

THE FORM VELU OF SRI LANKAN BRAHMI INSCRIPTIONS - A REAPPRAISAL

S. K. Sitrapalam.

In recent times an active interest has been generated in the study and reinterpretation of the early Brahmi inscriptions (Kanazaratnam, D. J. 1978; Veluppillai, A. 1979, 1980, 1981; Sitrapalam, S. K. 1980A, 1980B, 1986-87, 1988; Gunawardena, R. A. L. H. 1983; Seneviratne, S. 1985, 1988; Karunatilaka, P. V. B. 1986). This study has helped us to understand more profitably the political, economic and the social fabric of early Sri Lanka and the process of state formation during this period. During this early phase of our history it was the group of clans which held sway in various parts of the country with the system of ranking as evident from the use of titles such as **Rajas, Parumakas, Gamikas, Gahapatis and Kutumbikas**, although many details of these clans are missing. Moreover, the whole system went out of vogue of by about the 1st or 2nd century A. D. Tantalisingly enough, many scholars who acknowledged the above process failed to take cognizance of a similar process which was in operation on other side of the Palk Strait in the neighbouring Tamil Nadu whose culture too stemmed from a common Proto-historic megalithic cultural base as in the case of Sri Lanka (Sitrapalam, S. K. 1980a, 1988a). Because of this, even some of the clan names have been interpreted as titles or personal names (Nicholas, C. W, 1950; Perera, L. S. 1951; Parnavitana, S. 1970; Hettiarachy, T. 1972, Karunatilaka, P. V. B. 1986). The purpose of the present paper is to study one of the clans mentioned in the early Brahmi inscriptions which has been interpreted as a personal name Velu (Ellawala, H. 1969; Parnavitana, S. 1970). This study becomes more feasible in the light of the earliest extant literature of Tamil Nadu, namely the Sangam literature which has preserved some details of their clan society.

In this form Velu, there are two Brahmi characters namely ve and lu. As it is, there is no difference of opinion in the decipherment of the first letter as ve. The problem only lies with the other letter which has been deciphered as lu by Parnavitana (1970: xxiii - xxv) although Parker as far back 1880 deciphered this form as la (Parker, S. 1909: 429). Parnavitana while doing so has derived this form Velu from Sanskrit Vailva. Similarly Parnavitana (1970 xxiii - xxv) had deciphered the Brahmi letter la occurring in the form parumakal as lu. This form which occurs in eight instances in the early Brahmi inscriptions as a feminine form of Parumaka / Perumakan / Parumakan has been convincingly deciphered as l in the light of the evidence from the Brahmi inscriptions of Tamil Nadu (Sitrapalam, S. K. 1986 - 87). Karunaratne (1984) while referring to this form has observed that 'a similar symbol is seen in the Brahmi inscriptions of Mathurai and the Tinnevely districts of South India and there it is read as la.' Finally he concludes that la too belongs to the same category of Brahmi letters which went out of vogue

at the beginning of the Christian era. Fernando (1969: 19-24) while referring to this earlier stratum and observing a close similarity in some Brahmi characters of both Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka opines that a school of scribes differing in several respects from those who carved the inscriptions of Asoka was existing in South India and Sri Lanka and was practicing its art in these regions even before the time of Asoka.

In the light of the study of the Brahmi inscriptions of Tamil Nadu which are also mostly of similar date it is evident that Paranavitana has failed to take note of the decipherment of the similar form in Tamil Nadu as la (Mahalingam, T. V. 1967; Mahadevan, 1968). The modern Tamil la is evolved from Brahmi la about which Paranavitana had reservations while deciphering this form as Velu (Veluppillai, A. 1981). In the Brahmi inscriptions of both Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka the consonantal dot is conspicuously absent. However depending on the context it has been the norm to add this consonantal dot wherever it is necessary or when the circumstances warranted. It is along this line only the Brahmi letter which has been graphically represented as la has been deciphered as l. This is further confirmed by the evidence from the Sangam literature. These speak of a clan known as Velir, plural of Vel. (Rangaswamy Dorai 1968; Subramanian, N. 1966a). This clan of Vels were not only agriculturists but also senior chieftains and nobles. Even the form Velalar which today means the agriculturists is a derivation of this form. (Subramanian, N. 1966b). This shows that the form Velu of the Sri Lankan Brahmi inscriptions should be read as Vel and not as Velu / Vela.

