Vedica relief of 3rd century B.C. showing elephant pillar and Brahmi inscription, Bharhut-Madhya Pradesh. Bottom shows Brahmi inscription with Devnagari decipherment.
This book would not have been possible without the support of my batch mates. My special thanks to Mandar Sir, Sreekumar Sir, Ma, Baba, Sushmita, Manorama & Suvarthi.

Guidance: Prof. Mandar Rane
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Brahmi
Rediscovering the lost Script

Ankita Roy
Writing Antiquity

Humans have evolved and have left a lot of traces for their posterities starting from the cave paintings to the modern graphics each and everything tell us a story. A story that’s built not may be in a hundred years but probably thousands of years ago. It is the tradition that is passed slowly from one generation to the other, from one culture to the other. When we look back around Five thousand years ago in 2600 B.C. in the northwestern parts of India one civilization that was spanning was the Indus Valley Civilization.

Indus Valley Civilization

They were the ones who were highly developed and rich in their culture, having humans settled from various parts of the world making it the largest ancient civilization in the world. They were the ones to be extremely innovative, they had toys that were easily movable, they had small carts, animal figurative, and they were the first ones to know about the burnt clay techniques, they were technologically very ahead, they knew about the plaster techniques, metal casting, they had some of the advanced systems of drainage, multi-storeyed house and grain storage.

The communication was playing an important role and conveying the message became the integral part. From the cave paintings abstraction began which were further developed into hieroglyphic or pictographic style. The images were put together to convey a message in written or in scripted format. This is the time when the scripts came into being.

White elephants showering holy water on Lord Mahavira. A folio from the Mandu Kalpasutra Jain style, Mandu, Central India. c 1439 A.D.

Human Figurines, c 2500-2000 B.C., Harappan Civilization. Shell Animal head, c 2600 - 2000 B.C., Dholavira, Gujarat
Inscriptions & Manuscripts

Sign Board Inscription (set of nine letters):
Made by arranging cut pieces of milk-white crystalline material
c.2600 B.C., Indus Valley, Dholavira, Gujrat.

Style of Writing:
The writing pattern was shifting due to the material that it was used to write or inscribe.

Sixteen dreams of Mother Tristha before the birth of Lord Mahavira. An illustration from a Jain Kalpasutra Jain style, Western India, 1500-25 A.D.
Early Scripts of India

Indus Valley Brahmi Kharosthi

**Indus Valley Script:**
The earliest script in India so far known is the Indus Valley pictographic
script. Two great cities of over 5,000 year old have been discovered in the
script: Harappa in Punjab and Mohenjo-Daro in Sind. Several thousand
seals have been discovered in the Indus valley.

**Brahmi Script:**
Brahmi script appeared by the 3rd century B.C. during the reign of the great
Indian king Ashoka, who inscribed his laws onto monumental columns.

**Kharoshthi Script:**
Kharoshthi is a clerk's alphabet and was a secondary script, running along
by the side of the Brahmi script, which prevailed all over India and is also
considered to be descended from Brahmi.
Writing materials

Stone
Metal
Palm Leaf / Tada patra
Birch Bark / Burja Patra
Wood
Bamboo
Bricks
Clay Tablets
Cotton cloth
Paper

Manuscript:
It is a written information that has been manually created by someone or some people, such as a hand-written letter, as opposed to being printed or reproduced some other way.

The information are chiselled upon a material such as palm leaf, tree barks scratched with a knife pointed tool or written with ink on cloth.

“Pashupati Seal” from Mohenjo-Daro a three headed deity/priest seated in an advanced yogic position that is Mulbandhana Asana and is surrounded by five beasts. Pashupati is also known as the controller of the wild beast.

An example of palm leaf manuscript.

Metal tablet with Indus Valley Script
Brahmi

Many examples of Brahmi are found during the period of 3rd or 4th century B.C., but Brahmi lipi had a long history in India even before king Piyadasi Ashoka caused his edicts to be incised in the various provinces of his large empire. Brahmi letters were found inscribed from right to left (Boustrophedon style) in a seal from Mohenjodaro and the Indus Civilization which was older than 2400 B.C.

In one of the inscriptions - Ashoka has justified, the engravings on stone, last longer in comparison with the writing on other perishable mediums such as cloth, leather, wood etc.

The Brahmi letters are given in comparison with the devnagri forms in the bottom figure.
Chronology

Proto-Brahmi Script (c 1700-600 B.C.)

Pre-Mauryan Brahmi Script (c 600-350 B.C.)

Mauryan Brahmi Script (c 350-150 B.C.)

Post Mauryan Brahmi Script (c 150 B.C.-600 A.D.)

