

# EELAM - AN ANCIENT NAME OF SRI LANKA ENDURING OVER TWO MILLENNIA

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Three of the earliest names used to denote the island of Sri Lanka are: 1. Lanka (Ramayana), 2. Tamraparni (Asoka Inscription) and 3. Eelam (Thirupparankunram Inscription). All these three names were in use since before the Common Era (Christian Era).

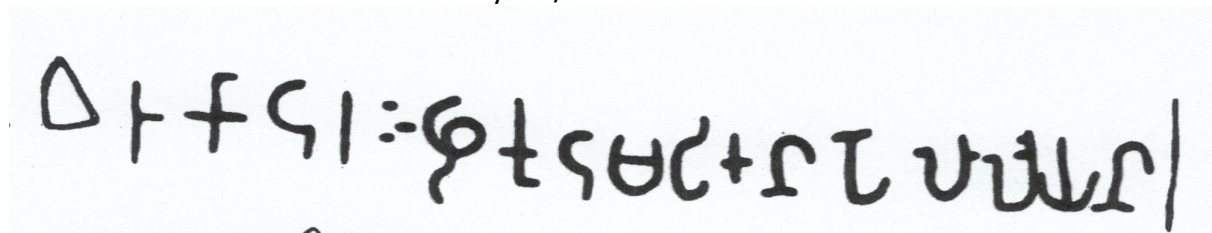
Prof Thomas Burrow (University of Oxford) and Prof Murray Barnson Emenau (University of Berkeley, California), the compilers of the *Dravidian Etymological Dictionary* (Oxford 1961) are of the opinion that the name of the land 'Eelam' came from the Dravidian word 'Eelam' (or Cīlam) referring to the palm trees in Ceylon which produces toddy.

Another meaning for 'Eelam' in Dravidian is gold or copper, and the copper-coloured soil may have given the name 'Eelam' to the land. The Prakrit name 'Tamraparni' (Tambapanni in Pali) also means copper coloured soil. This is an alternate explanation for the origin of the term *Eelam*.

## THIRUPPARANKUNRAM INSCRIPTION: 2<sup>nd</sup> Century BCE - 1<sup>st</sup> Century BCE

The earliest now available reference to the word *Eelam* is in a Tamil Brahmi inscription from about the 2<sup>nd</sup> - 1<sup>st</sup> Century BCE found in a cave at Thirupparankunram in Tamilnadu. It is found engraved on the ledge above the row of stone beds in the cave. It is about a donation made by a man named Polalaiyan to the Jain monks.

The first line of the two lined script reads: Erukathur Eela-Kutumbikan Polalaiyan, meaning (the gift made by) Polalaiyan, the Eelathu householder from Erukathur. Eelam is identified as the island of Ceylon / Sri Lanka.



This inscription from Thirupparankunram refers to the house-holder Polalaiyan from Eelam.  
Picture Courtesy: I. Mahadevan 2003: p.390.

### References:

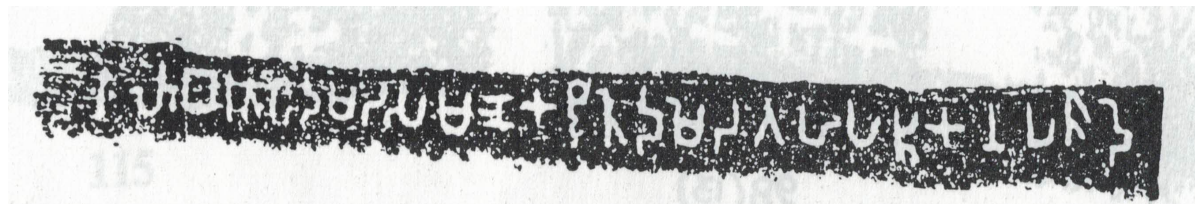
1. Mahadevan, I. (1966): *Corpus of the Tamil Brahmi Inscriptions*, Seminar on Inscriptions., Madras, p. 9.
2. Mahadevan, I. (2003): *Early Tamil Epigraphy: From the Earliest Times to the Sixth Century A.D.*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, pages 390-392.
3. Mahalingam, T.V. (1974): *Early South Indian Palaeography*, University of Madras, Madras., pages 251-257.

## ROCK INSCRIPTION AT ABHAYAGIRI, ANURADHAPURA: - 2<sup>nd</sup> Century BCE

The Brahmi rock inscription at Abhayagiri Vihara, Anuradhapura belonging to the second century BCE, (*Inscriptions of Ceylon No. 94*) has a three-line inscription, the first line reads as follows: “*Eelabaratahi Dameda-Samane karate Dameda ghaspathikana pasade*”. This means “The terrace of the Tamil house-holders caused to be made by the Tamil Saman of Eelabarata. *Eelabarata* referring to the Barata of *Eelam*.”

Scholar Paranavitana of the Dept. of Archaeology, who first read this script and published it, mis-read the first word as “*Ilubaratahi*” instead of “*Īla (Eela)baratahi*”

Dr Velupillai has pointed out that the very first letter of the script is ‘Ī’ (Ee) - (sign: ‘|’ in Brahmi) which anyone with a basic knowledge of Brahmi can easily identify. It is baffling how a scholar like Paranavitana who is supposed to be proficient in reading the Brahmi script mis-read the very first letter of this inscription.



This inscription from Abayagiri at Anuradhapura refers to the terrace of the Tamil house-holder Saman of Eela Barata. Picture Courtesy: S. Paranavitana.

### References:

1. Paranavitana, S. (1970): *Inscriptions of Ceylon: Early Brahmi Inscriptions*; Dept of Archaeology, Colombo.
2. Velupillai, A. (1971): *Inscriptions and Tamil Studies*, Peradeniya.