While deciphering this form Vel as Velu Paranavitana (1970: xxiv-xxv) had further shown evidence from the Sri Lankan Pali and Sinhalese texts in order to prove his point of view. The form 'Velusumana' has been taken from these texts to give validity to his decipherment. Accordingly in Mahavamsa, one of the paladins of the king Dutthagamani was given this name at the time of his birth by combining the names of his father's two friends namely Vela and Sumana. The fact that this form Vela sumana is quoted in the medieval texts like Thupavamsa and Saddharmalankara as Velusumana led him to believe that Velu was the reading which originally stood in the Mahavamsa and the form Vela is a later corruption. It is very likely that the form Vel was written as Vela in the old manuscripts where in the language itself there is no provision to add a consonantal dot. The fact that both Vel and Sumana are two separate names as mentioned in the Mahavamsa is also further confirmed by the evidence from Brahmi inscriptions. Many instances could be quoted from these inscriptions to show that Sumana was used here as a personal name (Paranavitana, S. 1970). There are

also references in these inscriptions of the Vēls occurring in such forms such as Parumaka - Sumana - Veluha; Parumaka Velu Sumana' (Paranavitana, S. 1970: 529, 647). These are in fact a reference to Vēls who had the personal/proper names Sumana and the title Parumaka.

The Vēls are one of the oldest clans of Tamil Nadu. This is quite evident from the epithets used in describing them as 'Vēl Mutumakkal' 'Tonmutu Vēlir (Aham: 372. 3-4), Mutukuti (Puram. 166; 289.5). Although they were wide-spread along the fertile tracts of Tamil Nadu, their main concentration was in Vēlnād, in the southern extremity of Tamil Nadu bordering modern Kerala and Tamil Nadu and there were as many as eighteen branches in this clan. Regarding these Vēlir, Chempakalakshmi (1975 - 76: 110 - 122) observed that the frequent references to Vēlir and their strongholds as overflowing with rice and prosperity and their generosity to learned men would favour their identification with the founders of the earliest agrarian settlement in their region. She, however, finally equates them with the founders of the Proto - historic Megalithic Culture. They were, in fact, the earliest agrarian elite of South India (Seneviratne, S. 1980; 54 - 69). What is said of South India holds equally true of Sri Lanka as well. Tantalisingly enough, in Sri Lanka too most of the inscriptions which have reference to Vēls are in close proximity to the Megalithic sites.

The perusal of the body of Sangam literature shows that there has been a tendency among the native kings / chieftains of Tamil Nadu to trace their lineage to the North India. This, in fact, is due to the acculturation of Northern elements in the South. Vēls are in fact no exceptions to this trend. The early Vēlir Kings of Tamil literature claimed Yadava lineage (Chempakalakshmi, R. 1967 - 68). Purananuru (Thuraicampillai, Cu. 1962 - 64), a Sangam work, in verse 201 mentions that the Vēlir were the descendants of those who ruled over Tuvurai for 49 generations after appearing from the sacrificial pot of the northern sage (Agastya). However, it is relevant to note here that the Medieval Tamil traditions associate Tuvurai with Dvaraka in Gujarat, the capital of the Yadavas. These traditions also associate Agastya with having led the eighteen clans of Vēlir from Dvaraka till he finally settled in the Podiyil hill of Tamil Nadu.

