

UNESCO INTERNATIONAL MEMORY OF THE WORLD REGISTER

NOMINATION FORM

1.0 Title of item or collection being proposed

Trilingual Inscription (*Tribhasha Sellipiya*)

2.0 Summary (max 200 words)

The trilingual inscription is a stone tablet inscribed with Chinese, Persian and Tamil languages, discovered in 1911 culvert near Cripps Road within the town of Galle, southwestern coast of Sri Lanka by a British engineer H.F. Tomalin. It was removed safely with the scholarly excitement inscriptions were deciphered with some difficulty and is now preserved in Colombo National Museum and a replica is exhibited in the Museum in Galle. When deciphered by archeologists with great efforts, it is written in Chinese, Tamil, and Persian in praise of Buddha, God Vishnu and Allah. This inscription is dated 15th February 1409 and installed by the Chinese Admiral Zheng He, who commanded seven great voyages through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean between 1405 and 1433. The stone tablet was originally inscribed in the Treasure Boat Shipyard Park in Nanjing in the seventh reginal year of Emperor Yong le of Ming dynasty and brought on the 3rd voyage of Admiral Zheng He and the text of inscription mentions about offerings made to the sacred mountain shrine. This is the only trilingual inscription having texts in Chinese, Tamil and Persian which represent three different regions and cultures across the world.

3.0 Nominator contact details

3.1 Name of nominator (person or organization)

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3.2 Relationship to the nominated material

1. Secretary to the UNESCO MOW National Committee

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4.0 Declaration of Authority

I certify that I have the authority to nominate the item, or items, described in this document to the Memory of the World Register.

Signature

Full name and position: Ms. Sanuja Kasthuriarachchi
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Date: 25.10.2023

5.0 Legal information

5.1 Name of owner (person or organisation)

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5.5 Name and contact details of custodian IF DIFFERENT from the owner

The owner and custodian are same.

5.6 Legal status

Act No.31 of 1942 has empowered the Director of National Museums to manage and preserve the artifacts in all museums under the control of the Department of National Museums.

5.7 Copyright status

Social Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka

5.8 Accessibility (note any restrictions, including cultural restrictions)

The inscription is in the custody of the Colombo National Museum and there are no legal or cultural restrictions in accessibility.

Digitization process is expected to begin in 2024.

6.0 Identity and description of the documentary heritage

6.1 Name and identification details of the items/collection being nominated

Tribhāshā Sellipiya

6.2 Type of document

Inscribed Stone Slab

6.3 Catalogue or registration details

Registration no, 24.57.139.20 (116).

Main register maintained by Ethnology section of the Department of National Museums

6.4 Visual documentation (if available and appropriate)

Attached

6.5 History/provenance

The trilingual inscription was discovered in 1911 culvert near Cripps Road within the town of Galle, southwestern coast of Sri Lanka by a British Engineer H.F. Tomalin. Following the discovery of the slab, the Chinese inscription was successfully transcribed and translated by Edmund Backhouse. Sometime later, the Tamil inscription was transcribed and translated for the third volume of

Epigraphia Zeylanica (1933: 331–341) by Senarath Paranavitana, who benefitted from having access to Backhouse's translation of the Chinese text. The Persian inscription is badly damaged but Khwaja Muhammad Ahmad of the Archaeological Department of H. E. H. the Nizam's Dominions was able to compile a text and translation of the legible portion, which was published in 1933 as an appendix to Paranavitana's account of the Tamil inscription.

In order to assign the slab from Galle an intelligible place in the context of Asian epigraphical monuments, imperial and private inscriptions from plain Chinese contexts, and diverse inscriptions of 15th century Sri Lanka can be drawn upon to evaluate different cases that establish the background for the setting of the trilingual inscription. Thus, the findings published by Zhou Gucheng in 1985 can be related to the results of the epigraphic description concerning the trilingual slab; several rubbings of the inscription were procured through the Archaeological Commissioner for Ceylon at Anuradhapura, H. C. P. Bell, who consulted expert's opinions on the inscriptions. The preliminary results thus published by E. W. Perrera comprised two imperfect notes on the Tamil and Persian parts of the estampage and the complete English translation by Backhouse with a transcript of the Chinese inscription.

