

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SRI LANKAN EPIGRAPHY: A SUMMARY

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Introduction

As it happens in history that many things are forgotten with the passage of time, the memory of the numerous inscriptions which were carved upon various medias for a period of 20 centuries slipped from everybody by the time of the Kandyan kingdom. The drip-ledges, pillars, rock and stone slabs which were full of some unknown symbols of the past evoked a sense of mystery in the minds of those who saw them. Hence the deep silence in regard to their meaning and the objectives of their presence. Thus Knox says in 1861;

“..... Here some ancient writings engraven upon rocks which poseth all that see them. There are divers great rocks in divers parts in Cande Uda and in the Northern parts. These rocks are cut deep that they may last to the worlds end. No body can read them or make anything of them. I have asked Malabars, Gentuses as well as Chingulays and Moors, but none of them understood them. You walk over some of them. There is an ancient temple, Goddiladeni in Yattanour stands by one place where there are of these letters. They are probably in mamorial of something, but of what we must leave to learned men to spend their conjectures.....”

(Knox 1681:122-23)

We have also found another attempt made by Constatine de Za Noronchcho, a Captain of the Portugees army. When he demolished the Konesvaram Hindu temple at Trincomalee he found a Tamil inscription and made a copy of it and send to the Portugal for the purpose of identification in 1624 (Queyroz 1930 ed: 66 - 67).

It was about three centuries after Norochcho and Knox that initial attempts were made at deciphering these ancient writings which had been forgotten for 23 centuries. The inscriptions that Sri Lanka drew from the renaissance hich was brought about in India with the decipherment of the Brahmi script by James Princep in 1837 gave on impetus to the importance and the enthusiasm of understanding of early writings in Sri Lanka. The

literary interest of the Oriental languages which developed especially among the European scholars with the decipherment of curious systems of writings such as the Cunei Forms in the Middle East, the Hieroglyph of ancient Egypt and the Linear A and B of Crete and the Minoan was a complement to this trend at the time. The investigations and researches in the field of Sri Lankan epigraphy which started in the second half of the 19th century are discussed below in several stages.

Basic premises (1847 - 1874 AD)

The earliest reference about the Sri Lankan epigraphy in 19th century goes to 1830's. James Princep had published several eye - copies of Tamil inscriptions found in Sri Lanka in 1836 (Princep 1836). There were no consequences after Princeps article until 1847.

After the discovery of several ancient royal grants engraved on some copper plates, by Casiechitti in 1847 AD, the ensuing period of 27 years up to 1874 in which year a Commissioner of Archaeology was first appointed by governor W. H. Gregory, was the period which marked the beginning of the basic dynamics in the history of epigraphic researches in Sri Lanka. Scholars like Bordie (1853), (1855), Rhys Davids (1870), Zoysa (1871) and Casiechitti have kept records on epigraphy which inspired greater enthusiasm on one hand and which boosted of an extensive expansion on the other hand although they did not have the opportunity to do a deep academically oriented research in this new field.

Though very short in the number of years, yet this initial period is still more important with regard to epigraphy in the island on account of the establishment of the Archaeological Commission in 1869. The main function of this Commission appointed by the then Governor of Ceylon Sri Herculeas Robinson as a result of a request made by H. S. O Russel who was the then Government Agent in Jaffna, was to look into the possibility of collecting the copies of inscriptions in the North Central province. The ability to measure the effectiveness of this initial function is hampered due to be fact that this report which is said to have been prepared by that Commission which consisted of Capt. A. B. Fires, Superintendent of the Dept. of Survey, Sir Gilfred Molesworth Director, Public Works Department, and James Smither Assistant architect of the Department as its members, is misplaced at present.

In fact this period may be called a period of "individual interest" and "curiosity" in the history of epigraphic researches in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, it can be compared, at least to a certain extent, to the movement which spread throughout Europe during the Renaissance about the antiquities.

The Great Beginnings (1874 - 1922 AD)

It was with the induction of Dr. P. Goldschmidt as the Commissioner of Archaeology which officially conferred the authority of antiquities, that the “reawakening” in the tradition of epigraphy in the island during the period of two and a half decades prior to 1874 transformed to a clear, practical process. According to Karunaratne the main objective of Goldschmidt was the exploration and recording of inscriptions in the island (Karunaratne 1984).

