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A Unique Śāṅkhalipi (Shell-script) Inscription from Si Thep, Thailand

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ABSTRACT

Inscriptions in the highly calligraphic and still undeciphered *śāṅkhalipi* or ‘shell script’ have been found by the hundreds in most parts of India except the far south, typically in conjunction with sites and monuments dating from around the Gupta period and succeeding centuries. To date, four specimens have also been discovered in the Indonesian archipelago, in West Java and West Kalimantan (Borneo). Another specimen of *śāṅkhalipi* inscription, engraved on a pillar and exceptionally ornate, was recently discovered in Thailand at the site of Si Thep, a moated early settlement in Phetchabun Province. The article reviews the historical and cultural contexts of shell-script inscriptions in India and discusses the significance of this remarkable first specimen found in mainland Southeast Asia.

KEYWORDS

archaeology of Thailand; indology; *śāṅkhalipi*; shell-script inscriptions; Si Thep; South and Southeast Asian epigraphy

1. REVIEW OF ŚĀṅKHALIPI OR SHELL-SCRIPT INSCRIPTIONS IN INDIA

Śāṅkhalipi, often referred to by several English equivalents such as ‘shell script’, or ‘shell characters’, is an extremely ornate and stylized calligraphic script which is attested in large numbers in India in the form of inscriptions engraved, or sometimes painted, on stone. The names *śāṅkhalipi*

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pi, ‘shell script’, etc. are derived from the superficial resemblance of the shape of many of the characters to a conch shell (*śaṅkha*).¹

The script is typically associated with monuments from the regions and periods of the Gupta dynasty (fourth to sixth centuries CE), that is, from north and central India, but shell-script inscriptions are also found, though somewhat less frequently, in other periods and parts of the Indian subcontinent. In fact, specimens have been found over most of India except the northwest and the far south, from Kashmir in the north to Karnataka in the south and from Gujarat in the west to Bengal in the east, but they are particularly common in the northern/northeastern ‘heartland’ of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Bihar.² Some 640 examples from sixty-seven different sites in India were documented in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Salomon 1977–78, 1978–79, 1980, 1982a, 1986). Since then, many more examples have been reported in various sources (e.g., Mukherjee 2005), most notably in R.K. Sharma’s ‘Location of Shell Inscriptions in Central India’ (1990: 89–112, chapter 6), which reports well over one hundred previously unpublished inscriptions from Madhya Pradesh. These include, for example, ninety-two inscriptions from Ahmedpur (Sharma 1990: 90–94), where previously only forty-six had been reported on



Figure 1: Bharhut *śaṅkhalipi* inscription 3 on a railing pillar from the ruined *stūpa* (Satna District, Madhya Pradesh, India), now in the Indian Museum, Kolkata [Photo © Richard Salomon, 1976]

¹ These terms seem to go back to the time of James Prinsep in the 1830s (Salomon 1982a: 94), but have no ancient attestation.

² For details and references, see Salomon 1986: 109.



the basis of a brief survey (Salomon 1986: 113–114); thirty-one inscriptions at the previously unreported site of Gupha-Maser (Sharma 1990: 103–105); and several sites in the neighborhood of Bhopal (Sharma 1990: 97–100) where large numbers of painted shell-script inscriptions are either ‘interlocked with each other with their loops and flourishes in such a confusing manner that it is not possible to count them’ (Sharma 1990: 98), or too worn to be counted. All in all, at least some 800 *śaṅkhalipi* inscriptions have been documented by now in India, and no doubt many more await discovery.

Shell-script inscriptions are often found in large concentrations at major religious sites, as many as 125 at the temple of Muṅdeśvarī alone in Bihar (Salomon 1976, 1983, 1986: 132–133; Neuss 2003: 542, 551, 579, pl. 19). They very frequently co-occur with dated or datable inscriptions in standard forms of Brāhmī, which has made it possible to determine that shell-script was in use between at least the fourth and seventh centuries CE. Shell-script inscriptions were often added to pre-existing structures and monuments, including both Hindu/Brahmanical ones such as the Heliodorus pillar at Besnagar, Madhya Pradesh (Salomon 1980: 35–36), as well as Buddhist sites such as Bharhut [Figure 1] and Sanchi, also in Madhya Pradesh, and Amaravati in Andhra Pradesh (Salomon 1980: 22–24, 28 and 1986: 116). One or more *śaṅkhalipi* inscriptions have also been found on eight different Aśokan or Maurya-period pillars, where they have no doubt been added many centuries after the original construction and inscriptions, such as at Kausambi in Uttar Pradesh and Lauriya-Araraj in Bihar [Figures 2–3].³