Girnar Inscription, Gujrat, 3rd century B.C.
Maurya Dynasty

The 4th century B.C witnessed the rise of Magadha Empire (present day Bihar) under the rule of Chandragupta Maurya in 323 B.C. The empire later expanded under Asoka.

Asoka embraced Buddhism and was later dedicated to the propagation of Buddhism across Asia making several stupas, rock edicts, pillars. This change in King Asoka’s life came after witnessing the mass death and destruction which was the result of Kalinga War.

Edicts describing the Kalinga War

The Daya river turned red due to the mass killing. Ashoka ended the military expansion of the empire, and led the empire through more than 40 years of relative peace, harmony and prosperity.

"Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Priyadarshi, conquered the Kalingas eight years after his coronation. One hundred and fifty thousand were deported, one hundred thousand were killed and many more died (from other causes). After the Kalingas had been conquered, Beloved-of-the-Gods came to feel a strong inclination towards the Dharma, a love for the Dharma and for instruction in Dhamma. Now Beloved-of-the-Gods feels deep remorse for having conquered the Kalingas."

Rock Edict No.13

This is an illustrated form of the edicts of Asoka the Great.
Brahmi Decipherment

Brahmi was deciphered by James Prinsep (1799 – 1840) who is the first epigraphist. He deciphered the Ashokan inscription incised in Brahmi letters from left to right.

Prinsep was making copies of the inscription from the Sanchi Stupas, it is that time when he noticed the repetition of two letters. These two letters were there in almost in every ending of the inscription. He suspected these letters to be as ‘gift’ and in sanskrit as ‘danam’. Thus recognized the letter ‘d’ and ‘n’, shown in the Fig.1. The word next of danam that was deciphered was ‘Pyadasi’. Likewise the full decipherment began.

Girnar Inscription, Gujrat, 3rd century B.C.

Fig.1
The letters ‘d’ and ‘n’, the word is ‘danam’ meaning ‘gift’, the first deciphered word.

Deciphering Kharosthi

Here again this script was also deciphered by Prinsep, he used the bilingual Indo-Greek coins to decipher Kharosthi.
Origin of Brahmi

Brahmi letters developed from the hieroglyphs of the Indus Valley script (Fig. 2) and also has few connections with the Phoenician style (Fig. 3), thus it has Semitic origin.

Phoenician was a language originally spoken in the coastal (Mediterranean) region then called “Canaan” in Phoenician, Arabic, Hebrew & Aramaic languages whose living representatives are spoken by more than 470 million people across much of the Middle East, North Africa and Africa. They constitute a branch of the Afro-Asiatic language family. The most widely spoken Semitic languages today are: Arabic, Amharic, Hebrew & Aramaic.

The Semitic languages are a group of related

Fig. 2
Development of Brahmi from Indus Script Hieroglyphs

Fig. 3
Oldest Semitic & Indian Alphabets

Early Stages of Indus Script 2500 B.C
Brahmi Script 3rd / 4th century B.C
Devanagari Script
### Brahmi as a Hieroglyph

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brahmi Script</th>
<th>Devnagari Script</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Brahmi Script</th>
<th>Devnagari Script</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
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<td>देव</td>
<td>Cave</td>
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<td>जपिण</td>
<td>Distiller's Pot</td>
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Descendants of Brahmi

They are used throughout India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet, Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and in scattered enclaves in Indonesia, southern China, Vietnam and the Philippines. As the script of Buddhist scripture, Brahmic alphabets are used for religious purposes throughout China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam.

The Asian continent is the main holder of all the Brahmi descendants in India, the scripts of India are divided in two main parts.

**Northern Group:**
Gupta, Kutila, Nagari, Sharada & Bengali.

**Southern Group:**
Western (Gujrati-Modi), Madhya Pradesh, Telegu, Kannada, Vatteluttu (Malayalam) & Damila (Tamil).

Map of the descendants of Brahmi Script.
Developmental Stages of Brahmi

The journey of how the type travelled from 3rd century B.C., Asokan period to Gahadavala of the 12th century A.D. This shows the developmental stages of letter "Ka". The last "Ka" is today's Devnagari script which is the descendent of the Brahmi script.

Vishnu (Preserver God), Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu.

Dvarapala (Door keeper), Nachana Kuthara, Madhya Pradesh.

Female bust, Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh

Moustached male head, Sarnath, Uttar Pradesh.

Garland bearer, Amravati, Andhra Pradesh.

Mauryan
3rd century B.C.

Satavahana
2nd century A.D.

Gupta
5th century A.D.

Pallava
6th-7th century A.D.

Vardhana
7th century A.D.

The above display also shows how the earlier sculptures were just a simple human form and slowly the detailing is seen in the later stages.