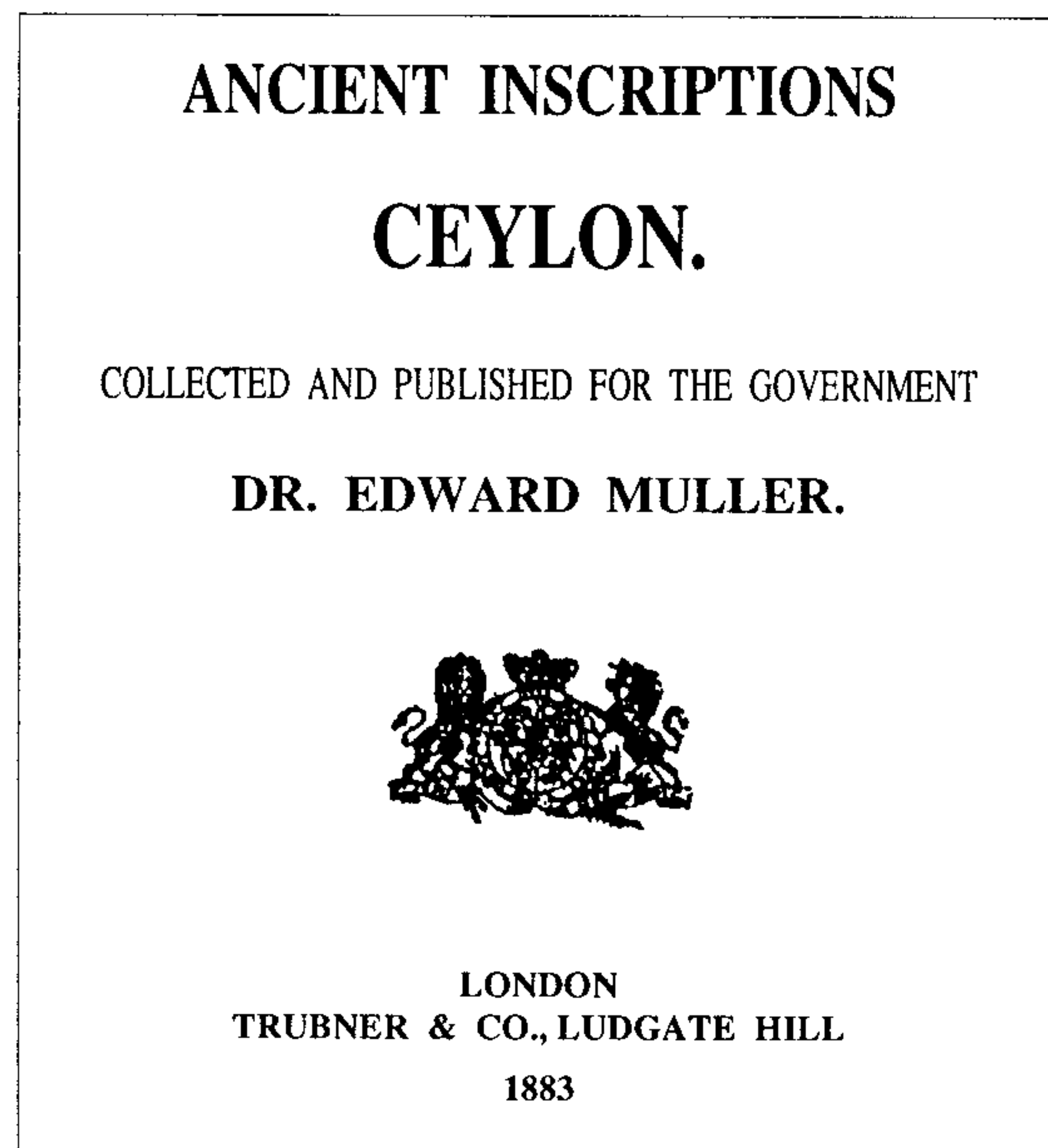


Fig 1: Title Page of the Muller's book originally published in 1883.