Figure 2: Kausambi Aśokan pillar (Kausambi District, Uttar Pradesh, India) with several added shell-script inscriptions [Photo © Christophe Pottier, 2008]

³ The six other inscribed pillars are at Allahabad, Delhi-Meerut, Delhi-Topra, Sanchi, Sankisa, and Vaishali (Salomon 1980: 26 and 1986: 137–138).

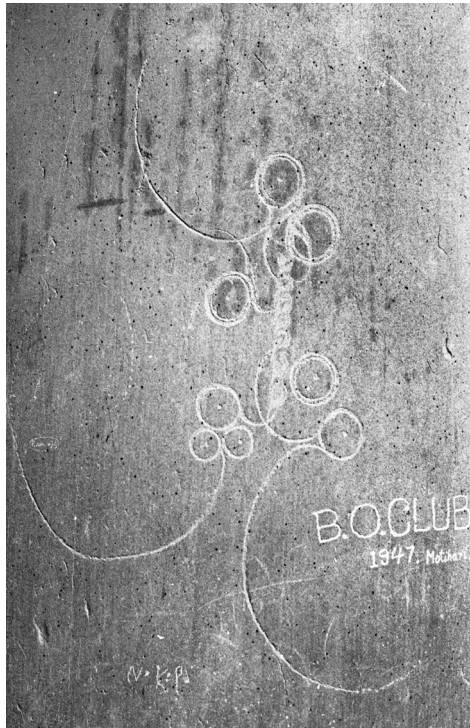


Figure 3: Lauriya-Araraj Aśokan pillar (East Champaran District, Bihar, India) with added *śaṅkhalipi* inscription 1 and modern graffiti [Photo © Richard Salomon, 1977]

Shell-script inscriptions are typically characterized by elaborate, sometimes very large and complex flourishes above and below the principal characters, which may be dwarfed by the ornaments attached to them, as in Eran pillar inscriptions 5 and 6 in Madhya Pradesh [Figure 4], and Kheri inscription 23 in Bihar [Figure 5]. Most of these central characters have been assimilated to a conch-like form or other common shapes, to the point that they are often very difficult to distinguish and catalog. In the more elaborate styles such as the new specimen from Thailand being presented here, and as in Eran 5 [Figure 4, upper inscription] and Prahladpur 2 in Uttar Pradesh [Figure 6], the interiors of the main characters are delicately sculpted with a three-dimensional effect. There are also several examples of a simpler, two-dimensional style in which the central characters are merely outlined, as in Eran 6 [Figure 4, lower inscription], and in the even more rudimentary Chunar inscription in Uttar Pradesh [Figure 7]. But even here, the principal characters all share the quality of being enclosed shapes, in contrast to the open, linear forms that predominate in Brāhmī and most other related pre-modern Indic scripts.

In light of the evident composition of the script with main central characters and super- and subscript modifications attached to them, it seems reasonable to assume that the underlying graphic system—if not the individual graphs—operates according to the ‘abugida’ principle that is common to all Indic scripts, in which the graphic unit is most often composed of a consonant with a vowel attached as a diacritic addition, or simply of a plain consonant with the ‘inherent’ or neutral vowel *a* implied. If this assumption is correct, the central shell-shaped characters should



Figure 4: Eran pillar (Sagar District, Madhya Pradesh, India), *śaṅkhalipi* inscriptions 5 (upper portion, central line of characters plus flourishes above and below) and 6 (last line, without large flourishes) [Photo © Richard Salomon, 1977]

represent consonants (or occasionally initial vowels), while the extravagant decorations attached to them must be hyperextensions of super- and subscript vowel signs or of subscript consonants.⁴ This apparent systemic parallel is one of the reasons for assuming that *śaṅkhalipi* or shell script is derived in some way from Brāhmī, but the strongest ground for this assumption—which has been agreed upon by nearly all of the scholars who have addressed the issue—is one of exclusion; since the shell script evidently developed and flourished in a period and region where all other types of writing were forms or derivatives of Brāhmī, there is simply no other historically and geographically plausible candidate, other than, perhaps, an *ex nihilo* invention.