The Chinese and Sri Lankan religious harmony and cultural coherence based on Buddhism from the past is reflected in this inscription to mark the emperor's veneration to the sacred footprint in Adam's peak. In maritime culture in the Indian Ocean around the southern coastal ports has recognized Sripada sacred mountain and Devundara God temple as popular blessing centers for the protection of their ships and mariners.

It was removed safely and is now preserved in Colombo National Museum and a replica is exhibited in the Museum in Galle.

6.6 Bibliography

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7.0 Assessment against the selection criteria

7.1 Primary criteria - significance value to the world. Comment on one or more of the following significance criteria.

7.1.1 Historic significance

From the earliest times because of its central position in the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka has attracted traders, seafarers and adventurers from both the East and West. Further the reputation of Sri Lanka as repository of orthodox Buddhism, the diversity of its products, the salubrious climate and the hospitality of the people all have contributed to its fame. While commercial pursuits seemed to have first brought the Chinese and Sri Lankans together, the interest in Buddhism created a strong bond between the two countries. Contacts with China too can be traced back to an early date, and the Ambassadors who called on the Court of Claudius in the first century had commented on the commerce that generally prevailed between Sri Lanka and China. It is only after the third century that we find authentic sources in Chinese literature of the itineraries of Buddhist pilgrims, military and civil officers who brought back information which is very useful in tracing the early relations between Sri Lanka and China (Dewawraja, 2006; Senewirathne and Sylvan, 1915).

Sri Lanka was one of the main trade centres in the Indian Ocean. The main reason for this was that Sri Lanka was located on the West and East trade route. From the Red Sea to the Arabian Sea, the sea voyage and the evolution in the speed of ships made the journey to Sri Lanka and beyond easy. By the time between the seventh and ninth centuries AD, the Indian Ocean had become a haven for ships from all over the world. Maritime traders found a new marine route from China to Europe through the Indian Ocean and Sri Lanka, made new political, cultural, economic, devotional and social relationships with many countries. From Sri Lanka Archaeologists found much evidence that Sri Lanka had strong maritime trade relationships with countries such as India, China, Persia, Thailand, Myanmar, Greco-Roman etc. Merchants from countries such as China, Persia, Ethiopia, Java, Sumatra, Arabia, India, Rome, Malaysia, Indonesia, Myanmar may have used Sri Lankan ports as trading centres for the exchange, sale and purchase of goods. But by the seventh century AD, the Arabs seized control of the sea trade held by the Greek and Roman merchants.

The recognition given to Sri Lanka stems from the geographical position of being an island-state, equidistance in the East-West maritime trade posts in the Indian Ocean, astride the famed sea lines of communication. In the recorded history of Sri Lanka, trade with Chinese merchants, transshipment of Chinese goods and embarking of Chinese ships and people was an ordinary occurrence and Sri Lanka held a key position in the Chinese trade route, similarly to that afforded to the Arab merchants. Historical records indicate that trade was the most influential component between the two countries in the ancient days similar to the contemporary relations. (Senaratne & Melegoda, 2022) It is obvious that with Zeng He's expeditions, commercial, political, cultural and religious exchanges took place in between two countries and across the region during 15th century. Parakramabahu VII had dispatched to the court of the Ming Emperor of China altogether six

missions beginning in 1416 AD and continuing through 1421, 1433, 1436, 1445, and 1459 AD. From 1433 AD relations between Sri Lanka and China grew more regular and cordial (Bastiampillai, 1990).

7.1.2 Form and style

The slab features inscriptions in three different languages, enclosed within a floral border: Tamil (top-left), Persian (bottom-left) and Chinese (right).

In all, three inscriptions were dedicated to the tutelary sea goddess Tian Fei. Three inscriptions are ornamented with dragon-decor and carry imperial inscriptions. Common to ornamentation on the trilingual slab from Galle are the dragon motive worked on top and interlocking floral scrolls bordering the stone inscription. Six tablets may be referred to in regards to ornamentation. They show floral borders in varying grades of elaboration and dragon motives separately and combined. The motive of two antithetic dragons in the air prevails on all tablets, which are of imperial issuance. A combination of floral ribbon enclosure and dragon designed top was applied to the imperial inscription to the tutelary goddess of seafaring, Tian Fei, at Nanjing in 1416 AD. This tablet is worked as assemblage in several parts, top and tablet are separately conducted in outstanding large parameters, as is also the imperial obituary tablet to the (Philippine) king of Sulu, buried at Shandong and equally equipped with a high-quality dragon bas-relief: the tops show full relief carvings of two closely intertwined dragons, arching above the heads and sheltering thus a gable-roofed text-compartment. It is placed amidst and contains the title of the inscription in seal-script. Both dragon tops seem to have received working from four sides.