At this juncture, it is relevant to quote some evidence found in the Brahmi inscriptions of Sri Lanka regarding the migration of these Vēls during Proto - historic / historic times into Sri Lanka. Seneviratne (1988) has drawn our attention for the prevalence of Jar myth of Vēlir in Sri Lanka on the basis of a Brahmi inscription. This has been deciphered by Paranavitana

(1970: 250) as Parumaka Kutaragaya Veluha which could be rendered into English as the cave of chief Vel, the holder of vase. Seneviratne has even cited examples from the Parumaka inscriptions from the north western Sri Lanka as having the representation of jar and lance bearer, two attributes associated with Velir (Paranavitana 1970: 1051 - 54). According to him some of the inscriptions from this area mention a town by the name of Tavirikiya which Paranavitana has taken to mean Dvarakiya (Dvaraka). This reminds us of the earliest mythical capital of the Velir, namely Dvaraka (Tuvurai in Tamil). The reference to Dvaramandalaka during the reign of Pandukabhaya of the fourth century BC in the Mahavamsa is again interesting (M. V. 10: 1-3). Hence it is very likely that the terms such as Tuvurai, Dvaraka, Tavirikiya, Dvaramandalaka could be taken as evidence for reflecting a common tradition of this region. It is also of interest to note that the Pandyas as well as all the other lunar dynasties of the South claimed Yadava lineage. Though this is largely mythological, it shows the general direction of acculturation. (Maloney, C. T. 1968: 250). Seneviratne finally concludes that some of the Velir clans arrived at an early date in Sri Lanka with their tradition of Jar and Dvaraka under the pressure from the Pandyas who apparently consolidated their position in the Vaigai - Tambapanni region.

Tampapanni, the earliest name for Sri Lanka, confirms the above hypothesis. The name Tampapanni and Tamraparni are, in fact, the Prakrit and Sanskrit rendering of Tamil Tan porunai (Chempakalakshmi, R. 1967 - 68). Porunai region was also the home of Palayar (old ones) who were also part of the Velir group (Maloney, C. T. 1968: 97 - 98). It is very likely that the form 'Palaya' found in the Sri Lanka Brahmi inscriptions (Paranavitana, S. 1970, 38, 159) refer to these Palayars. It is also likely that the Megasthenes reference (Ramachandra Jam 1984: 62) to the people of Sri Lanka as 'Palaeogoni' has something to do with the Palayar connection. There are also references to Palayamara and Panayamara in Manayamsa (M. V. xxxiii 50 - 61.) As Mara being the family name of the Pandyas, this could be taken to reflect the Palaya-Pandyan linkage. Even the first mythical king of Sri Lanka, king Vijaya who had his capital at Tambapanni is said to have married a Pandu Princess of Southern Mathurai of Tamil Nadu (M. V. Vi). His successors [Panduvāsudeva, Pandukabhaya had their names beginning with the suffix 'Pandu' which means 'old'. Pantu, Pantai also mean old, antiquity (Tamil Lexicon: 2451). Interestingly enough the Pandyas of Tamil Nadu are always referred to as 'Pandu' in the Sri-Lankan Pali chronicles. It is interesting to argue as to whether the kings like Panduvāsudeva and Pandukabhaya claimed their lineage with the 'Pandus' of North India as often claimed by our historians or with Pandu (Pandyas) of South India. very likely with the latter.

Although numerically speaking the inscriptions bearing the title Vels are less in number, numbering only eighteen yet they give a valuable data of the important clans which played an important role in ancient Sri Lanka. They are only the donations of caves made to the Buddhist Sangha by this clan who embraced Buddhism when it was introduced to Sri Lanka in the middle of the 3rd century BC along with the Mauryan or Asokan Brahmi script. In these inscriptions either the Vels themselves or their sons / daughters and in one solitary instance their wife figure as founders of caves. Children even jointly founded the caves. Although some traced their lineage upto three generations most of them belonged to either single or two generations only. Could it then reflect a stage where there was not much of an enthusiasm among the Vels to embrace a new religion namely Buddhism. While tracing their lineage too the donors never called themselves by their clan names. Instead, they preferred to call either their father or grandfather by that name only. These inscriptions are concentrated in the Dry Zone area of Sri Lanka and many of them are in close proximity to the Megalithic sites. As many as four are found in the districts of Anuradhapura and Rampantota. There are two each in Polonnaruwa, Vavuniya, Amparai and Kegalle districts and one each from Kurunegalle and Moneragalle districts. The other valuable data one gets from these inscriptions is the reference to some social groups and the evidence for the use of titles by these Vels.