The change in design that came over a period of time was due to the base and tools used to write or inscribe. While writing, scribes tend not to lift their hand for writing faster. This brought in a different look altogether.
Garuda (Mythical bird and mount of Vishnu), Pallu, Rajasthan.

Vishnu (Preserver God), Bengal.

Mohini (A female representation of Vishnu), Gadag, Karnataka.

Laxmi-Narayan on Garuda, Halebid, Mysore.

King Prathivideva & Queen Kelachchhadevi, Alwar, Rajasthan.

Pratihara
10th c A.D.

Pala
11th century A.D.

W. Chalukya
11th c A.D.

Hoysala
12th c A.D.

Gahadavala
12th c A.D.

क क क क

Canarese Script
Kannada,
Southern Group.

Nagari Script
Devanagari,
Northern Group.
## Development of Nagari Script

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mauryan</th>
<th>Kushan</th>
<th>Gupta</th>
<th>Yashodharman</th>
<th>Vardhana</th>
<th>Pallava</th>
<th>Rashtrakuta</th>
<th>Paramara</th>
<th>Yadava</th>
<th>Vijayanagar</th>
<th>Nagari Script</th>
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### Description

- **Mauryan**: 3rd century BCE
- **Kushan**: 2nd century A.D.
- **Gupta**: 4th century A.D.
- **Yashodharman**: 5th century A.D.
- **Vardhana**: 6th century A.D.
- **Pallava**: 7th century A.D.
- **Rashtrakuta**: 8th & 9th A.D.
- **Paramara**: 11th & 12th A.D.
- **Yadava**: 13th A.D.
- **Vijayanagar**: 15th & 16th A.D.
- **Nagari Script**: Various scripts across different periods.
# Development of Bengali Script

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*Information is not available*
## Indic Scripts

Some of the Indic scripts show a major influence from Brahmi, but rest have derived a completely independent form in itself.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brahmi</th>
<th>Devanagari</th>
<th>Bengali</th>
<th>Gujarati</th>
<th>Kannada</th>
<th>Malayalam</th>
<th>Oriya</th>
<th>Punjabi</th>
<th>Tamil</th>
<th>Telegu</th>
<th>Sinhalese</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>॥</td>
<td>आ अ अं अ े ए एँ ए</td>
<td>क़ क़ क़़ क़ः क़ऽ क़ऺ</td>
<td>े े इ इँ इऽ इऺ</td>
<td>ेँ िँ ऐ ऐँ ऐऽ ऐऺ</td>
<td>ेः िः ऐः ऐः</td>
<td>ेथः िथः</td>
<td>े़ः ि़ः</td>
<td>ेऽः िऽः</td>
<td>ेऺः िऺः</td>
<td>ेऺऺः</td>
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Brahmi Numerals & Matras in comparison with Devnagri

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brahmi</th>
<th>Devanagari</th>
<th>Latin</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ए</td>
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<td>एएएएएएएएएए</td>
<td>०</td>
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Ancient Symbols

Construction of ओः (Om)

ओः (Om/Aum) is a mystical or sacred syllable in the Indian religions, i.e. Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. It is from a Dravidian origin, having the meaning of "yes", "It is" or "Will be".

According to Walawalkar, the letter ओः (Om) is a phonograph written in linear Brahmi ओ अ (a, u, m). The graphic representation of three sounds is a phonetic notation showing three distinct graphemic units.

Punch Marked Coin Symbols:
The earliest coin series of India started with silver punch-marked coins around 5th century B.C. These coins bear varying symbols of animals (elephant, bull, turtle etc.), plants, religious symbols and every day objects (plough, pot).

A.B Walawalkar: He is an epigraphist of the 20th century, he published his study on the origin of Indian alphabet 'Pre-Ashokan Brahmi- A study on the origin of Indian alphabet (Maheshwari phonography)' in 1951. Taxila Coins Ganga and Hoysala
Deciphering a symbol

This symbol is engraved on some of the ancient coins published by James Prinsep (the first epigraphist 1799 – 1840) and others. The symbol on the left according to Walawalkar, resembles the devnagri Oṃ (Om) turned on its left side. Whereas Princep suggested that it may be Buddhist Chaitya, flame of Mount Meru or Mount Abu.

Elephants worshipping Bodhi tree, Bharhut-Madhya Pradesh

दुहु हत्य को निरद
twusat tak rdc
rkøs ḥamkø

Above Brahmi is the inscription from the image and left is the Devanagari decipherment of the same.
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National Museum – Kolkata
Prince of Wales - Mumbai

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Child learning Brahmi Vernmala, found from Sugh, Haryana, ht: 5.4 cm in stone, 3rd century B.C.
Brahmi script appeared by the 3rd century BC, during the reign of the great Indian king Ashoka, who inscribed his laws onto monumental columns.