 The revised reading adopted above as sabbagati bhayya vivajjittakhemaggam is confirmed by the Tela and bhayya, vivajjitta may be edited as bhaya, vivajjiita.

Line 12 Both na in munina on the plate are cerebral, but editing it as dental is justified and is in accordance with the Tela. The last word appearing on the plate is pasattham, but the Tela has it as panitam, to mean ‘narrated’ which appears to be the most appropriate in the context, “muninā panitam dhammam,” “the Dhamma narrated by the sage”.

On the other hand there is suppasattham in Line 15, used in the same sense as pasattham on the plate; and this amounts to the fault of using repetition, punaruttadosa, which in no way can be attributed to the author of the Tela, especially considering his erudition and mastery of versification, as fully demonstrated in his work. In the circumstances panitam appears to be the ideal in the context. But the word pasattham is quite clear on the plate and cannot be rejected. What could be surmised is that the author of the inscription may have made a slip in his memory in choosing the word pasattham instead of panītam. Yet to be more fair by the author of the inscription Buddhhasiri, we may adopt pasattham, which is actually on the stone.

Line 13 dadapyamapi, is almost accurate to what is on the plate, although it slightly differs from tadappamapi, of the Tela; da instead of ta and pya for ppa may be attributed to faulty hearing of the engraver. This being so, tadappamapi, tam+ appam + api, deyyam “that even a little that should be offered” may be adopted instead of dadanti + yam + api as has been edited. Editing of yāttha as yattha is desirable.

Line 14 dātvā, as read and datvā as edited are both acceptable. The last seven aksaras have been read and adapted as phalamulam ratanam: In the Tela this phrase appears as phalamulārataram, phalam + ulārataram “greater benefit”, a meaning most appropriate in the context. When we look at the plate, there is a vague dot over la which cannot be taken seriously. On the other hand, a vertical stroke parallel to the right arm of la is seen, which cannot be ignored. When la is read with the parallel vertical stroke, it becomes lā, The next two aksaras have been correctly read as ratta, and the final aksara, though read as nam, can also be recognized as ram. Thus we get phalamulārattaram which, when edited as phalamulārataram is what appears in the Tela. Now we
have deyyam tadappamapi yatth pasanna cittā datvā narā phalam ulārataram labhanti, meaning “to whom, having offered even that little that should be offered, human beings obtain very great benefit.”

The first four aksaras which have been read as saranti are corrected above as labhanti In the light of the above examination we can now produce the final text as it should appear on the stone slab as follows:

4. sri, yo sabba loka mohito ka -
5. karunādhivaso/mokhākaro (raviku) -
6. lambara puṇa canḍo/noyyoda (dhiṃ su) -
7. vi (ku) lam sakalam vibuddho/lokuttamaṇi
8. namatthi taṃ sīrāśa munendam//
9. sopānāmālamamalaṃ ti (dāsā)
10. layassa/samsara sāgara samuttaranāya
11. setuṃ/sabbāgatī bhayya vivajjita khema maggaṃ/
12. dhammaṃ namassatā sada munīṇa pasattham//
13. deyyam dādapyamapi yāttha pasanna
14. cittā/datvā narā phalamulārattaraṃ
15. labh nti/taṃ sabbādā dasa balenapi suppasattham/
16. sanghaṃ namassata sadā mitta pūṇa khettāṃ/

**final version**

1. Yo sabbalokamahito karuṇādhivaso
   Mokkhākaro ravikulambara puṇṇa canḍo
   Ŋeyyodadhim suvipulamī sakalamm vibuddho
   Lokuttamaṇī namathā tam sīrasā munindaṃ

2. Sopānāmālamamalaṃ tīdasālayassa
   Samsārasāgara samuttaranāya setuṃ
   Sabbāgatī bhayya vivajjita khema maggaṃ
   Dhammaṃ namassatha sadā munīṇa pasattham*

3. Deyyaṃ tadappamapi yattha pasanna cittā
   Datvā narā phalamularataram labhanti
   Taṃ sabbādā dasabalenapi suppasatthāṃ
   Sanghaṃ namassatha sadāmita pūṇākhettāṃ

**Translation**

1. Pay homage, with (bowed) head, to that great Sage, the highest of the world, revered by the entire world; (the sage)-who is an abode of kindness; a mine of emancipation; the full moon in the sky of the solar clan; who has understood the entire vast ocean of knowledge.

