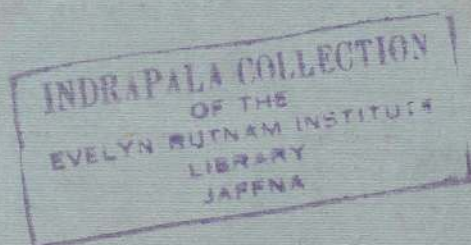


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Arabic Gravestone from Trincomalee Dockyard

by

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## Arabic Gravestone from Trincomalee Dockyard

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About two years ago Mr. W. P. Simon of the Civil Engineer's Department, Trincomalee Dockyard, informed me that a peculiarly inscribed stone had come to light when the Works Service premises were being cleared of undergrowth. When I visited the spot I found not one but two inscribed slabs. Of these one is in very good condition. It is the subject of this paper. The other is in very poor condition, and practically nothing could be made out in its defaced and weathered state, at least as far as an amateur like me sees it.

At the time of writing the slabs are in the recently opened Archaeological Museum, Trincomalee. In passing, one might say that the Dockyard contains, besides the well known Fort Ostenburg (Dutch), other relics of interest to the antiquarian. Among these are not only artifacts but also buildings.

Whilst trying to trace the history of the finding of the slabs I was contacted by Mr. S. H. Amir Khan of the Dockyard Electrical Engineer's Department who assured me that he was the person who had found the slabs and transported them to the Works Service premises. That was in February 1939, when he was engaged in laying a cable to a pump which was being installed by one of the two wells in Nicholson's Cove. This Cove is a narrow and sheltered inlet near the entrance to the Inner Harbour of Trincomalee. The wells, though marked on the map, could not be identified by Mr. Khan and me, such concealment they have from the rank jungle growth at the site. Save for a few fishermen whose huts border the waterline, the whole area is covered by forest.

According to Mr. Khan his labourers had found the slab under a tree and drawn his attention to it. Perhaps he himself, being a Muslim, came to be interested in it both for itself as for the fact that a shrine to a bygone saint of his faith exists within the Dockyard known by the popular name, "Kalladi Appah's Shrine." He had the slab brought to the notice of his departmental chief and through him to the Civil Engineer. This officer undertook to have the stone photographed and have it deciphered by the antiquarian authorities in Cairo.

How far the proposed action proceeded one cannot say. Mr. Khan himself forgot all about the stone, with the passage of time, not to speak of his preoccupation with other tasks. In 1958 the Royal Navy

handed their Trincomalee base to the Ceylon Government, and thus ten years later the slab came to be re-discovered. Mr. Khan is a happy man when he tells us that the then Civil Engineer came to be very interested in inscribed stones. As a result, a gravestone (probably early British), a stone bearing the date "A : 1676" and presumably referring to Fort Ostenburg, and the second slab with the weathered face already mentioned, have since come into notice. Mr. Khan was very surprised that my own search in the undergrowth brought to light this second stone. He assures me that he discovered and transported only one from the Cove.

The inscribed slab I here describe appears to be of a variety of quartz. In shape it is very nearly a square: 19 ins. long, 16 ins. broad,  $2 \frac{1}{4}$  ins. thick, in its present condition. The characters are in sunk relief. Six horizontal lines, with the remains of a seventh, can be made out. These are flanked by two vertical columns, also inscribed. On the whole the engraving is very finely done, in quite high relief and virtually undamaged, save for a slightly chipped off corner. To even my untutored eye, the script seemed Semitic, most probably Arabic. In my quest of someone who can help in its decipherment, I turned to my father who had once served in the Archaeological Survey of Ceylon and is an honoured member of our Society. Through him, a photo copy was sent to the Chief Epigraphist of the Indian Archaeological Survey, Dr. G. S. Gai, Ph.D. Dr. Gai was so good as to refer the matter to Dr. Z. A. Desai, Superintending Epigraphist for Arabic & Persian Inscriptions. Dr. Desai has solved my enigma when he provided a complete and illuminating reading of the inscription, its text, transcript and translation. These are here reproduced. Dr. Desai does not advert to the script and the language as such, as they were not required from him by us. But Dr. Gai, in his covering letter to my father has mentioned "the Arabic inscription sent by you." Thus it would be proper to accept that here we are dealing with Arabic.

