

A TRILINGUAL SLAB INSTALLED IN SRI LANKA

Admiral Zheng He made seven expeditions in the Indian Ocean. In Sri Lanka he set up a Trilingual slab inscription in Devinuwara in circa 1409 CE. It was found in Galle in 1911 by a British Engineer.

During that expedition the Chinese admiral captured the de-facto ruler of the Kotte kingdom, Vira Alakeswara and took him to China. In the year 1411 he was forgiven by the Ming Emperor Yung Lo and he returned to Sri Lanka.



Trilingual Slab



Zheng He

The slab was discovered in 1911 by H. F. Tomalin (the then Provincial Engineer in Galle at a culvert near the turn of Cripps road within the Galle municipal area. When it was discovered, the stone was said to be used as a cover stone of the culvert with the engraved side downward. The stone was later moved to the Colombo National Museum where it is being exhibited now.

It is 145 cm long 76 cm wide and 12¹/₂ cm thick. The inscriptions are in three languages, Chinese, Persian and Tamil. It was made in China and brought to Sri Lanka and planted in Devinuwara (Dondra).

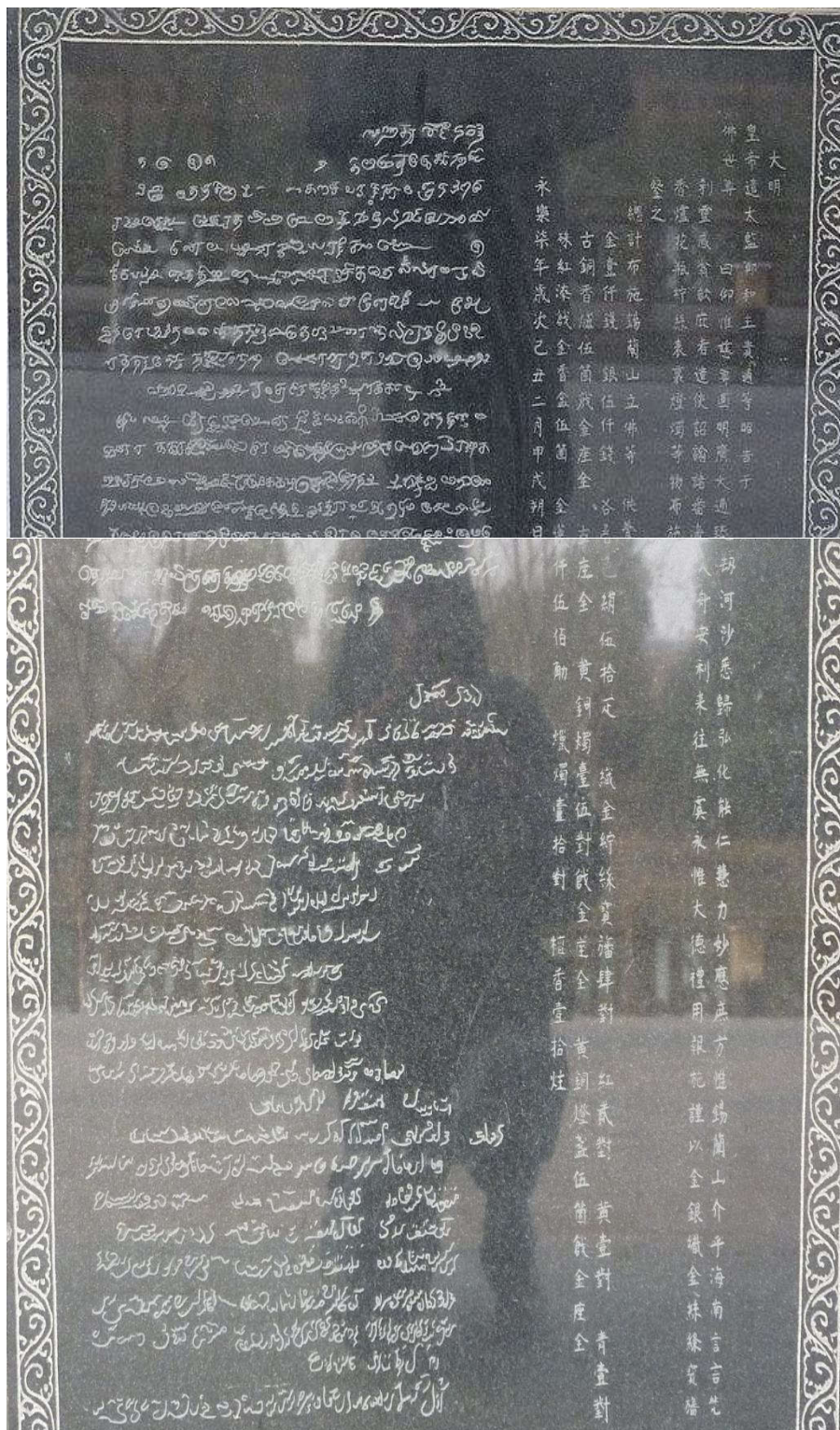
This trilingual inscription bears the date 15 February 1409, probably indicating the date it was inscribed. It was inscribed in Nanjing, the then capital city of China in the seventh reigning year of Ming Emperor Yongle and brought to Sri Lanka by Admiral Zheng He