This assumption is also supported by a statistically projected calculation of the number of distinct graphs in the script, which yielded an estimate of forty-seven characters, very close to the number of graphs in Brāhmī used for Sanskrit, which is (ideally) forty-six.⁵ Another argument for a Brāhmī connection is the appearance of small horizontal or diagonal lines on the tops of many of the main characters (Salomon 1980: 55 and 1982a: 109), which are reminiscent of the various forms of top lines or *mātrā* that are a constant feature of virtually all of the many varieties and

⁴ The extension and elaboration of such super- and subscript elements is characteristic of all calligraphic varieties of Brāhmī and Brāhmī-derived scripts; see Salomon 1985: 5. The study of calligraphic writing in Indic scripts is on the whole a much-neglected subject; for some rare exceptions, see Sivaramamurti 1948: 32–38; Salomon 1985 and 1998: 68–70; Griffiths & Southworth 2007.

⁵ For statistical details, see Salomon 1982a: 100–103.



Figure 5: Kheri (Bhagalpur District, Bihar, India) *śāṅkhalipi* inscription 23 [Photo © Richard Salomon, 1977]



Figure 6: Prahladpur (Ghazipur District, Uttar Pradesh, India) *śāṅkhalipi* inscription 2 (vertical, at center) and Brāhmī inscriptions (horizontal lines at top and bottom), now on the grounds of Sampurnanand Sanskrit University, Varanasi [Photo © Richard Salomon, 1977]

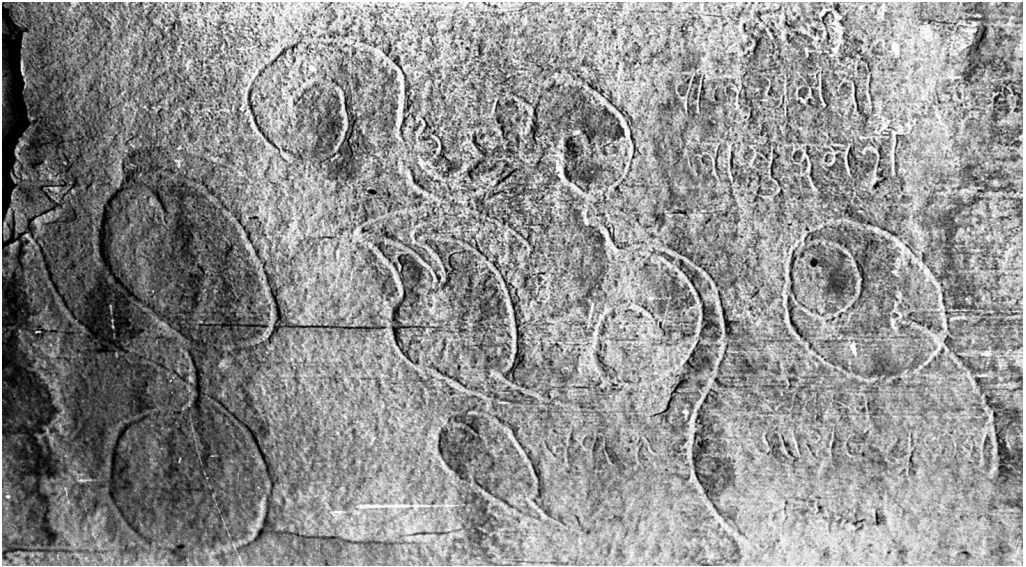


Figure 7: Chunar (Mirzapur District, Uttar Pradesh, India) *śaṅkhalipi* inscription (center) with later graffiti (top and bottom right) [Photo © Richard Salomon, 1977]

derivatives of Brāhmī. Yet, various attempts to associate particular shell characters with possible Brāhmī prototypes on graphic and statistical grounds have proven to be very tentative at best (e.g., Salomon 1982a: 111–131 and 1986: 145–152), and have not led yet to convincing overall interpretations. In short, the shell script must still be considered completely undeciphered, some claims to the contrary notwithstanding.⁶

