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During the period 2009-2012, I conducted a systematic archaeological survey around the towns of Banavasi and Gudnapura, both located in the North Kanara district of Karnataka. The Banavasi-Gudnapur Regional Survey Project (BGRS) investigated the organization of regional socio-political complexity at Banavasi and at the adjacent contemporaneous lower order center of Gudnapur through a systematic archaeological survey. Banavasi rose to prominence as the capital of the regional kingdom of the Kadamba dynasty (4th-6th centuries AD) and continued to maintain its importance as an administrative and regional economic center under a series of imperial powers until the 14th/15th centuries.

I undertook a full coverage survey of a 25 sq. km area (5×5 km block) centered on Banavasi and a targeted exploration of a similar sized block around the nearby village of Gudnapura. The Banavasi block was systematically surveyed by a team of three to four members spaced 20 meters apart to ensure complete coverage and the identification of even small sites. All sites identified in the survey area were described on standardized field forms, recording information on: GPS location, site size, geographic setting and modern land-use, historical function, presence/absence of ceramic scatters and their nature and density and probable date. Sites were photographed and mapped using Brunton compass and pace measurements or using a handheld GPS. During the course of this survey over 350 sites were recorded. This article briefly describes a previously unpublished and fragmentary early Brahmi inscription recorded during this survey.

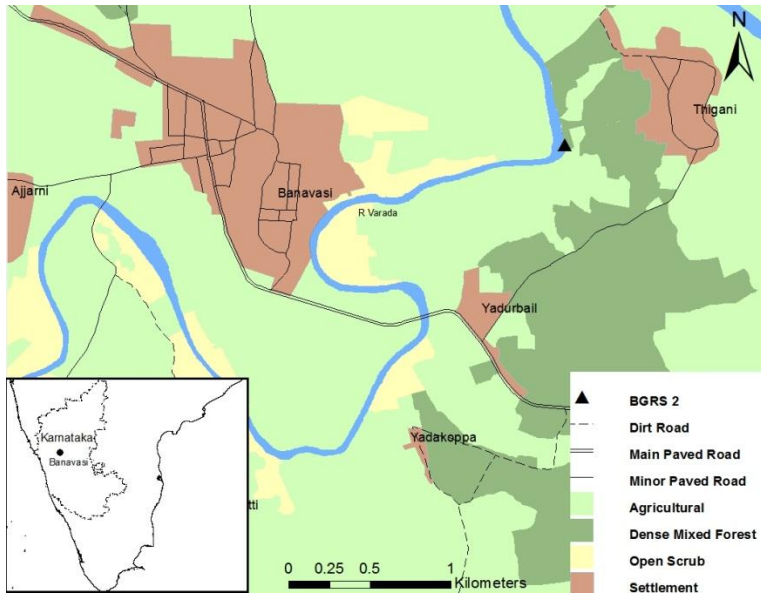


Figure 1: Location of Inscription

Recorded as BGRS 2, the site consists of an extremely eroded early Brahmi inscription carved onto a large outcrop located on the Varada river bed. The site is located over a kilometer northeast of the modern village of Banavasi, at a bend in the channel of the river (Fig. 1). During the time of my survey (April-May, 2009), the water level was extremely low and river bed was partially dry with a narrow water channel in the center. The bed of the river is covered with large, natural boulders and smaller rocks lining the entire visible area. However, during the monsoons the entire area is completely submerged. This periodic fluvial action has contributed greatly to the erosion of the inscription.

The inscription has two lines and the visible letters read (Pl. I):

de va sa tha te.....

[second line] *tu.....*

It is possible that the inscription was carved onto a roughly prepared surface and there are remnants of a carved border on the top and right side, such that the inscription is in a slight rectangular depression. The inscribed face of the outcrop faces southeast.

The inscription is written in the Brahmi script. Brahmi appeared in the 3rd c. BC across the subcontinent and was the parent of all later Indic scripts (Salomon 1998: 17). It was used to write the earliest Prakrit and Sanskrit inscriptions in the Deccan (Katti 2006: 217). Among the earliest and the best known Brahmi inscriptions are the eleven Ashokan edicts found in a distinct cluster in north-central Deccan, in the modern-day states of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka (Ritti 1991; Sugandhi 2003: 229-230).