during his second voyage [1409-1411]. After landing in Devinuwara, and conducting a trade fair he installed the trilingual slab as a commemorative tablet.



Top of the trilingual slab carved with two Chinese dragons

INSCRIPTION



The inscriptions is incised on one side only. The top part of the inscription has curved corners with two dragons facing each other. The inscriptions are below the top part and within a floral border. The right portion of the inscription is in Chinese, the left upper part has the Tamil inscription and the inscription below the Tamil one is in Persian. While Chinese and Persian inscriptions invoke the blessing of the Lord at Adams Peak the Tamil inscription invokes the blessing of Lord (Nayanar) at Devinuwara (Tenavarai)

Chinese Inscription

The Chinese inscription which is the best preserved of the inscriptions was deciphered and translated by E. Blackhouse. It invokes the blessings of Lord Buddha and provides a list of offerings made to the Buddhist temple in the Mountain of Sri Lanka.

Translation of Chinese Inscription

[As published in the Spolia Zeylanica]

His Majesty, the emperor of the great Ming dynasty has dispatched eunuchs Ching-Ho, Wang Ching-Lien and others to set forth the utterances before Buddha, the world honoured one as follows:

“Deeply do we reverence you, merciful and honoured one, whose bright perfection is wide-embracing and whose way of virtue passes all understanding, whose law enters into all human relations, and the years of whose great kalpa(Period) are like the sand of the river in number, you whose controlling influence ennobles and converts, whose kindness quickens. And whose strength discerns, whose mysterious efficacy is beyond compare!

‘Whereas Ceylon’s mountainous isle lies in the South of the ocean and its Buddhist temples are sanctuaries of your gospel, where your miraculous responsive power imbues and enlightens. Of late we have despatched missions to announce our mandate to foreign nations and during their journey over the oceans they have been blessed with your beneficent protection. They escaped disaster, or misfortune and journeyed in safety to and fro. In everlasting recognition of your supreme virtue, we therefore bestow offering in recompense, and do now reverently present Buddha, the honoured one, the oblations in gold and silver, gold embroidered jewelled banners of variegated silk, incense burners, flower vases, silks of many colours, in lining and exterior, lamps and candles with other gifts, in order to manifest the high honour of our worship. Do you Lord Buddha, bestow on them, your regard.

List of Alms bestowed at the shrine of the Buddhist temple in the mountain of Ceylon as offerings

1,000 pieces of gold; 5000 pieces of silver; 50 rolls of embroidered silk in many colours; four pairs of jewelled banners, gold embroidered and of variegated silk; two pairs of the same picked in red; on pair of the same in yellow; one pair in black; five antique brass incense burners; five pairs of antique brass flower vases picked in gold in lacquer with gold stand; five yellow brass lamps picked in gold on lacquer with gold stands; five incense vessels in vermilion red, lacquered gold picked on lacquer, with gold stands; six pairs of golden lotus flowers; 2500 catties of scented oil; ten pairs of wax candles; ten sticks of fragrant incense.”

Tamil Inscription

The Tamil inscription which contains linguistic difficulties was initially deciphered by Professor S Paranavitana, which was later revised by Professor S Pathmanathan. It invokes the Hindu divinity Tenavarai Nayanar and lists the ritual items sent for the worship of Tenavarai Nayanar.

Translation of Tamil Inscription

By S Pathmanathan

“(Lines 1-6) Hail (Prosperity.....) The great king of Chinam, the supreme lord of kings, whose splendour is like that of full moon, having heard of the glory of Nayinaar(God) makes (the following) offerings to the Nayinaar(God) of Tenavarai in the kingdom of Ilankai. These are sent personally through the envoys Cinvo and Uvin Cuvin

(Line 6 -13) This declaration should be heard: “All living beings who had their origins in this world are enjoying happiness because they are protected through the compassion of the Nayinaar (Lord). It is through the grace of the Nayinaar(God) of Tenavarai that all those persons who come there reach the land (in safety). To such a benign divinity (Tenavarai aalvaar) gold, silver, rolls of cloth, silk, sandalwood and oil for anointing are presented

(Lines 13 – 21) (The items are) one thousand kalanchu of gold, five thousand kalanchu of silver, 50 pieces of tulukki of different colours, four pairs of clothe (pieces) embroidered with gold, two pairs of red clothe(pieces), two pairs of blue clothe (pieces), five copper vessels for keeping incense burners of antique copper, Ten copper vases for holding flowers, ten black stands, five standing lamps from java(cavan), five black stands, six pairs of lotus flowers made of wood and gilt, five gilt copper caskets for depositing akil, ten pairs of wax candles, two thousand five hundred katti of oil and ten pieces of sandal wood.