The occurrence of the form 'Bata' shortened form of 'Barata' in the inscriptions of the Vels is significant (Paranavitana, S. 1970, 121, 123). Inscriptions with the form Bata / Barata are found scattered all over the island and as much as two hundred inscriptions have this form Bata / Barata. Paranavitana (1970) and others (Eunawala, 1969) have given the meaning as 'Lord' for this. However, from the evidence from Sangam literature it is quite clear that this form refers to another clan known as *Kufatava*, who lived in the Pandyan coast in close proximity to the Vels and engaging themselves in trade and Pearl fishing (Sitrampalam, S. K. 1980; Seneviratne, S. 1985). As mentioned earlier this form 'Bata' occurs in the two inscriptions of the Vels. In the inscription no. 123 the three brothers who were the sons of Gahapati Vel figure as co-providers of a cave along with Bata (Paratava) Dutta. Paranavitana (1970: 121) who deciphered this inscription as Sagaslene Bata Citagutasa puta Velusa lene Parumaka masalene and translated this as follows: The cave (is given) to the sangha, the cave of Velju, son of Lord Cittagutta and the cave of .. ma, the chief. Unfortunately the name of the person who had this title Parumaka (chief) is missing in the inscription. It is very likely that here also Vel is mentioned as the son of Paratavar. Gitta.

gutta. Moreover, this may be a pointer to the possibility of inter-marriages between the Paratavar and the Vēl clans. Their preference to keep the identity of their clans even after marriages is also evident from this inscription.

Although the form Aya occurs in only one inscription of the Vēls (Paranavitana, S. 1970: 795) yet it is significant. Paranavitana (1970: lxvi) while deriving this form from Sanskrit Ārya and Pali Ayya rendered it into English as 'Prince' R. A. L. H. Gunawardana (1982: 1-39) while challenging this derivation and holding that linguistically it is not tenable further ascribes its origin to Tamil Ayyan. In both Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu Brahmi inscriptions it has been the practice to graphically represent the short 'a' in places the long ā and the consonantal dot also is absent. Consequently the forms in which these letters occur have been given reading depending upon the context. Therefore it is very likely that the Aya of the Sri Lankan Brahmi inscriptions, which have been given the meaning of a 'prince' could be deciphered as Āy, a class of chieftains / nobles who belonged to the same clan as the Vēls and ruled in Vēlnād (Sitrapalam, S. K. 1988: Puram 129:5, 240: 3,374: 16). Their settlement is mentioned in the Sangam literature as Āykuti and they too like the Vēls claimed lineage to the Yadava clan.

Referring to the Aya of the Sri Lankan Brahmi inscriptions, Mahalingam (1974: 160) observed that this word resembles very much the term Āy in Tamil indicating the line of petty rulers who held sway over the Vēlnād in those early days. Thus in the light of the above interpretation the study of the form Aya (Āy) appearing in the inscriptions of the Vēls assumes significance. In this inscription of Aya (Āy) Siva the female lay devotee Velu (Vēl) is said to be the inmate of the harem of the above. The important fact which occurs from this evidence is the use of form Vēl even to indicate the feminine form. If Vēlu is a personal name as Paranavitana had contended, it is very unlikely that the same form would have been used to indicate the feminine form as well. It is only because it is a clan name the same form Vēl has been used to indicate the feminine form as well. Thus, this inscription not only gives validity to our reading of the form Velu as Vēl but also shows as to how Āys and Vēls were of the same clan as mentioned in the Sangam literature. (Rangaswamy Dorai 1968). In Sri Lanka there are about 52 inscriptions of Āys distributed over twenty six sites out of two hundred and sixty nine sites where the Brahmi inscriptions have been located. Moreover the other noteworthy aspect of the Āy inscriptions is the appearance of a single fish symbol which recalls a similar dynastic symbol of the early Pandyas appearing on the square

copper coins of the Pandyas under whom the Vēls and the Āys reigned as minor chieftains. It is quite possible that this symbol symbolises the recognition of the Pandyan suzerainty by the Āys and the bringing of this tradition of recognition of the Pandyan suzerainty even after their migration to Sri Lanka (Sitrapalam, S. K. 1988).