Unfortunately, the service of Goldschmidt would have rendered to the field of Sri Lankan epigraphy for a longer period with great enthusiasm and devotion was ended with his sudden death in 1877. Three valuable

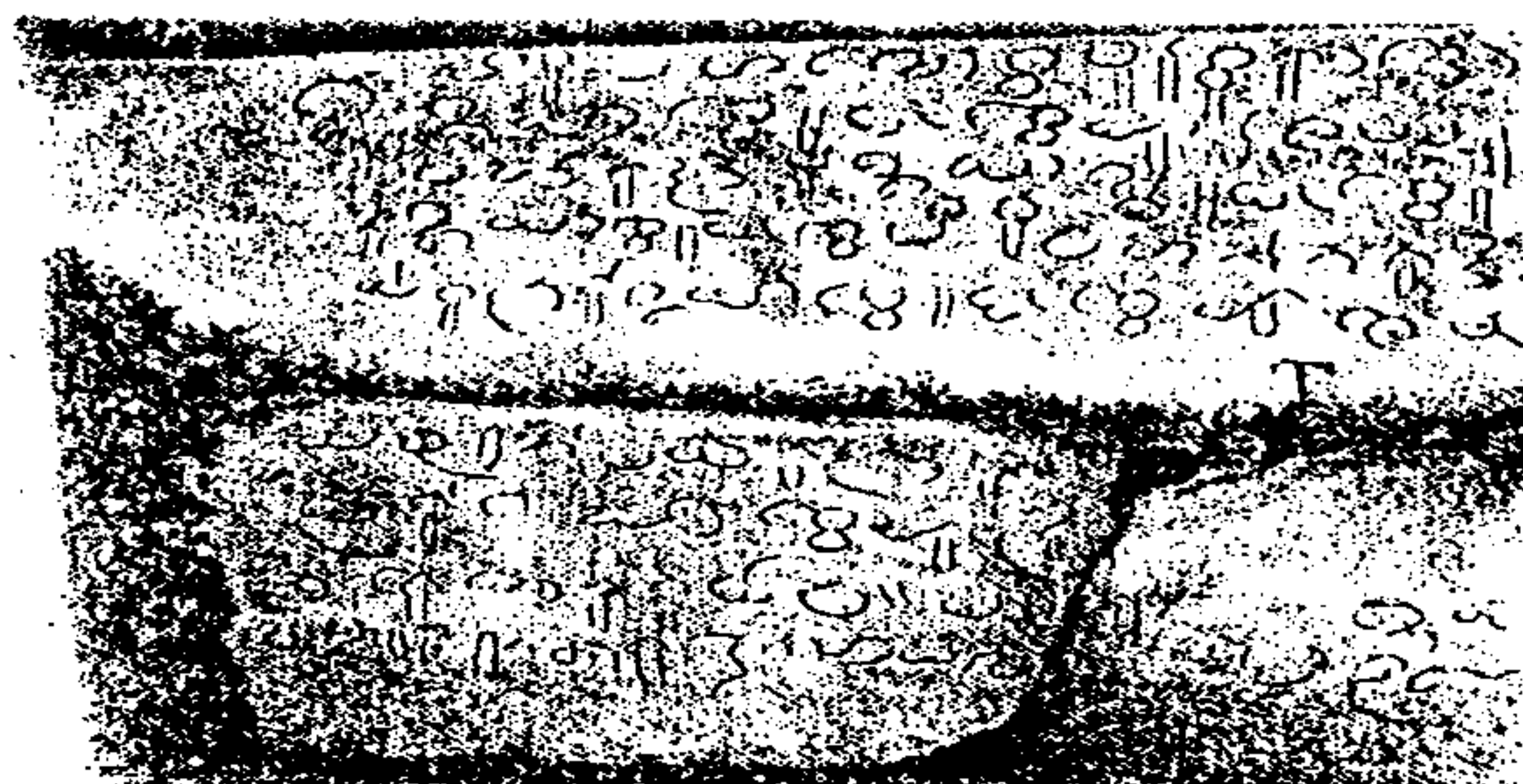


Fig 2: First attempts of making an eye-copies by Muller in 1883.

documents still exist which enable us to evaluate his service to the field of epigraphy in Sri Lanka during his 3 years of service (Goldschmidt 1875a, 1875b, 1876). However, Goldschmidt's brief initiative regarding the subject was a positive motivation for the long journey of nearly a century that followed.