Details of the dragon design remaining unconsidered, it must be assumed that the costly and skillful relief carvings supersede the nice quality of ornament on the Galle slab that is conducted on smaller scale worked in one piece from merely two sides as may be compared to other slabs of approximate size. The floral ribbon of orchid petals on the Galle slab and the decor on promotional bills, bestowed to officials of ranks 3 and 4 are associated with the so-called “foreign lotus” or “thriving lotus” (*fan lianhua*) scroll, that borders the slab dedicated to *Tian Fei* at *Zhangle* (Nagel, 2001).

Conclusively, the cloud-and-wind patterned ornamented top must thus be regarded a carrier of the insignia of imperial favours, directed to addressees of military status, besides alluding to the protective powers of a celestial deity, whose veneration through “soldiers of the government army” is testified in the inscriptional text of II. Dragon motifs as displayed on all imperial stone tablets showing in imperial architecture and on numerous objects of imperial and official usage, apparently made a forceful career following to early Ming times. According to He Li, the five-clawed dragon motif was forbidden to commoners, and dragon-motifs hardly found i. e. on Yuan ceramics until 1368 AD. In early Ming periods, dragon decor eventually continued to feature a supreme insignia of imperial rank; hence by the addressed person was conceived a significant dignitary, who notably enjoyed imperial grants (Nagel, 2001).

7.1.3 Social, community or spiritual significance

The inscription is an index to the extent of religious tolerance that the Ming Emperors practised. It is said that Chinese junks, which set out for commercial purpose habitually carried Islamic, Hindu and Buddhist savants to provide advice and guidance. Yong Le was a Buddhist Emperor, whose admiral, was a Muslim offering valuable gifts to the Buddha, to Allah, the God at Devundara, very likely Vishnu and setting up an inscription to commemorate the event. Buddhism with its teaching of universal tolerance had been for centuries the religion of the Chinese people. This is apparent in the multi-lingual, multi-cultural nature of the inscription. He established a language school in Nanjing and trained interpreters who accompanied the fleets enabling admirals to communicate with rulers from India to Africa in Arabic, Persian, Swahili, Hindi, Tamil and many other languages.

Examining the contents of the Chinese version (which is the same as others) the inscription was a thanksgiving by the Admirals and sailors who came in the ships to the founders of their respective religions. The Chinese Buddhist sailors give their thanks to Buddha for bringing them safely on such a long and perilous voyage, in the Chinese language. The Tamil speaking Indian Hindu sailors give their thanks to Vishnu in the Tamil language. The Muslim sailors including Zheng He express their thanks to Allah in Persian. Sinhala people were obviously not sailing in the Chinese fleet. Even if there were few Sinhala speaking people in Zheng He's ships they too would give thanks to Lord Buddha thus duplicating what is given in the Chinese version (Dewaraja, 2006).

The Chinese text of inscription features praise and offerings dedicated by the Chinese emperor, through his envoys to the Buddhist temple on the sacred mountain of Sri Lanka. The Persian text is largely defaced but what is readable makes it clear that this too lists offerings to the light of Islam. The Tamil inscription follows the same pattern and the beneficiary is *TenavaraiNayanar*, a Tamil god. It therefore appears that, when the Chinese arrived in Sri Lanka, they made gifts of equal value to several different religious traditions of the region and registered these gifts on the same stele. It was clear that Zheng He, as a Muslim, offered valuable gifts to the Buddha, to Allah and the God of Tamil and entertained the multi-lingual, multi-cultural approach to the extent of universal tolerance that the Ming Emperors practiced. This intervention symbolizes the peaceful trade among countries with diverse ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic groups in the region in the 15th century and improved the good relationship already existed between the two countries for more than a thousand years. When Admiral Zheng-He first visited Sri Lanka in 1405 at Beruwala harbour, which was a thriving harbour for Arab traders at that time, he paid a visit to Kotte Kingdom and climbed Sri Pada to pay his respects.