The title Parumaka which occurs in nearly quarter of the Brahmi inscriptions of Sri Lanka (Sitrapalam, S. K. 1980; 1986-1987; Seneviratne, S. 1988) does appear in the inscriptions of the Vēls as well (Paranavitana, S. 1970; 169, 250, 271, 319, 353, 355, 529, 612, 647, 648, 979). Perhaps this is the single title which occurs in eleven out of the eighteen inscriptions of the Vēls. In fact Parumakas formed the single largest group of nobility who were the backbone of the administration and in rank they were second only to the kings. It looks as if the Vēls were also of the same group as that of the personages who had the title Parumaka as the inscriptions (Paranavitana, S. 1970: 1051-54) from the north western Sri Lanka clearly make it out (Seneviratne, S. 1988). These inscriptions carry two symbols representing the Jar and the lance bearer, two attributes of the Vēlīf. Interestingly these very symbols not only appear in the Megalithic pottery of this region, but also the inscriptions are located in close proximity to the famous urn burial Megalithic site of Sri Lanka namely Pomparippu. Unfortunately no symbols have been found in the inscriptions of the Vēls.

The parumaka title occurs in these inscriptions in different contexts, sometimes simply qualifying the clan name Vēl as Parumaka Vēl, on other occasions qualifying the personal name of the Vēl with the Parumaka title such as 'Parumaka Tabara Vēl'. In one of these inscriptions at least three generations of the Vēls are mentioned (Paranavitana, S. 1970: 647). It records Parumaka Phussadeva as the son of Parumaka Vēl and grand son of Parumaka Vēl Sumana. It may be recalled here that Phussadeva is here mentioned without his clan title where as in the case of his forefathers this remains added. He is also mentioned here as a revenue officer of the king Devanampiya Raja Tissa who has been identified with Mahaculi Mahatissa, the grand nephew of Dutthagāmini (Paranavitana, S. 1970: lxi; Godakumbura, C. E. 1965): It seems that the Vēls were very close to Dutthagāmini and his descendants.

That the Vēls too belonged to the class of nobility is also quite evident from the Sri Lankan literary sources. For, Mahavamsa and Sahassavattupakarana mention about seven paladins of the king Dutthagāmini including Vēl

Sumana as belonging to the class of Kutumbikas (karunatilaka, [K. V. 1986: 130). As Mahavamsa makes out they were also known as Mahākulas. In the light of the above evidence Karunatilaka's inference that the Mahākulas and the Kutumbikas designate noble families is convincing. Unfortunately there is only one solitary reference for the Kutumbikas in the Brahmi inscriptions of Sri Lanka (Paranavitana, S. 1970: 233) and Paranavitana has rendered this term as 'householder'. Likewise an inscription found at Tirupparankunram in Mathurai district of Tamil Nadu refers to a Kutumbika(n) from Sri Lanka. The relevant portion of the text runs as follows 'Ila kutumbikan Pōlālayan' which has been rendered into English as a householder from Ilam by the name of Pōlālaiyan by Mahalingam (1974: 251-257). Perhaps Ellawala (1969: 51) is quite right in classifying them with the Parumakas. Thus in the light of the literary and other evidences the Kutumbikas could be classed as a group of nobles who were landowners as well as merchants to whose class the Vēls too belonged. In one of the inscriptions found at Periya Puliyankulam in the Vavuniya district Parumaka Vēl is mentioned as the superintendent of horses (Asa-Adeka) (Paranavitana, S. 1970: 355): It is very significant indeed because it occurs in the same site along with two other inscriptions which have a reference to 'Dameda Vanijha Gapati Visaka' which means, a wealthy Tamil Merchant Visaka. (Paranavitana, S. 1970: 356, 357). This in fact is a reference to traders from Tamil Nadu.