In fact the pioneer in the field of epigraphic research in the island was Dr. Edward Muller. In 1878 he succeeded Goldschmidt as the Commissioner of Archaeology was able to publish the first collection of epigraphs in Sri Lanka which included 172 inscriptions (Muller 1878). In its second volume, eye copies of many of the inscriptions included in that collection were reproduced by Muller. On the whole, Muller's work on inscriptions was an important landmark in the history of epigraphic research in Sri Lanka. It showed his interest in the subject, the constant devotion and the fine academic discipline he possessed.

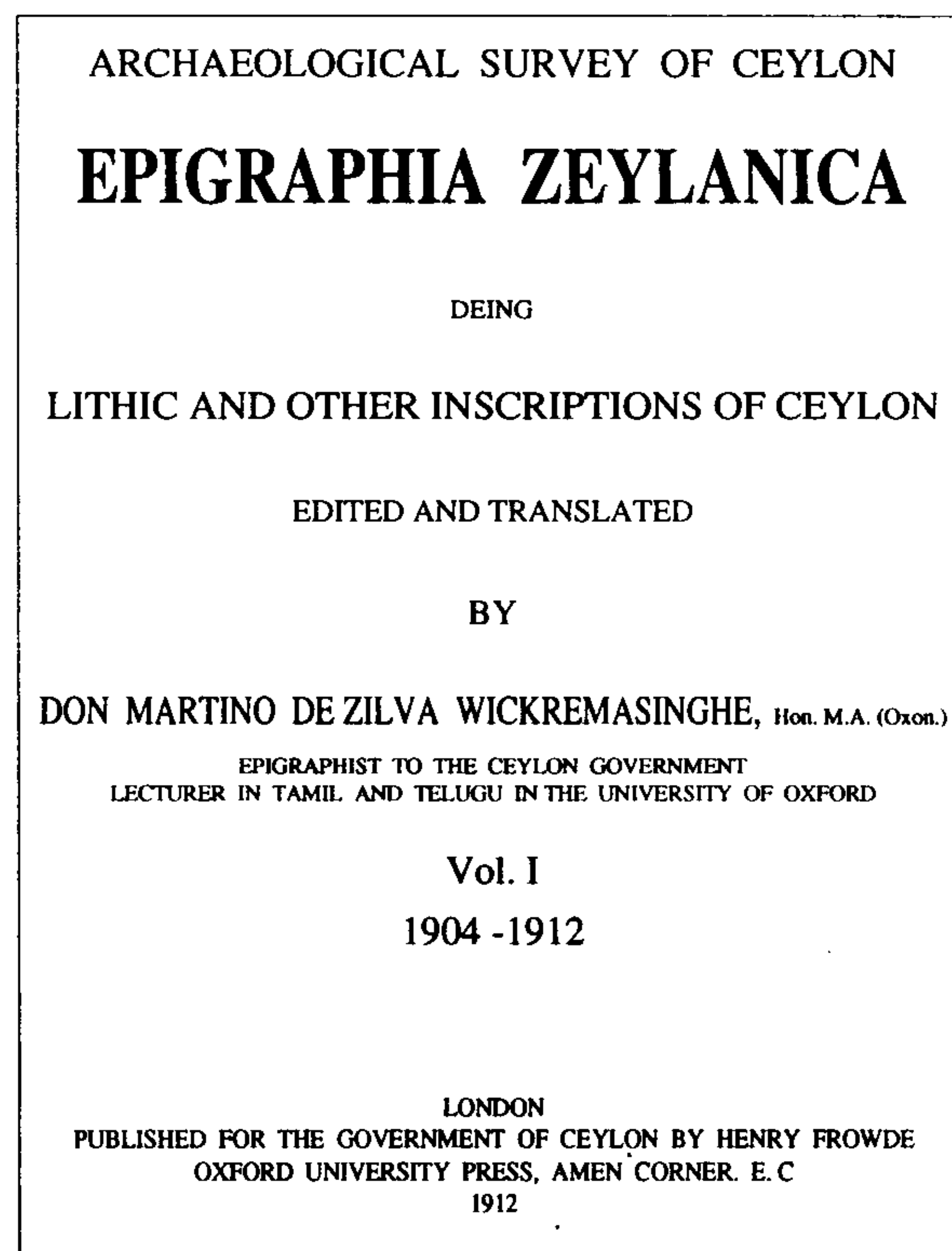


Fig 3: The Title page of the Epigraphia Zeylanica published in 1912

The convention of the Archaeological Survey of Ceylon which existed till then into the Department of Archaeology in 1890 and the appointment of H. C. P. Bell as its Commissioner were on the whole, the beginning of a definite reawakening in archaeological researches and explorations in the island. Fortunately Bell too was a lover of inscriptions like his predecessor. This interest Bell showed in the ancient writings of the island reached a peak with the starting of the first Journal of the subject, *Epigraphia Zeylanica* in 1904 by him. The first editor of this journal which was started parallel to *Epigraphia Indica* then published in India with the editorship of Sir Alexander Cunningham, was Dr. Don Martino de Silva Wickramasinghe, who was Bell's assistant. The inscriptions of the island received a certain publicity and identity with the emergence of this journal. Also the model of presentation of an inscription as propounded by Wickramasinghe further developed through the past six decades and has become the basic model today. Both Bell and Wickramasinghe left no stone unturned in discovering inscription as well as editing and publishing them.