(Line 22-24) (All) these items included in this description should be given as offerings to the sacred presence of Nayinaar(God) of Tenavarai.

The second month of the seventh year of Yung-lo.”

Persian Inscription

The Persian version [Translation by Mr. Ghulam Yazdani, MA, Director of the Archaeological Department of H E H the Nizam’s Dominions of Hyderabad.] [MB. Dots... indicate worn out and undecipherable letters]. This translation and original Tamil translation by Professor S Parnavitana were published in Epigraphia Zeylanica Volume III, 1933

[Lines] 1)... 2) The great king... by royal order... Ming 3).. has been sent to pay homage.. 4) .. to seek help and ... 5) ... 6) ... it is known ... 7) ... for ... 8) and these miracles ... 9) ... has been sent ... 10) ... is known ... to pay his respects 11) ...embroidered cloth, incense burners, flower baskets ... and lamp oil 12) ... for kind favours has sent these presents, so that 13) ... Light of Islam. 14) ... the presents are as detailed below. 15) Gold one thousand 'Misqal' ... Silver five thousand 'Misqal'... embroidered articles fifty in number. 16) ... fifty in number ... embroidered articles four ... altogether two pairs. 17) one pair yellow ... one pair ... incense burners of copper, five in number. 18) stand of copper, five in number ... five pairs ...red stands with gold work. 19) antique lamp stands five in number red stands worked in gold five in number - wooden with gold work five in number 20 ... lamp oil ... 21) ... date ... 22) ... seventh year .. first of the month.

It is not certain why the Chinese rulers chose Persian and Tamil along with their native Chinese language for the trilingual inscription

Tenavarai (Devinuwara, DevanThurai, Dondra)

Tenavarai is the place name known as Devinuwara in Sinhalese. This place is called Dondra in English suggesting the original name of Devan Thurai. The old Sinhalese name was Devanagara. This is the southernmost point of the island of Sri Lanka.

Moroccan traveller Ibn Battuta visited the place and mentioned about the temple in 1344 on his return from pilgrimage to Adams peak. He mentioned that it was a city of merchants and the Hindu temple had a man sized gold statue. He also mentioned about five hundred girls engaged in singing and Dancing during temple festivals.

Portuguese soldiers under the command of their naval captain De Souza looted the city and the temple and destroyed it in 1588. Portuguese navigator and historian Fernao de Quiroz had mentioned, in his book completed in 1687, that the temple was replaced by St Lucia Cathedral. In circa 1640 King Rajasingha II of Kandy built a new Vishnu Devale in Tenavarai after defeating the Portuguese.



Stone gateway of Tenavarai temple destroyed by the Portuguese

In 1988 a sivalingam sculpture (120 cm height, 75 cm width) had been found in the foreground of the *Othpilima Vihara*, along with a stone image of Nandi. Statues of Ganesh and Nandi had been found decades earlier at the site of a newly constructed Buddhist Vihara in the Vallemadama area.

A decorated stone gateway (which was certainly part of the Tenavarai temple), is now installed at the present Vishnu Devale which was originally built by King Rajasinghe II after the Portuguese were defeated.

Professor S Pathmanathan had this to say, “Tenavarai is the Tamil form of Sinhalese Devinuvara. The alternate form of the name is Devundara. The same locality is referred to in the Mahawamsa as Devanagara. Devinuvara had developed into a considerable size and importance during the period between 12th and 16th centuries. It had become the principal emporium of trade in the southern part of the island”

Ming Dynasty and Emperor Yong Le

Zhu Yuanzhang a Han Chinese overthrew the ruling Mongolian Yuan dynasty from Beijing in 1368. He founded the Ming Dynasty and ruled as Hongwu Emperor till 1398. Hongwu emperor's son Zhu Yunwen ruled as Jianwen emperor from 1398 to 1402. Jianwen Emperor was overthrown in 1402 by his uncle Zhu Di, the Prince of Yan. He was crowned as Yong Le Emperor. Yong Le Emperor ruled for 22 years.