This sacred mountain monument is venerated not only by Buddhist but also visited by other religious groups of Hindu, Muslim and Christians too. It is a geographically critical and historically crucial location which is now recognized as a UNESCO world heritage site.

7.1.4 Gender equality

Neither the ‘preparation of trilingual inscription slab’ as a historic event, nor the slab connected with it have any implication that contributes to inequality of gender. The documents proposed for nomination do not contain any gender-specific statements against men or women.

7.2 Comparative criteria. Comment on one or more of the following comparative criteria:

7.2.1 Rarity

There are many multilingual inscriptions recorded across the world and most of them are bilingual. Among all trilingual inscriptions only two include the Chinese language and Gall inscription is exclusively recorded as the only inscription has Chinese, Persian and Tamil texts (Sen, 2018).

This inscription is significant historical evidence that supports the hypothesis of seeking commercial and political unrestraint under the guidance of religion goodness by Ming emperor. This is the only inscription established by a foreign ruler out of the region for religious purposes with devotional gifts. Therefore, the context of the inscription reveals the strong cultural relationship between China and Sri Lanka that influenced indirectly on the political situation of the country. This is the only physical evidence in textual form available inscribed on a slab erected several centuries ago by a historical character recorded in other sources. There are many scholarly articles published on this because of its rarity as no copies are available in the country except the replica at the Galle Museums.

7.2.2 Integrity, completeness, condition

The slab-inscription as a whole is well-preserved. Defects of the inscription seem to arrive from mineral loss during carving or recarving the stone, not from weathering. Reworking of the slab-surface cannot be excluded. Distortions are few and concerned with a single or two to three characters at the most, generally caused during working the stone. With the help of individual paper-graffities taken from single characters and small passages, disturbances were limited to the afflicted parts in terms of composition principle and stroke sequence, so that characters were partly or wholly identified. (Nagel, 2001).

According to earlier descriptions the stone tablet displays carefully smoothed front- and ornamentation of the top is worked in relief from both sides. The stone owns a greenish colour and is rounded in the top corners. According to the observations, measurements render maximum values of 145 cm in height, 77 cm in width and 13 cm in thickness, notwithstanding natural irregularities of 2-3 cm. This is congruent with measures taken by Paranavitana as 4' 9" (144.88 cm) in length, 2' 6" (76.20 cm) in breadth and 5" (12.7 cm) in thickness (Nagel, 2001).

The inscription's ornamentation includes dragon carving, floral ribbon on the top with an arrangement of two dragons worked in relief from both sides. The dragons squat down in antithetic posture, their visible front paws reach out at each other, while rising the heads to gaze at the pearl above: “two dragons play with a pearl”- motive (er long xi zhu wen). Their tails intertwine above the

pearl so as to shelter it. The dragons are surrounded by curly elements (waves/clouds). Distinctive features of the identical dragon pair are straight and blunt-edged horn(s) sprouting shortly, five-clawed pawns, a full set of flat teeth with a tusk raising from the rear lower jaw and beard whiskers. Body and tail are scaly and surrounded by a fire corona. The tablet beneath the top-relief is surrounded by a bordure of an endless waving floral ribbon of curled leaves (orchid petals) sprouting in turn from either side, backed by a plain linear frame. Carving technique is in high relief; measures. Artistic design is accomplished and the craft well executed. The impression is strong and vivid (Nagel, 2001).

Socket is made with a turtle-socket or square socket, but not preserved. Recent observations show the slab well preserved. Mineral colour changes in a large middle stripe section, which was open to damp and water from a culvert, probably occurred when “the tablet was used as cover stone of a culvert with the inscribed face downwards”. Several slight abrasions in the Tamil and Chinese section show the turning points, resulting from its modern usage. A single, long-stretched notch by some sharp-edged tool or weapon disturbs the Persian section. One natural fissure in the lower middle part of the slab leaves the writings about untouched. Finally, about 2 cm of sandy mortar that cover the floral ribbon at the base have gone unnoticed before and not traceable on the figure published by Perrera in 1913, where the floral ribbon shows to be completely reproduced, this anchorage might be of very recent origin. Today the slab is based on a rectangular socket, almost backed by a wall in about a decimetre distance (Nagel, 2001).