The editions of Wickramasinghe formalized correct the exposure required to the enhanced the general enthusiasm about epigraphy in the island in the minds of many, to the establishment of a yet another clear norm in the historical archaeology in Sri Lanka and to its vast development. Wickramasinghe, who was an eminent scholar of both Aryan and non - Aryan languages, was able to go through the oversights made by Muller and at times even by Bell in editing inscriptions. While *Epigraphia Zeylanica* was being published as the official publication which published the ancient writings in Sri Lanka, several other scholars who had an interest in this subject, published from time to time several unpublished inscriptions. The role played by Parkers becomes noteworthy in this regard (Parker 1909).

Bell's retirement in 1912 affected great deal the activities carried out so far regarding epigraphy. Epigraphic exploration activities were almost at standstill after that. The fact that Bell's successor Horcart was in no way able to a match his predecessor Bell's activeness in the field is clearly evident in a note written by Horcart to the administration report in 1922-23 (ASCAR 1922-23). He is called by Tennakoon as "a man at office work" (Tennakoon 1957:71).

The Phase with Diversity (1922 - 1983 AD)

The period of 18 years between 1922 AD in which year Paranavitana was appointed as the epigraphical assistant of the Dept. of Archaeology and 1940 in which year he assumed duties as its Commissioner was a period of transition that brought about a variegated intellectual phase in the field of epigraphy in the island lasting for nearly 5 decades since then. The training

in epigraphy which Parnavitana received under the distinguished patronage of the senior most epigraphist of India, K.V Subramanyam Ayyar in Udaka Mandalam in Tamilnadu in 1923 was the most influential event happened during this period in the field of Sri Lankan epigraphy. This journey of Parnavitana was the culmination of his flair. It is during this period that he contributed direct of the field of ancient writing in Sri Lanka. In addition to those written in ancient Sinhalese language the Tamil inscriptions in Sri Lanka with the publication of the *Velaikkāra* inscription of King Vijayabahu I in Polonnaruwa in *Epigraphia Zeylanica* in 1926 (EI XVII: 330 - 38).