In the light of this find arise some interesting matters. After receiving the reading I re-examined the other (weathered) slab. It has made me revise my earlier belief that it was of little account, for now I have come to accept that it, too, is a gravestone like the other, better preserved one. Although here there seem (to my vision) only one or two characters which can be made out, the rectangular depressions which form the "bed" from which the inscribed letters rise in relief (as in the better preserved slab) are clear enough. They are also similarly positioned for two of the horizontal and half of each of the two vertical writing spaces remain. It is unfortunate that this stone is damaged, only being half intact. To judge from the area,  $9\frac{1}{2}$  ins.  $\times$   $19\frac{1}{2}$  ins., of uninscribed surface below the inscribed, the slab seems to have been rectangular, 22 ins.  $\times$   $19\frac{1}{2}$  ins., in its present state, as opposed to the very nearly square shape of the other.

An intriguing question would arise if these two slabs, which clearly are gravestones, had been from Nicholson's Cove, for that would necessitate a re-examination of the Ceylon-Arab relations during this period of history. The gravestones could only have come from a Muslim graveyard and for such a piece of ground to be set apart there should have been a sizable resident community of the Muslim faith in the area. There are, as far as I know, many Muslim shrines in Trincomalee, apart from the subject of this paper; and a re-examination of relations with this farflung community of traders and travellers is, to my mind, indicated to the historian.

Encouraged by the reading of Dr. Desai, I was led into finding out more about the remains connected with Islam in our bygone years. But I could discover only three published notices. The first of these was about 150 years ago. It was a discussion in the Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland (vol. 1, two articles numbered xxxii) of a Cufic inscription from Ceylon. (Dr. C. E. Godakumbura mentions the find spot as Jawatta in Colombo. See this Journal for 1969, p. 6.) This stone bears Colombo Museum registered number 24.57.140.20. Like the inscription I am here presenting, this was also an epitaph. The Rev. Samuel Lee, Professor of Arabic then in the University of Cambridge, read in it a prayer to Allah in His Mercy on behalf of Khàlid Ibn Abu Bakáya (or Takáya or Nakáya), the deceased. The date on which the epitaph was indited is given as the fifth of the month of Rejeb, Hejira Year 337 (A.C. mid-10th cent.). This is the first ever notice of an Arabic inscription from Ceylon. Its special point of interest is that it is a little past a century after (probably) the earliest allusion to Ceylon by any west-Asian author (viz. Tabari, born A.C. 838—according to Tennent, *Ceylon*, I, p. 571, footnote 2). The same author proposed that the origin of the Muslim (Arab) pilgrimages to Sri Pada could be ascribed to the early part of the 10th cent., (about 50 years before our Cufic inscription was indited) as the Muslim saint Imaum Abu Abd Allah who was the first to make known the way "from India to the mountain of Serendib" died in Hejira Year 331 (op. cit. 579).

The second inscription I have read of is a short legend (fragmentary) on the rock surface at Bhagava Lena about 100 ft. below Sri Pada. Numbered 378 (Ceylon Journal of Science, sec. G, vol. ii, pp. 20, 21), its reading is "Muhammad, May God bless him, (the father of) Man....." Mr. G. Yazdani of the Indian Epigraphical Division ascribed it to about the same period as Nissanka Malla, an inscription of whom, together with a likeness of him as a bowing pilgrim, virtually is juxtaposed to the legend.

