Tamil-Brahmi and the Early History of Writing in the Tamil Region

Letters, languages, objects and chronologies in the earliest Tamil inscriptions

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Direct answer. Tamil-Brahmi is a scholarly name for Brahmi-derived writing adapted to represent Old Tamil. Its distinctive orthographies handled Tamil phonology, including consonants without an inherent vowel and sounds such as l, □, □, r, □ and □. Evidence occurs on rock-shelter donations, pottery, coins, rings, seals and other objects across Tamil Nadu and in connected trading zones. Widely accepted inscriptions centre on the last centuries BCE and early centuries CE, while some excavated sherds have been assigned earlier dates that remain debated because a radiocarbon date usually belongs to associated organic material or a layer, not directly to the letters. Tamil-Brahmi documents names, donors, ascetics, merchants, rulers and ownership practices. It does not by itself prove mass literacy, the date of later literary manuscripts or direct descent from the undeciphered Indus signs.

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1 Definition and corpus

Tamil-Brahmi denotes Brahmi-derived orthographies used for Old Tamil on caves, pottery, coins, rings, seals and other objects. Terminology should follow observable graphic and linguistic features.

2 Orthographic adaptation

Old Tamil phonology required representation of vowel-less consonants and language-specific sounds. Early and later conventions differ in inherent-vowel treatment and pulli use; surface damage can change character identification.

3 Formal cave inscriptions

Mangulam, Jambai and Pugalur preserve donations, patronage and named political actors. Jambai's Satiyaputo Atiyan Netuman Anci supplies a particularly strong bounded correlation with literary and Ashokan terminology.

4 Portable and settlement inscriptions

Inscribed pottery and small objects broaden the corpus to ownership, manufacture and exchange. Pre- and post-firing marks have different production histories, and portable objects may travel far from inscription.

5 Chronological method

Palaeography, stratigraphy, radiocarbon association, ceramics and coins are complementary. Radiocarbon dates organic material, not lettering; the sample-deposit-object relationship and residuality determine relevance.

6 Language and society

Tamil, Prakrit elements and mobile religious and trade networks document multilingual interaction. Counts of inscribed sherds cannot independently measure population literacy, language proportions or ethnic identity.

7 Later scripts and continuity

Southern Brahmi-derived forms developed through branching regional traditions including Va□□e□uttu and modern Tamil's antecedents, with Grantha used for Sanskrit. Coexistence complicates linear evolutionary charts.

8 Digital encoding

Unicode Brahmi includes Old Tamil orthographic signs, enabling searchable text when supported by fonts and shaping. Encoded characters are normalized abstractions and should remain linked to images and editorial apparatus.

9 Publication protocol

Object metadata, provenience, imaging, sign readings, uncertainty, language, translation, dating logic, alternatives and stable identifiers make epigraphic claims reproducible.

10 Evidence assessment

Strong	Tamil-Brahmi adapted Brahmi conventions to represent Old Tamil phonology.
Strong	Rock, pottery and portable-object inscriptions document donors, names, ownership and exchange across the Tamil region.
Strong	Jambai securely links Atiyan Netuman Anci with the Satiyaputo title.
Probable	The large pottery corpus indicates writing practices extending beyond royal and monumental institutions.
Probable	Different Tamil-Brahmi orthographies represent chronological and regional development, with overlap.
Contested	Dates substantially earlier than the third century BCE for particular excavated sherds and the implications drawn from them.
Unsupported	The claim that Tamil-Brahmi directly deciphers or descends demonstrably from the Indus script on present evidence.

11 Conclusion

Tamil-Brahmi is the earliest substantial written evidence for Old Tamil and a primary source for people, patronage, religious life and exchange. Its value comes from precise reading and context. The strongest histories combine object-level documentation, palaeography, stratigraphy and scientific dating; the weakest turn one sherd or an associated date into a claim about an entire language, population or civilisation.

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This paper is an evidence review for public scholarship.

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