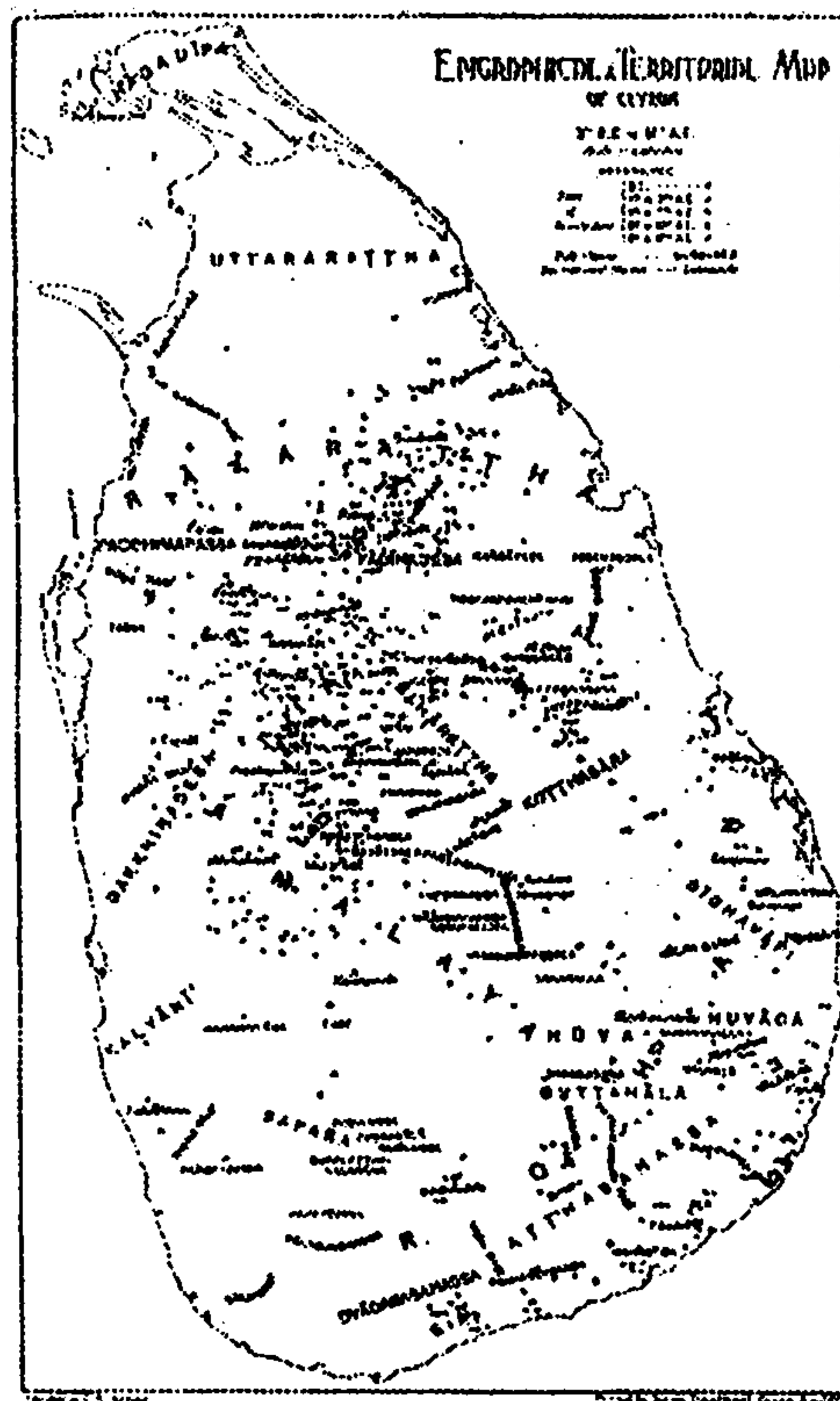


Fig.4: First distribution Map of Island's inscription published by Nicholas (1959)

In fact the prominent trend visible in this period is Parnavitana's role as an indigenous personality. It is this indigenous personality which he possessed in the field of ancient social science in the island that influenced the invisible role performed by Parnavitana in building a strong mentality about the national identity in the national freedom struggle.

Yet another trend visible during this period is the interest shown by several local scholars in the study of paleography in the island. Many local scholars who understood the fact that the present system of Sinhala letters was the result of a systematic linear evolution of the ancient characters in Sri Lanka, made an attempt at understanding and explaining that evolutionary stage during this period. Intrinsicly, this attempt was an instance of establishing paleographic studies within the Sri Lankan archaeology.

A map of the distribution pattern of the inscriptions in Sri Lanka was prepared for the first time in 1956 (Nicholas 1956). This attempt can be described as the culmination of effort at systematically recording of data. The trend for the use of the wide collection of inscription which had been written for a period of about 2300 years in the interpretation of the contemporary history practically started its gradual development during this period. The use of inscriptional information in order to establish the historical reality of incident which were till then confined to literary sources only symbolized the recognition of their real value. The two volumes of Paranavitana's magnum opus "Sigiri graffiti" published in 1956 was a great diversion in the epigraphical researches in Sri Lanka in general and in his career in particular. In addition to that the collection of ancient inscriptions which he published under the title "Inscriptions of Ceylon" in 1970 is considered as a unique even today.