In several cases, *śaṅkhalipi* inscriptions have been found in close juxtaposition with short Brāhmī inscriptions containing proper names, inevitably giving the impression that they recorded the same text in two scripts. But the result of careful comparisons of such pairs was disappointing, in that the shell-script and Brāhmī texts could not be convincingly linked, as they had different numbers of syllabic characters, different internal repetition patterns, or other irreconcilable contrasts (Salomon 1982a: 134–141 and 1982b). But it can at least be reasonably assumed that most, if not all, shell-script inscriptions record personal names engraved or painted as pilgrims' records. Among the points supporting this interpretation are their frequent occurrence at places of religious significance together with pilgrims' engravings recorded in other scripts, including hyper-calligraphic forms of 'ornate Brāhmī' (Salomon 1982a: 108–109; 1985: 5), and especially their uniform brevity, nearly always between four and eight characters.

It is unfortunately not beyond the realm of possibility that the shell script is essentially undecipherable, despite the fact that it is almost certainly derived from a known script—that is, some form of Brāhmī—and that its contents are presumably proper names in Sanskrit and/or epigraph-

⁶ For example, Mukherjee 1981, 1983 and 1990; *contra*, Salomon 1982a: 142–146 and 1987. The quality of Mukherjee's claimed decipherments may be judged by, for example, his reading of the Bharhut shell-script inscription 3 (shown above in Figure 1) as *Savachare 90 phuva phuchavo*, giving the Sanskrit equivalent as *samvatsare 90 pūrva utsavaḥ* [!], translating 'in the year 90, the Eastern festival', and referring the supposed year 90 to the [discredited Kaniṣka] 'era of A.D. 78' (Mukherjee 1990: 26).

ical varieties and approximations thereof. The problem may be that shell-script inscriptions are extreme examples of a type of public writing in which the communicative aspect of the script has been subordinated or even totally supplanted by the artistic component, to the extent that the writing becomes difficult or impossible to ‘read’ and has become in effect illegible. For examples of this phenomenon, we need look no further than modern urban graffiti, that generally represent the name or ‘tag’ of the writer, but that may be wholly illegible to the uninitiated observer.

But even if this degree of parallelism is valid, there is still a fundamental difference in the circumstances surrounding contemporary graffiti, on the one hand, and shell-script inscriptions, on the other. The former are usually meant to be executed in haste by the writers themselves, whereas the circumstances of the engraving of shell-script inscriptions, especially of the very ornate specimens, must have been very different. For these are clearly the work of expert calligraphic stone engravers who must have been commissioned by the parties who wished to have their names (presumably) recorded.⁷ This is most vividly illustrated by some of the especially elaborate examples, even as extreme as the colossal inscription which covers the entire face of Cave 18 at the Gupta site of Udayagiri in Madhya Pradesh, some eight meters long and two meters high (Salomon 1980: 12; Sharma 1990: 109–110). Such productions must have been the work of members of a community of highly skilled stone-carving artisans dwelling in and around the sites at which the inscriptions were found. Unfortunately, though, we can know nothing of them other than their often-magnificent work.⁸

2. THE *ŚĀṆKHALĪPI* INSCRIPTION FROM SI THEP, THAILAND

To date, only four examples of shell-script inscriptions have been found outside India in insular Southeast Asia. These are located in the Indonesian archipelago, are not very well known, and not very prominently published.⁹ The new sample presented below is thus the fifth example discovered across the Bay of Bengal and the first specimen known of the script in continental or mainland Southeast Asia. The *śāṅkhalipi* inscription found at Si Thep, in upper-central Thailand, was first recognized by the second author of this article as a unique specimen in 2013, and this was confirmed later during a joint visit by both authors to the site on 25 January 2020.¹⁰

The ancient town of Si Thep (เมืองโบราณศรีเทพ) in the Pa Sak Valley (ลุ่มน้ำป่าสัก) of Phetchabun Province (จังหวัดเพชรบูรณ์), located in the western margin of the Khorat Plateau (ที่ราบสูงโคราช) in northeast Thailand, is the largest and one of the most significant and enigmatic sites of the central highlands that yielded archaeological material dating between the mid-to-late first

⁷ For some speculations as to the process of composing shell-script inscriptions, see Salomon 1982a: 132–134.

⁸ Ali & Zhang (2022: 319) note that the study of copper-plate land grant charters reveals that ‘scribal/engraver communities were important officials in court protocol’; see also pp. 316–318, 335–337 of the same article.