2. Pay homage, always to the Doctrine, preached by the Sage;- (the Doctrine)-

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* paṇītam in the, Telakatāhagāthā, PTS. 1884, pp. 54.
which is the stainless flight of steps to the abode of Tidasa heaven (Tāvatimsa) the bridge to cross the ocean of Samsara, and which is the path of safety to avoid fears of all evil.

3. Pay homage always, to the Community which is an unmeasurable field of merit, to which having offered even a little that should be offered with delighted mind, human beings obtain very great benefit and which has been well praised by the ten-powered one.

The rendering of the Noen Sa Bua inscription in the way suggested above and comparing it with the three stanzas in the Tela which are identical to the text on the plate, one is compelled to deduce that the text of the inscription has been borrowed from the opening of the Telakataha gatha.

III

We now propose to deal with the question of the authorship and authenticity of the Telekatahagatha. In doing so we shall firstly quote Professor G.P. Malalasekera, the renowned author of the Pali Literature of Ceylon.

To the tenth century or the earlier part of the eleventh also belongs the small but delightful Pali poem of ninety-eight stanzas, known as the Tela-katahagatha - the Stanzas of the Oil Cauldron. They purport to be the religious exhortations of a great Elder named Kalyani Thera, who was condemned to be cast into a cauldron of boiling oil on suspicion of his having been accessory to an intrigue with the Queen Consort of King Kalani-Tissa, who reigned at Kelaniya (306-207 B.C.). The story is related in brief in the 22nd chapter of the Maha-vamsa. The Rasa-vahini, written by Vedeha in the first half of the fourteenth century, gives us greater details of the story. There we are informed that the Kings’ attendants placed a cauldron of oil on the hearth and, when the oil was boiling, hurled the Thera into it. The Thera at that instant attained Vipassana, and, becoming an Arahat, rose up in the boiling oil and remained unhurt, “like a royal hamsa in a emerald vase” and in that position reciting a hundred stanzas, looked into the past to ascertain of what sin this was the result. He found that once upon a time when he was a shepherd, he cast a fly into boiling milk, and this was the punishment for his former misdeed. He then expired, and the king had his body cast into the sea. A vihara seems to have been built later on the spot where the Thera was put to death, for the Salaihinisandesa, written in A.D. 1462, refers to it as still existing.

“'The decorated hall, which in their zeal
The merit-seeking people built upon
The spot where stood the cauldron of hot oil
Into which King Kelani-Tissa threw
The guiltless sage, a mere suspect of crime’

Neither the author of our version nor his date is known. There is no doubt, however, that he was a member of the Order, well versed in the Pitakas and commen-
The stanzas show great depth of religious and metaphysical learning. The verses embody in them the fundamental tenets of Buddhism and are an earnest exhortation to men to lead the good life. They open with a blessing upon the king, apt beginning for the utterances of a holy man before his murderer. Their setting is exquisite, and the style of the poem clearly shows that it was written by a man who also knows Sanskrit quite well. Only such a man could have constructed in the elaborate and beautiful metre of the poem so delicate a specimen of Sanskritized Pali. Yet the Pali is not overlaid with Sanskritisms, which shows that the work is earlier than the twelfth century. It is a fine specimen of the literature of what might be called the Pali Renaissance period, before the language became contaminated by Sanskrit influences and lost its pristine purity of diction and simplicity.  

The author and the date of the composition of the Tela are not mentioned in the work. Malalasekara assigns the poem to either the tenth or the early part of the eleventh century A.D., but it is only a conjecture not based on any concrete evidence. Now we see that stanzas 2, 3, 4 of the Telakatahagatha had been quoted in Sa Bua inscription of 761 A.D. This being so, the Telakatahagatha should have been available in Prachinburi before 761 A.D., which leads us to the inevitable conclusion that the Tela predates the inscription.

If we accept that the actual poem was recited by the Arahant himself, as given in the chronicles, then the date would be some where around 250 B.C.