During this period a large number of researches were done on historical philology based on the inscriptions (Wijerathne 1956). Another important development during this period was the use of inscriptional evidence by scholars in other fields other than archaeology as data in their researches. Perera, who wrote an important article on ancient settlement pattern in Sri Lanka made use of the map depicting the distribution of inscriptions in the island (Perera 1978).

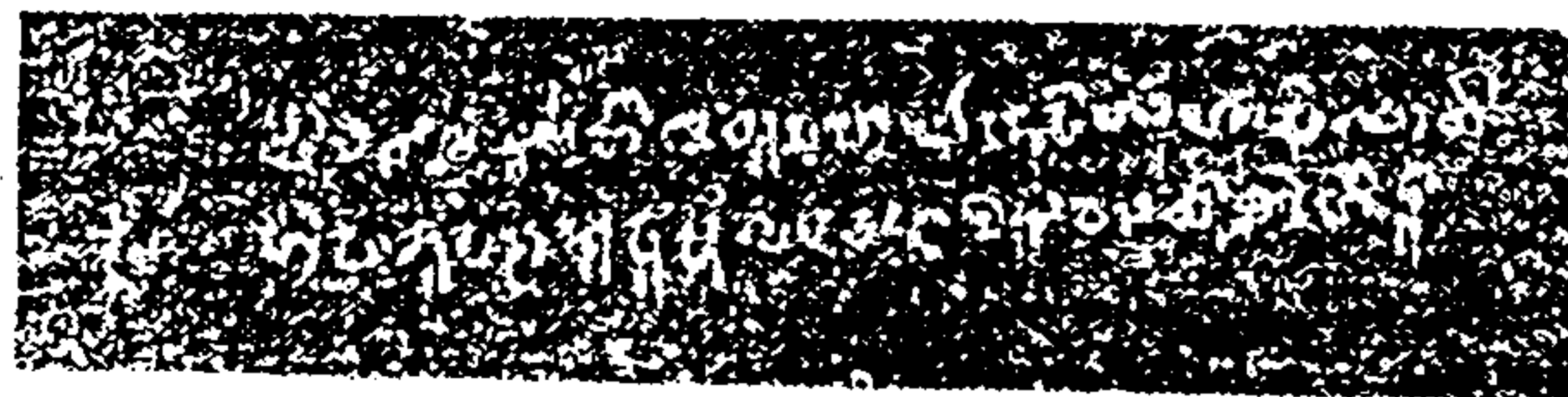


Fig. 5. One of the Graffiti reproduce from the Mirror - wall at Sigiriya (after Paranavitana 1956)

Although Paranavitana retired his post in 1956 the great awakening brought about by his guidance continued to be in the field of epigraphy. His successor Godkumbura and Karunarathe were both epigraphist. Results of epigraphical researches in Sri Lanka during the past five decades or so extended to the international academic circles as well. Especially Indian

scholars showed a great deal of interest in such activities. The vast expansion of epigraphical researches in the island among the international scholars was mainly due to the fact that Paranavitana as well as his successors were great in Oriental languages and that they possessed remarkable academic discipline in history as well as archaeology.

The process of epigraphical researches which began in Sri Lanka in 1874 had shown a tremendous development by the middle of the 1980s. This process which was started with the recording of 73 inscriptions by Goldsmidt had reached close upon 4000 inscriptions by 1980. Out of this nearly 2000 records have been published so far.

Towards the Innovative Trends. (after 1983)

The direction of epigraphical researches in Sri Lanka has taken a new turn after 1983. This period witnessed initial experiment required for obtaining a greater participation of inscriptions in the matter of interpretations in Settlement archaeology. Here an attempt was made to arrive at the hypothesis of the Socio - economic structure of contemporary settlements, their density etc. on the basis of a chronological classification of inscriptions. A good example is the analysis of inscriptions in the island through the nearest neighbor analysis approach according to the location of inscriptions (Bandaranayake 1992). Another aspect of this approach is the attempt at interpreting the morphology and the Socio - economic implications of ancient settlements in a particular area by taking the entire collection of inscriptions in that area not in isolation, but as a network of inscriptions reflecting the norms of that particular society (Somadeva 1994). In the 1990s an inscription is subjected to evaluation not only by reviewing its text alone, but also taking it as a human creation and thereby including it in cognitive archaeology as mentifact.

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