My third and last inscription is particularly intriguing. It was found on the west coast. Numbered 29 in the Archaeological Survey Annual Report for 1956 (p. 12), the description goes: "Slab inscription at the entrance to an ancient dagaba at Pomparippu on Mariccakatti

Road (F/15/23)." Dr. W. S. Karunaratne who has made this note has also queried its composition in the next entry as "Undeciphered Early Arabic?" In a personal letter dated 25.2.'70, however, he reviewed his opinion. "I scrutinized the Inscription you refer to (Reg. No. 2354). The script being Arabic is also doubtful."

Finally, it would appear that few Arabic inscriptions have been found or commented on in Ceylon as locally discovered. From this point of view the gravestone and its inscription here presented should be considered among evidence gathering slowly and surely of early contact of the Island with west Asia. I, for one, would welcome any further light that can be shed on the present inscription by those competent to do it. I hope, too, that it will lead to further discoveries in the same field.

**Postscript**—After I had submitted this article to the editor, I came to know of two other Arabic inscribed slabs, now in the Colombo Museum. By registered numbers they are:—

- 24.57.138.20 — being the one mentioned by Archaeological Commissioner E. R. Ayrton in his report for 1912-1913, at page 8 and also plate XVI, as having been originally found in the island of Puliyantivu and removed to the South Bar of Mannar; the inscription praises God and Mohamed upon whom and family blessings and protection are solicited.
- 24.63.1.56 — brought to the Colombo Museum in May 1963 after having been taken over a few days earlier from the Trincomalee Kachcheri. This slab, too, had been found in the Dockyard and had been commented upon in an article (Mohamed Sameer Bin Hajie Ismail Effendi: "Archaeological Evidence of Early Arabs in Ceylon") in the Souvenir published by the Moors' Islamic Cultural Home ("The First Twenty One Years," Colombo, 1965). The full text, edited by Dr. S. A. Imam, Ph.D., of the University of Ceylon, together with a facsimile of the inscription, is given in this publication. This slab, too, is a memorial erected over the grave of "the respected Quazi, the martyr, Afifuddin" and is dated "Saturday nineteenth of the month of Safar..... year six hundred after Hijra."

I quote the circumstances relating to the finding of this slab as they have a bearing on the subject of this article. "The Government Agent, Trincomalee, informed me that the stone was unearthed during the war by workmen while excavating for laying water pipes at a spot between Ostenburg Point No. 1 and Chappel Hill. This may have been the burial place of Muslims, for the stone is a tombstone over the grave of a Quazi."



In the accompanying map I have indicated the spots mentioned in the quotation above, along with the wells by which the slab which forms the subject of this article was found. It will be noticed that the wells are situated approximately half-way between Ostenburg Point and Chapel Hill; and, knowing the lay of the land, I have no doubt that the findspots were identical. It thus seems more than likely that Nicholson's Cove was the site of a Muslim burial ground of importance for over a century.

(a) Right Side:

[الله لا إله إلا هو الحى القيوم لا تأخذه سنة ولا نوم له ما فى السموات و

(b) Left Side:

[ما شاء وسع كرسيه السموات والارض ولا يؤده حوطهما وهو العلى العظيم

(c) Centre:

(١) [كل من عليها فان و يبقى وجه ربك ذو الآلال

(٢) والاكرام هذا قبر المحدث الطاهر

(٣) العفيفة الموصوفة لولاد الامير بدر الدين

(٤) حين بن على الحلبى تغمدها الله بمغفرتة

(٥) واسكنها جوارحه جنة توفيت الى حجة الله تعالى

(٦) يوم الاثنين سابع متردوالقعد سنة تسع عشرين

(٧) [وتسعين] من الهجرة النبوية عليه السلام [والعلاء

\* [وسبعين]



### Transcript (Fragmentary)

(a-b) Throne verse. (*Qur'ān*, Chapter II, verse 255, with middle portion missing).

(c) (1) [Kullu man 'alaihā fāninwwa Yabqā wajhu rabbika] dhu' l-jalālī.