Admiral Zheng He's naval expeditions except the last one occurred during Emperor Yong Le's reign. He also commissioned 1681 new ships. His decedents did not continue with these expeditions

Admiral Zhen He

Zheng He was born in the Yunnan province of China to Muslim parents in 1371. He was captured by the Ming emperor when he was 10 years old and castrated. He worked as a eunuch in the house hold of Yong Le emperor. When he was 35 years old, the emperor appointed him as the commander in chief of the treasure fleet. He had the mandate to collect tribute and establish ties with rulers in the Indian Ocean.

The treasure fleet carried out seven voyages in the Indian Ocean with Zheng He as commander, between 1405 and 1432. The Chinese flag ships were about 122 m long and 80 m wide. They were much larger than Columbus's flag ship.

During its first voyage in 1405 the fleet went through Vietnam, Java, Malacca, Sumatra, Andaman and Nicobar islands and came to Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka Vira Alakeswara was hostile to him. Therefore he left Sri Lanka quickly and went to the west coast of India. On his return journey he defeated a powerful Chinese pirate. The first fleet returned in 1407. It had 62 ships including 4 flagships and was crewed by 27800 sailors.

Zheng He did not join the second fleet which departed in 1407 and returned in 1409. It went up to Indian west coast.

Zheng He joined the third voyage which departed in 1409. It consisted of 48 ships and crewed by about 30000 sailors. During this trip Zheng He planted the trilingual slab in Devinuwara, Sri Lanka. He arrested Sri Lankan ruler Vira Alakeswara and brought him to Beijing.

Fourth voyage (1413 to 15), fifth voyage (1417 to 19) and sixth voyage (1421-22) of the treasure fleet was commanded by Zheng He which went up to Persia and Africa.

The seventh voyage (1431-33) was ordered by Emperor Yong Le's grandson Emperor Zhuande which had 100 ships and 27500 men. It probably went up to India's west coast. Zheng He died during this voyage.

Vira Alakeswara (of Alahakonara family)

Alahakonara family arrived in Sri Lanka during the 13th century from Kanchipuram Tamil Nadu. They converted to Buddhism, concentrated in business activities and became wealthy. By the fourteenth century they became politically powerful under the Gampola Kings.

Vira Alakeswara was a descendant of this family. He also carried the family name of Alahakonara. His father Alakeswara was a minister under King Vikramabahu III of Gampola. Alakeswara fortified an area near Colombo on the Southern side of Kelani River to avoid paying tax to the tax collectors of Jaffna King. This fortified area is the present day Kotte. Alakeswara seems to have ruled this area independently as the kingdom of Raigama.

When Alakeswara died there was disunity in the family. Eventually Kumara Alakeswara controlled this area during 1386-1387 period followed by Vira Alakeswara from 1387 to 1391. He was ousted by his relatives in 1391. He came to power again with help of foreign mercenaries in 1399. In 1409 Zheng He captured him and took him to China as a captive. Vira Alakeswara is also known as Vijayabahu VI. Chinese called him Ya lieh k'u-nai erh, which is a Chinese transliteration of his family name Alahakonara.

When Zheng He's first fleet came to Sri Lanka Vira Alakeswara was hostile to them. Therefore the Chinese fleet left Sri Lanka hastily. Zheng He did not join the second fleet. Zheng He commanded the third voyage in 1409 during which he installed the trilingual slab in Devinuwara at the Southern Coast of Sri Lanka. During this journey they captured the Sri Lankan king and took him to China.

The Chinese fleet anchored near Colombo and Admiral Zheng He and 3,000 Chinese troops travelled overland into Kotte, because Vira Alakeswara had lured them into his territory. Vira Alakeswara used his troops to cut off Admiral Zheng He and his troops from the Chinese fleet. Vira Alakeswara planned to launch a surprise attack on the fleet. In response, Admiral Zheng He and his troops invaded Kotte and conquered the Capital. It is very likely Vira Alakeswara's local enemies helped Zheng He. Alakeswara's army hastily returned and surrounded the capital, but they were repeatedly defeated in battle against the invading Chinese troops. With his 3000 men Zheng He marched through a circuitous route, throughout the night and attacked the capital, after a battle lasting 6 days Vira Alakeswara, his wife, children and court officers were captured and taken to China.

Chinese records say that the Ming Emperor forgave Vira Alakeswara and freed him. The emperor also provided food and clothing to them. The Chinese emperor ordered them to select another member of Alakeswara's family as the new king. Chinese records say that the name of the newly appointed king is 'Yeh-pa-nai-na'. Paranavthana identified him as Parakramabahu VI

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