If that is the case then this poem would have been brought down through oral tradition to be committed to writing in the Vattagamini Abhaya period, (89-77 B.C.) like the Tripitaka, Hela atuva, the commenteries in original Sinhala and history of the Sasana. The written Telakatahagatha then would have been refined and perhaps recomposed in the 5th century A.D., in the same manner as the Sinhala commentaries mentioned above were refined and translated by the learned Acariyas like Buddhaghosha, and also as the Mahavamsa came to its final form in the hand of Mahanama Thera in 5th century. Thus the 5th century A.D. can be the latest date of the Telakatahagatha.

However the most important questions that arise from our study are, how, when and through whom this Sri Lankan text reached Prachinburi, possibly the Dvara, or gateway to the Dvaravati Kingdom. Could it be that the knowledge of Telakataha was brought by Bhikkhu Buddhhasiri himself, who was the author of the inscription, according to the Khmer language introduction? If so was he a Sri Lankan monk or a Dvaravati monk who had been in Sri Lanka before 761 A.D.? Whatever it may be, in the light of this new evidence it can now be established that the Sri Lankan Theravada literature had found its way to Southeast Asia, even before 8th century A.D. through Dvaravati, and not in the eleventh century through Ramannadesa as has been generally believed.  

Since the Noen Sa Bua inscription stands out as a strong testimony to cultural
contacts between Sri Lanka and Dvaravati kingdom, the Bodhi tree in the vicinity of the inscription also could have some connection with Sri Lanka. It is noteworthy that the legend connected with Dong Si Maha Phot has it that it was brought from Anuradhapura. It is also possible that Buddhhasiri, the author of the inscription, planted the Si Maha Bodhi, having brought it from Sri Lanka, as had been the general habit of pilgrims from this region to Lanka, bringing, on their return, sacred objects such as corporal relics of the Buddha, replicas of the foot prints on Sumanakuta and saplings of the Sri Maha Bodhi at Anuradhapura.\(^\text{10}\) If so, both the inscription and the Sri Maha Bodhi can have a common birth certificate, with the father as Bhikkhu Buddhhasiri, place as Dong Sri Maha Phot, Prachinburi and the date as 761 A.D. On the other hand it is also not impossible that the Buddha pada lanchana discovered at the same site at Wat Sa Morakot, Dong Si Maha Phot would also have been connected with this episode. It should be noted that in line 26, of the Noen Sa Bua inscription, there is a phrase “Phra Pada Pratistha” which means “established the foot print.” The question is who established it? Was it Buddhhasiri, the author of the inscription himself, or someone else.

If so the date of the establishment of the Buddhapada too, would be the same as that of the inscription and the Sri Maha Bodhi. This would then point again to the influence of the foot print worship prevalent in Sri Lanka in the early centuries of the present era, as already remarked by Professor, H.S.H., Prince Subhadradas Diskul, in his article “A Pair of Lord Buddha’s Foot Prints at Wat Sa Morakot, Dong Si Maha Phot, Prachinburi,”\(^\text{11}\)

Thus the three monuments; the Noen Sa Bua inscription, Sri Maha Bodhi, and the Buddhapada at Wat Sa Morakot can be considered as concrete evidence for close cultural contact between Sri Lanka and the Dvaravati Kingdom as early as the eighth century A.D.

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REFERENCES:

1. *Caruk nai pradet Thai*, vol.1 2529, B.E., the plate, p. 180; text, p. 185;
2. Read as *mokhankaro*, on p.182, *Carik*.
3. The last three aksaras of line 5 on the plate, *Carik*, p. 180.
4. op. cit. pp. 182, 183.
5. The complete poem edited by Mudliar, Edmond R. Goonaratne with an introduction, appears in the
   *Journal of The Pali Text Society*, 1884, pp. 49-68.
6. op. cit. p. 183.
7. *panitam*, in the *Telakatahagatha* in the *JPTS.*, p. 54 .
9. ...Pagan contacts with Ceylon begin with Anuruddha (fl.c. 1044-1077); and it was only at, or after the
   end of his reign that complete copies of the Sinhalese Tipitaka began to reach Pagan...G.A. Luce & Tin
10. For example Mahasami Sri Sraddha Raja Culamuni, in the mid fourteenth century A.D. "...brought (a
    sapling) from the Sri Maha Bodhi of the city of Sinhalas...and planted it...” Inscription 2, *Prachum
    Silacaruk* (line, 54)