7.3 Statement of significance

The trilingual stone slab inscription recovered from Galle, Sri Lanka, dated to the year 1409 AD, represents a unique historical source to this country closely associated with broader, archaeologically and historically defined contexts in South Asia. Chinese emperor has shown the religious adoration to the most sacred mountain that was worshipped by multicultural communities in the country and travelers from other countries. The blessings from religious gifts were expected for the protection of mariners and workers of harbor cities in the face of international trade juncture between Persia, China and India. Turning back to epigraphical evidence, the lack of signatures on the Galle tablet for once excludes the Galle inscription from the group of sacrificial tablets as were erected in the course of official worship rendered by Chinese officials to codified deities in insular and coastal South Asia. Alternately, as the Galle inscription concludes on the contemporary religious, social and political background, it conforms to the understanding of maritime trade in the view of 'Under the Heaven' over the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea during 15th century. This is an exclusive historical source that is written in three languages, representing different cultural contexts across the region as recognized in multi-religious perspective in spiritual blessings for maritime protection.

8.0 Consultation with stakeholders

8.1 8.1 Provide details of consultation with relevant stakeholders ensuring a gender-balanced

representation about this nomination

The steering committee had members from all the stakeholder institutes such as Department of National Museums, Department of Archeology, National Archives of China, National Library Services and Documentary Board, MoW National Committee and Department of Archeology University of Kelaniya. There were several discussions and review meetings held between the committee and nomination writer with consultation of experts who have researched the inscription.

9.0 Risk assessment

9.1 Detail the nature and scope of threats to the nominated material

The proposed documentary heritage is well preserved, stored, and displayed at the National Museum of Colombo. So the proposed documentary heritage is free of the following risks: climatic conditions (displayed in control climatic conditions), poor storage, economic issues and political interferences.

10.0 Preservation and access management plan

10.1 Describe, or attach as a scanned document, any existing plans. If no plans exist, provide details about proposed conservation, storage and access strategies.

The proposed documentary heritage is displayed in Gallery No. 4 (Transitional Period Gallery) at the National Museum of Colombo. The capacity of the gallery is 19,968 cu feet (L = 48 feet, W = 26 feet, H = 16 feet). The climate conditions are controlled in the gallery, to a certain extent. Two industrial fans are operated to provide proper ventilation inside the gallery, safeguarding the artifacts. Danger of Fire would be the main risk factor. The gallery is equipped with portable fire extinguishers, heat and smoke detectors with an emergency alarm system, and a horse reel system. In order to prevent theft or vandalism in the museum, the CCTV system and IR laser beams are operated in the gallery. The museum is secured by the museum security team, in addition to police officers' day and night in roster to protect the museum and its artifacts. The proposed documentary heritage is displayed for the public with all the above precautionary measures. It would be located in a special place with prominence and also with all necessary preservation measures.

11.0 Any other information that may support the nomination

Plans for promoting the documentary heritage to be included in public display in a TV screen at the main entrance and provide a pamphlet for the visitors' information etc.

This is already cited in many research works and other kind of literary sources. Department of National Museums with the support of Universities and other institutes will encourage further educational and research activities.

11.1 Note below or attach scanned documents as appropriate.

Attached.

12.0 CHECKLIST

Summary completed (section 2); ☒

Nomination and contact details completed (section 3); ☒

Declaration of Authority signed and dated (section 4); ☒

If this is a joint nomination, section 4 is appropriately modified, and all Declarations of Authority obtained; ☒

Legal information (section 5); ☒

Details of custodian if different from owner (section 5); ☒

Details of legal status completed (section 5); ☒

Details of accessibility completed (section 5); ☒

Copyright permission for images completed (section 5); ☒

Catalogue and registration information (section 6); ☒

History/provenance completed (section 6); ☒

Bibliography completed (section 6); ☒

Independent referees identified (section 6); ☒

Significance – primary criteria (section 7); ☒

Significance – comparative criteria (section 7); ☒

Statement of significance (section 7); ☒

Details of consultation with stakeholders completed where relevant (section 8); ☒

Assessment of risk completed (section 9); ☒

Summary of Preservation and Access Management Plan completed or strategy proposed (section 10); ☒

Any other information provided – if applicable (section 11); ☒

Additional scanned documents, including suitable reproduction quality photographs identified to illustrate the documentary heritage (300dpi, jpg format, full-colour preferred); ☒