⁹ Three of these were found in West Java, the best-known example being the Ciaruteun rock inscription in its original site in the Aruteun River (Cibungbulang District, Bogor Regency), with accompanying Brāhmī and Sanskrit inscription of King Pūrṇavarman. The fourth one is from Borneo/West Kalimantan. For details, see Vogel 1925: pls. 34a–b; de Casparis 1975: 88, pl. IIa; and Salomon 1982a: 141–156 and 1986: 131–132, 135–137.

¹⁰ The inscription was discovered randomly in 1998, with no associated finds, by the western moat of the ancient inner city while the workers dug and cut a big tree during restoration work (pers. communication with Pongdhan Sampaongern/พงศ์ธันว์ สำเภาเงิน, former director of the Si Thep Historical Park). The Thai Fine Arts Department (FAD) did not recognize it as a specimen of shell-script inscription, and published this discovery simply as a ‘pillar carved [with] decoration’ (FAD 2015).



millennium CE and around the thirteenth century. Excavations and archaeological surveys over the past decades have yielded some refined sculptures as well as impressive architectural remains. The site plays a fundamental role in understanding the early history of Thailand and represents one of the first Hindu-Buddhist polities in the region.¹¹

In addition, a significant number of ancient inscriptions have been discovered at Si Thep, written in Sanskrit, Pali, Chinese, Old Khmer and possibly also in Old Mon.¹² This region, situated on the fringes of the so-called Dvāravatī and Zhenla (later Angkor) kingdoms,¹³ was most probably occupied mainly by an Austroasiatic population of Mon-Khmer origin, until the site was completely abandoned around the fourteenth century. However, the presence of a few ‘exotic’ inscriptions at Si Thep, such as the shell-script inscription under discussion and some clay fragments written in Chinese characters, attests to the cosmopolitan and unique character of the site.

The Si Thep *śāṅkhalipi* inscription (inv. no. พช ๒๕ /Ph.Ch. 25) is engraved on a quadrangular pillar—whose original function is unknown—measuring approximately 90 cm in height and 23 cm in width (Face B). The pillar has a tenon (8.5 cm in height) at what appears to be at first glance the bottom, although for reasons described below this could actually be the top, in which case the pillar has been mounted upside-down in the local Si Thep exhibition hall. The upper portion of Face B (the front as displayed in the exhibition hall) and Face C (the right side, in viewer’s perspective), as well as the largest part of Face D (rear), are broken off [Figures 8–9].

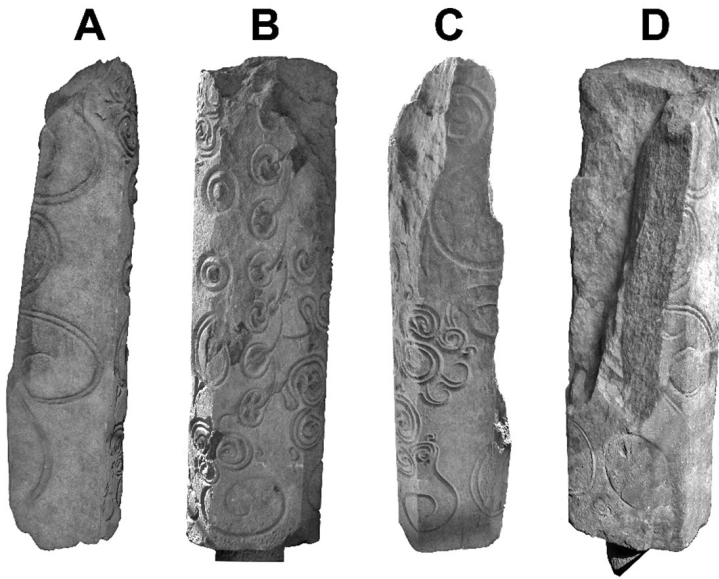


Figure 8: The Si Thep *śāṅkhalipi* inscription(s), Phetchabun Province, Thailand, inv. no. Ph.Ch. 25. H: 90 cm, W: 23 cm. Composite image of the four inscribed faces of the pillar [Photos © Nicolas Revire, 2020]

¹¹ For earlier studies of the site and its material, see *inter alia* Quaritch Wales 1936, Dofflemyer 1982, Skilling 2009a–b, FAD 2015, Anurak 2564, and Piriya 2564.