(2) wa' l-ikrām. Hādhā qabru' l-ḥurrati' t. t. ṭāhirat-

(3) i' l-'aḥfati' l-marḥūma aulādi' l-amīr Badri' d-Dīn (i.e. Badru' d-Dīn).

(4) Ḥusain bin 'Alī al-Ḥalabī taghammadahāllāhu bi-maghfiratihi

(5) wa-askanahā biḥubūḥati Jannah. Tuwaḥḥiyat ilā rahmati'-llāhi ta'ālā.

(6) yauma' l-athnaini sābi'-'ashara Dhu' l-Qa'da sanata tis'-ishrīna.

(7) wa[sab' or tis'-] mi'yata mina' l-Hijrati'n-na [bawīyya 'alaihi' s-salām (?)] wa' S-Ṣalāt.

### Translation

(a-b) Throne verse (*Qur'ān*, Chapter II, verse 255).

(c) (1-2) *Qur' ān*, Chapter IV, verse 26. This is the grave of the noble (lit. free), the pious

(3) (and) the chaste lady who has been received into Allāh's mercy, daughter of the Amīr (i.e. chief) Badru' d-Dīn.

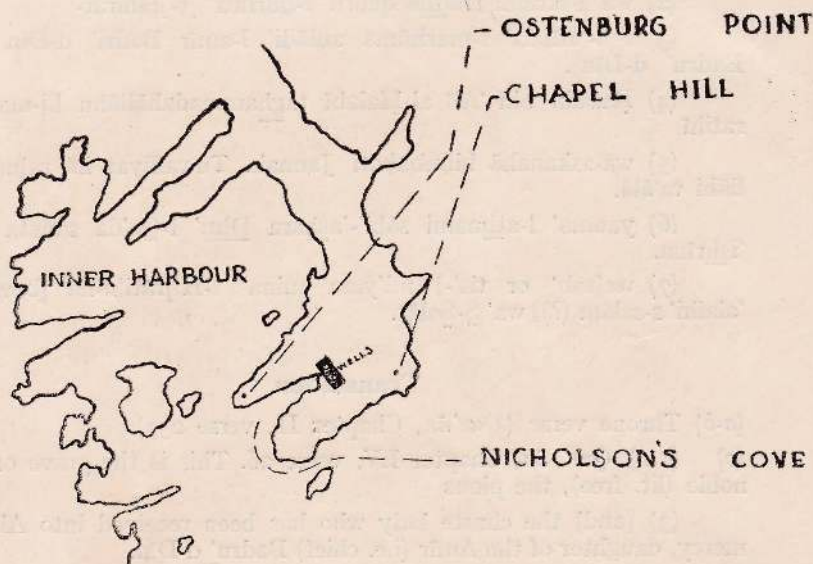
(4) Ḥusain, son of 'Alī al-Ḥalabī, may Allāh cover her with His forgiveness

(5) and grant her abode in the centre of Paradise. She (died and was taken) in the mercy of the Exalted Allāh

(6) On Monday the 17th *Dhu'l-Qa'da* year twenty-nine

(7) and seven or nine hundred from the Migration of the Prophet, may (Allāh's) salutation and blessing be upon him.

*Note:* The portion of the text containing the word indicating the third digit of the year is almost completely scraped off. The word can be either *sab'-mi'ya*—seven hundred or *tis'-mi'ya*—nine hundred. The date will therefore be 17 *Dhu'l-Qa'da* 729 (12 September 1329) or 17 *Dhu'l-Qa'da* 929 (27 September 1523). While in the absence of any other palaeographical specimens from Ceylon, it is not possible to say which of the two dates is preferable on palaeographical grounds, the earlier may be the correct date. A carefully prepared rubbing may enable definite decipherment of the word.



TRINCOMALEE HARBOUR SHOWING THE POSITIONS OF  
NICHOLSON'S COVE AND THE WELLS