Besides this, a Brahmi inscription from Anuradhapura which is better known as Tamil householders' Terrace inscription also mentions Gahapati named Karava with an additional title navika which means trader / mariner (Paranavitana, S. 1972: 90). Another inscription from Kuduvil in Amparai district too mentions Tamil traders (Paranavitana, S. 1970: 480). Besides these inscriptional evidences, there is also reference in the Pali chronicles which attest to the presence of Tamil traders in Sri Lanka during 3rd/2nd century B. C. Sena and Guttaka the two invaders from Tamil Nadu who overpowered Asela and ruled in Anuradhapura in the second century BC for twenty two years appear to have been connected with the horse trade in the island. For, according to Mahavamsa their father was a Assanāvika or ship's captain dealing with horses (M. V. xxi: 10). Interestingly in another instance Mahavamsa associates Velusumana (Vēlsamana) with horses from Sind (M. V. xxii 69 - 72). Moreover, the Paratavar of Tamil Nadu imported horses into South India (Maloney, C. T. 1968: 117). The Sangam literature mention that the Vēls who besides being agriculturists delighted themselves in their horses (Maloney, C. T. 1968: 97). Therefore, it is very likely that this Vēl was retained in the royal court as superintendent of horses for his expertise in the horse trade.

The term Gamika occurs as a title of the Vēls in two inscriptions (Paranavitana, S. 1970: 745, 880). In the first instance Upasika Devaya is mentioned as the daughter of Gamika Vēl and in the latter instance Damaya is mentioned as the daughter of Gamika Vēl. Paranavitana has however rendered this form Gamika as a 'village councillor'. Ellawala (1969: 51-55) on the other hand while treating them as the head of the village sees no difference between the Gamikas and the Parumakas in status. In fact they were approaching the status of the Parumakas in the social and economic spheres. They even had matrimonial alliances with the ruling kings and the Parumakas (Paranavitana, S. 1970: 913; 578). They held high position in the administration as ministers (ameta) revenue collectors (ayaka), keeper of the treasury (Badagarika) (Paranavitana, S. 1970: 797, 429, 139). Thus both Parumakas and Gamikas had virtually dominated the administration (Karunatilaka, P. V. B. 1986).

That the Vēls had borne the title Gahapati is also evident from the two inscriptions of the Vēls (Paranavitana, S. 1970; 123, 778). In the inscription numbering 123, three brothers are mentioned as sons of Gahapati Vēl. The other inscription mentions Tissa as the son of Gahapati Vēl. Paranavitana, has rendered this form as 'householder'. Ellawala (1969: 42), while agreeing with Paranavitana, however, argues that this term denoted a landowner or merchant of high birth and wealth. There are over seventy Brahmi inscriptions in Sri Lanka which mention this title 'Gahapati'. The body of these inscriptions show the prestigious positions enjoyed by this class in the administration as treasurers, messengers, accountants and superintendent of the Royal mint (Paranavitana, S. 1970: 215, 293, 679, 930). That they were even wealthy merchants is also known from the use of this title by the merchants. References to the Tamil traders in the Periya Puliyankulam inscriptions and the Tamil householders terrace inscription quoted above bear testimony to it. These instances clearly show that they were not merely householders but wealthy nobles and Vēls too, belonged to their group.

Finally, the study of the Vēls of Sri Lankan Brahmi inscriptions, however, shows their early migration from Tamil Nadu and their active role in the administration in the early historic Sri Lanka. Besides this, they too remain as a case study for one of the clans when exposed to various influences with the flux of time as to how they got acculturated and thereby lost their identity in the long process of time. This study also warrants the need for the closer scrutiny of the social history of Sri Lanka against the contemporary Indian back ground, more particularly that of South India and the necessity of delineating the various cultural strands which came to interact during the Proto-historic/early historic phases of Sri Lankan history.

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Veluppillai, A.

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