¹² For an early published corpus of inscriptions from Si Thep, see FAD 2534. A fresh and complete inventory containing newly discovered inscriptions and fragments from the site, several of which are still unpublished, is under preparation by the second author of this article.

¹³ For the intricate relationship among Dvāravatī, Si Thep, and Zhenla, see Woodward 2010 and Revire 2016.



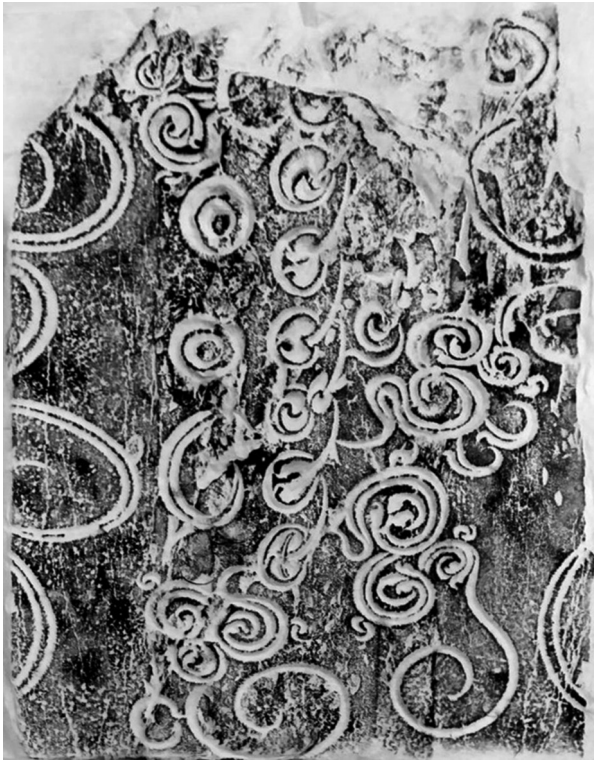


Figure 9: Partial rubbing showing Faces A, B (central portion) and C [Photo © Fine Arts Department of Thailand, 2019]

The principal portion of the inscription—that is, the central characters—is engraved on the side designated Face B [Figure 10a]. Very ornate flourishes attached to the tops and bottoms of the main characters extend upward from Face B onto the adjoining Face A [Figure 10b] and downward onto Face C [Figure 10c]. Unfortunately, the pillar is mounted in the exhibition hall with the badly damaged rear Face D very close to the wall [Figure 10d], so that we were only able to see some disconnected flourishes on it during our visits, and in the absence of a complete estampage of the entire pillar, we could not definitely determine whether these traces are further extensions of the flourishes seen on Faces C and A, or whether they are rather remnants of a separate shell-script inscription on Face D. It is hoped that at some future date it will be possible to move the pillar and conduct a definitive examination of Face D, as well as to produce a new rubbing of the four faces [cf., Figure 9].

The central part of the inscription on Face B consists of seven characters, of which the last, when viewed from bottom to top, is mostly broken off at the top right. All seven characters have the characteristic conch shell-like configuration, with a circular or oblong head and a tail-like appendage. As the pillar is currently mounted in the exhibition hall, these tails are oriented upward, so that the inscription would seem to be read from the bottom up. But in fact, all of the many previously known *śaṅkhalipi* inscriptions written vertically on pillars are oriented so as to be read from the top down (Salomon 1980: 45 and 1986: 110), and for this reason we may assume that



Figure 10a: Face B: front side (upside down?), containing the central portion of the inscription, presumably the consonantal characters [Photo © Nicolas Revire, 2020]



Figure 10b: Face A: left side (from viewer's perspective). Note the bottoms of the subscript flourishes, apparently continued around the pillar from the main Face B [Photo © Nicolas Revire, 2020]



Figure 10c: Face C: right side (from viewer's perspective). Note that the flourishes (subscript vowels and/or secondary consonants?) attached to the bottoms of the main characters on Face B continue onto this face, and perhaps also onto Face D [Photo © Nicolas Revire, 2020]