## EELAM IN PATTINAPĀLAI - First Century CE

*Pattinapalai* is a Sangam text compiled by Kadiyalur Uruthiran Kannanar in praise of King Karikal Valavan (first century CE) and his capital Kaviripum Pattinam. While describing the goods imported from abroad it speaks of “*Eelathu Unavum Kalakattakkamum*” meaning “foodstuff from Eelam and goods from Kalaham”

### References:

1. *PATTINAPALAI* (1988): *Kadiyaloor Uruthiran Kannanar Iyattriya Pattinapalai*: Palaniyappa Brothers, Chennai., Page 6, Line 191.

## **EELATHU POOTHAN THEVANAR - First Century CE**

Among the Sangam literature (3<sup>rd</sup> Century BCE- 1<sup>st</sup> Century CE) there is bard named Poothan Thevanar from Eelam who had composed three poems in *Akananooru*, three poems in *Kuruntokai* and one poem in *Narrinai*. Modern Indian commentators say that he came from 'Eelam' (Lanka) and maintained his identity by prefixing *Eelatthu* to his name (Pillay 1975:

### **References:**

1. Pillay, K. (1975): '*South India and Sri Lanka*', Sir William Meyer Lectures 1958-59, University of Madras, Madras. P. 37.
2. Dravidian Encyclopaedia, Vol. 3, p. 767.

## **KING OF EELAM: EELATHU-ARAYAN - 10<sup>th</sup> Century CE INSCRIPTION**

During the battle at Vēlūr, Chola king Parantaka (907-955) was opposed by the Pandyan ruler and the ruler of *Eelam*. The ruler of *Eelam* who marched against him was named as *Eelathu-arayan*, meaning the king of Eelam in an inscription (commented as the king of Ilankai by Krishna Sastri who deciphered this) (Krishna Sastri 1929: 232).

### **Reference:**

1. Krishna Sastri (1929): "No. 99 - The North Wall of the Central Shrine in the Khrapurisvara Temple at Thirupparkatal, *South Indian Inscriptions* 3: 3-4, pages 231-233.

## **EELA-MANDALAM IN RAJARAJA INSCRIPTIONS - 10<sup>th</sup> Century CE**

*Eela-mandalam* refers to the region of *Eelam*, an administrative unit of the imperial Cholas during their occupation of *Eelam*. The Chola king Rajaraja (985-1016) conquered several countries, among them *Eelam*. This land was included in his empire as *Eela-mandalam* (Hultzsch, 1892: 40: I, IV)

### **References:**

1. Hultzsch, E. (1892): No. 40, "I. Inscriptions at Māmallapuram" p.64 ; "IV. Inscriptions at Tirumalai Nera Polūr" p. 95.; *South Indian Inscriptions*.

## **EELAM IN MATHOTTAM INSCRIPTION - 11<sup>th</sup> Century CE**

There is a stone slab inscription obtained from Mātottam (Mannar) preserved in the Museum at Colombo. This eleventh century Tamil inscription was first read by Krishna Sastri, the epigraphist from India (Krishna Sastri 1923). This inscription mentions a donation made to the Thirukketisvaram temple in *Eelam* by a landowner from Cholamandalam in Tamilnadu.

### **References:**

1. Krishna Sastri (1923): "No. 1412. On a Slab preserved in the Museum at Colombo", *South Indian Inscriptions* 4, page 173.
2. Velupillai, A. (1972): "Inscription from Tirukkētisvaram of Mātōttam, Ceylon Tamil Inscriptions: pages 42-55.

## **EELAM IN TAKSHINA KAILASA PURANAM - 14<sup>th</sup> Century CE**

Takshina Kailasa Puranam is a 14<sup>th</sup> Century chronicle about the traditional history of Thirukkoneswaram temple at Trincomalee. The authorship is ascribed to Jayaveera Cinkaiaryan, the king of Jaffna (1380-1410). This work mentions *Eelam* as the country of this temple and provides descriptions of the people of *Eelam*.

### **References:**

1. *THAKSHINA KAILASA PURANAM*: (Edited by K. Chithambara Iyer- 1887), Chennai.
2. *THAKSHINA KAILASA PURANAM*: (Edited by E.S. Ragunatha Iyer - 1942), Jaffna.
3. Fr. Gnanapragasar (1940): A Critical History of Jaffna. Pages 99-102.

## **EELAMANDALAM IN PALLU VERSE - 18<sup>th</sup> Century CE**

Sinnathamby Pulavar (1716 - 1780), a famous poet from Jaffna composed a *Pallu* (a drama in poetry depicting scenes from rural life) in 28 verses, where he compares *Eela-mandalam* with *Cholamandalam* - nature of the land, the richness, the agricultural products, the fertility and the beauty of their women.

The verses will end as "*Eela Mandala Nādengal Naade*" meaning "Eelamandalam is our country".

### **References:**

1. Kumaraswamy Pulavar (1938): Tamil Pulavar Sarithiram (in Tamil), Chennai.

## **TAMIL EELAM - Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century CE**

In Sri Lanka, the latter half of the twentieth century saw the emergence of the Tamil resistant movement. On 14<sup>th</sup> May 1976, at their Annual Conference held at Vaddukoddai in Jaffna, the Tamil United Liberation Front under the leadership of Mr S.J.V. Chelvanayagam unanimously passed a resolution that the creation of an independent *Tamil Eelam* and the establishment of the right to self-rule is the only salvation to the Tamils in Ilankai (Sri Lanka).

The resistant movement, Tamil National Front (TNF), reorganised themselves as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

There is a misconception in some circles that the LTTE was responsible for creating the name *Eelam*, and this term has never been used as an early name for Sri Lanka.

The above article provides ample evidence to show that the term 'Eelam' has been in use for the past 2200 years as another indigenous name for the island of Sri Lanka.

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