Figure 10d: Face D: back side. Some of the subscribed flourishes, perhaps continued from Face C, are visible near the bottom of the image [Photo © Nicolas Revire, 2020]



the pillar is probably exhibited upside-down and that the tenon at the bottom should actually be at the top.¹⁴

The seven central characters on Face B, representing the main portion of the inscription, presumably the consonantal characters, are all highly stylized, and for the most part they are distinguished only by the different shapes carved in the inside of the shell-shaped outline that they share. For example, the interior of the first character (the one at the bottom of the pillar as it is currently displayed) is transected by a wavy horizontal line; the second one is partially divided at the top with a vertical gap; and so on. In the third character, the head is divided vertically by an *s*-shaped line, and another smaller shell-shaped graph is attached to its bottom; this presumably represents a subscript consonant. The fifth character is very similar to the second, and is apparently the same graph. Similarly, the sixth character resembles the third one minus its subscript element.

The very ornate super- and subscript flourishes in the Si Thep *śāṅkhalipi* inscription, presumably marking vowels and/or conjunct consonants, are mostly based on spirals and other circular patterns, sometime doubled and tripled. In this regard, it resembles, for example, the shell-script inscriptions found on the Kausambi and Lauriya-Araraj Aśokan pillars illustrated above [Figures 2–3], with single and doubled circular patterns and long curved tails attached to a sequence of small, almost indistinguishable central characters. The circular decorations on the Si Thep shell script also resemble those on the Muara Cianten *śāṅkhalipi* inscription from West Java [Figure 11]. However, no conclusion about the spread of shell script to Southeast Asia should be drawn from this similarity between these two specimens, as shell-script inscriptions everywhere are personal and idiosyncratic, and there is no significant evidence of regional styles as such.



Figure 11: Rubbing of the Muara Cianten *śāṅkhalipi* inscription, formerly known as the Pasir Muara inscription, Cibungbulang District, Bogor Regency, West Java, Indonesia [Photo © Kern Institute Collection, Leiden University Library, ref. OD-7373]

¹⁴ We have considered the possibility that the shell-script inscription was added on the pillar later, but we think this is not likely, especially since it is inscribed on all four faces.



Unfortunately, the central characters on Face B cannot be matched to any useful extent with the provisional inventory of graphs compiled many years ago for Indian *śāṅkhalipi* inscriptions (Salomon 1986: 149–152), so no attempt at an interpretation will be offered here, and the *śāṅkhalipi* inscription from Si Thep remains undeciphered and enigmatic.

Finally, a noticeable detail worthy of discussion concerns the little ornate addition at the bottom of Face D [Figure 12a]. The ornament consists of a small circle at the center surrounded by four almost semi-circular petals, constituting a small floral motif (*puṣpikā*) which in all likelihood served as a dividing marker or a punctuation mark for a short text.¹⁵ A similar floral symbol can be observed in another inscribed pillar [Figure 12b] from the ancient town of Sap Champa (เมืองโบราณชัยจำปาศักดิ์), an archaeological site some 60 km south of Si Thep in the neighboring Lopburi Province (จังหวัดลพบุรี), datable to the seventh or eighth century on paleographic grounds.¹⁶ This epigraphic parallel may allow us to tentatively place the Si Thep *śāṅkhalipi* inscription in the same cultural sphere and chronological period as the Sap Champa inscription, which is composed in the Southeast Asian variant of the late Brāhmī script. This form of *puṣpikā*, however, seems rather common in the first millennium, and parallels could also be adduced from other parts of the Indic world.¹⁷



Figures 12a–b: Details of floral motifs found in the inscriptions from Si Thep (Face D, left) and Sap Champa (right) [Photos © Nicolas Revire, 2020 and 2022]

¹⁵ If the floral motif came at the end of our text, it might have served the function of a final dot, similar to a double *daṇḍa*. However, in much later manuscripts and inscriptions from Thailand, composed in old Siamese, there is the symbol ◉ called *fong man* (ฟองมัน), also known as *ta kai* (ตาไก่), which was used rather to mark the beginning of a sentence, a paragraph, or a stanza. It is now obsolete.

¹⁶ This is a ‘citation inscription’ containing excerpts of the First Sermon by the Buddha in Pali (and not in Sanskrit as initially published by the FAD). It is registered as inv. no. ลพ ๘/LB 8 and is now kept in the Somdet Phra Narai National Museum (พิพิธภัณฑ์สถานแห่งชาติสมเด็จพระนารายณ์) in Lopburi City. See Revire 2014: 263, table 3, and 267, n. 25.

¹⁷ On such symbols found frequently in Indian inscriptions and manuscripts, see Sarkar & Pande 1999, and Bhat-tarai 2020: 75ff. Closer to us in mainland Southeast Asia, it is observed, for example, in one Sanskrit inscription of Satyavarman in Campā (C. 216) dated to 778 CE (Griffiths & Southworth 2011: 279, Face A, l. 4, end of stanza I, fig. 3).

3. TYPICAL AND ATYPICAL FEATURES OF THE *ŚĀṄKHALĪPI* INSCRIPTION FROM SI THEP

The main importance of the discovery of a specimen of *śaṅkhalipi* inscription in Thailand lies in extending the known range of the shell script beyond the Indian subcontinent and the Indonesian archipelago into mainland Southeast Asia during the mid-to-late first millennium CE, a period of intense cultural interactions. It also adds to the historical and geographical prominence of Si Thep as an international hub for exchange trade and networks between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea.¹⁸

We will never know for certain if the shell-script inscription was directly imported from abroad or commissioned and produced locally in the vicinity of Si Thep, or whether if it was engraved by a foreign traveler or artisan, as seems more likely, or perhaps rather by a Southeast Asian pilgrim travelling back from India. The answer to these questions would throw important light on the nature of Si Thep as a potential site of interregional pilgrimage. In most regards, the *śaṅkhalipi* inscription from Si Thep is a standard specimen of shell script, resembling Indian examples. It is, however, unusual in at least one respect, namely its layout, extending (apparently) around the four faces of the pillar. No such case has been found among the hundreds of Indian specimens; in this regard we can contrast in particular Eran *śaṅkhalipi* inscription 1 [Figure 13], in which the upper flourishes terminate abruptly at the edge of the square pillar, rather than wrapping around it as they do in the Si Thep inscription. In Eran 1, it is clear that the engraver was working from a model in which the upper flourishes were fully present, as the complete form of the archetype can be clearly reconstructed (Salomon 1982a: 132–133, and figs. 9–10 on p. 168). Thus, the engraving of the Si Thep *śaṅkhalipi* inscription around all four faces of the pillar could be a local feature, though it equally well might be an idiosyncratic innovation of the individual calligrapher or engraver. Here it is interesting to compare again the situation of *śaṅkhalipi*-inscription examples from Indonesia. At least two of them (Ciaruteun and Muara Cianten) are more or less standard specimens as to their form, but are inscribed on stones in riverbeds, a situation which never occurs among the hundreds of Indian specimens.

In sum, it seems—if anything can be concluded from the small number of specimens known so far—that *śaṅkhalipi* inscriptions were current in Southeast Asia in forms which resemble their Indian archetype, but that they may have been applied in different locations and circumstances. However, given the great frequency and wide distribution of shell-script inscriptions in India proper, it is likely that other examples occur elsewhere in Southeast Asia that have not yet been found, published, or properly recognized. The identification of further specimens might help to clarify in what regards the Southeast Asia manifestations of *śaṅkhalipi* resemble or differ from those in India itself. There is every reason indeed to suspect that other specimens of shell-script inscriptions remain to be discovered or identified in Thailand or its neighboring countries, and we must keep an eye out for them.¹⁹

¹⁸ On this ground, the site was recently proposed as a tentative UNESCO World Heritage Site by Thailand in 2019. See: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/6402/> (accessed on 6 February 2023).

¹⁹ The late Pamela Gutman claimed in her dissertation (1976: 117) to have observed a shell-script inscription on a mid-to-late first-millennium stone lintel fragment from Arakan in ancient Burma (Rakhine, modern Myanmar). This is, however, impossible to judge from the poor illustration reproduced therein (pl. XXXII) showing an image of a conch, but no shell script, leaving the impression that Gutman misunderstood what a shell-script inscription really is. It has unfortunately not been possible to locate and study the original inscribed lintel.





Figure 13: Eran pillar (Sagar District, Madhya Pradesh, India), *śaṅkhalipi* inscription 1 (central vertical line), with intruding Brāhmī inscription (horizontal line at bottom) [Photo © Richard Salomon, 1977]

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