In the early Kadamba inscriptions by the 4th and 5th centuries, Ashokan Brahmi was replaced by the southern box headed variety and continued to be used into the 6th century (Katti 2006: 218; 1996: 141). From the 6th century, the Kannada script began to develop from Brahmi and by the 11th-12th centuries, the modern day Kannada script is well established (Ritti 1991: 303-305). The language of the earliest inscriptions is Prakrit with a gradual transition to Sanskrit by the 4th century and then to Kannada by the 6th century although bilingual Sanskrit-Kannada inscriptions continue to be found for several centuries (Katti 2003: 146).

Paleographically, the inscription can tentatively be dated to the last century BC or the early centuries AD (Post-Ashokan, Late Mauryan) (A. V. N. Murthy, personal communication). The form of most of the characters of BGRS 2 lies between that of the Ashokan variant of the script (3rd c. BC) and the later Kadamba-Vakataka forms (4th-5th c. AD) (Sivaramamurti 1999: 56-153). The 'va', for instance, is not in the earliest, rounded form as seen in most Ashokan inscriptions but is a later triangular form. The inscription appears to refer to a proper name in the genitive case (*Devasa-* 'of deva').

The stone outcrop is currently being worshipped as a shrine to a local god named *Kalloli Boothappa* and is covered in oil and red and yellow *vibhuti* (ash) which greatly obscures the inscription. The inscription is no longer recognized as such as the villagers do not associated the carvings on the stone with a script. In front of the inscription are several metal tri-pronged arrows (*trishuls*) of varying shapes and sizes embedded in the ground. There are also several earthenware pots and *diyas*, coconut shells, incense wrappers and framed pictures of gods and goddesses including Devi, Basaveshwara, Vishnu and some sages. Evidently chickens are also sacrificed in front of the stone as blood spatters and feathers testify.

There are no other sites dating to the same period in the immediate vicinity. About 60m north of the inscription is a rectangular carved stone posthole (45×45×60 cms). The posthole is extremely eroded and lies at an angle on the dry river bed.

Two other well-known inscriptions using the Brahmi script (and Prakrit language) have been found in Banavasi. The first is a 2nd century AD inscription that commemorates the queen of the King Vashishthiputra Shiva Sri Satakarni. This inscription is recorded on a rectangular slab with an eroded chaitya motif on the top and a pointed base (to affix to a socket) (Murthy et al. 1997: 27). The second is a 3rd century AD inscription on the borders of a large Naga stone which records the construction of a tank, *vihara* and Naga by Nagashri, the daughter of the Chutu king, Vishnuskanda Satakarni (Murthy et al. 1997: 29-30). While these inscriptions are painstakingly inscribed on well prepared surfaces, BGRS 2 is less finished and the characters are more roughly formed with less flourish.

It has been widely assumed that a written script reached the Deccan through Mauryan influence and the early textual tradition does hint at some connections between north India and Banavasi. The Sri Lankan Buddhist chronicles in Pali dating to the early centuries AD, the

Dipavamsa and *Mahavamsa*, record that following a Buddhist council at Pataliputra, missionaries were dispatched to several regions, including Banavasi (Shastri 2006: 71). However, the archaeological evidence for the so-called Mauryan presence in the area is much more ambiguous. While the remains of several possible *stupas* were identified on survey, early excavations at Banavasi yielded only one sherd of Northern Black Polished Ware (often seen as diagnostic of contact with northern India), a bead making mould with Brahmi letters dated paleographically to the 3rd c. BC and two Mauryan punch marked coins (Murthy 2002).

Moreover, the recent discovery of early Brahmi sherd inscriptions in Sri Lanka and dated securely to excavation contexts belonging to a pre-Asokan period (early 4th century BC) raises some interesting issues about the spread of Brahmi to the peninsula (Coningham et al. 1996). Coningham et. al., following Buhler and Winternitz, have argued that mercantile activity and the extension of trade networks played an important role in the development and spread of Brahmi (to Sri Lanka) (1996: 91-95).

The location of the inscription at some distance from Banavasi is noteworthy, indicating perhaps a wider dissemination and use of the script beyond the confines of the early city. A tentative suggestion is that the inscription is located along a route of movement into the city, perhaps as a fording point over the Varada. It can also be suggested that the close proximity of the inscription to water could indicate an association with Buddhism. However, the small number of letters and the fragmentary nature of the inscription make it very difficult to make any more historical inferences beyond a tentative date. Finally, the appropriation of the inscription into the folk tradition emphasizes the role of memory in historical process as ancient places are reinvented and given new meaning even while their original significance is forgotten.

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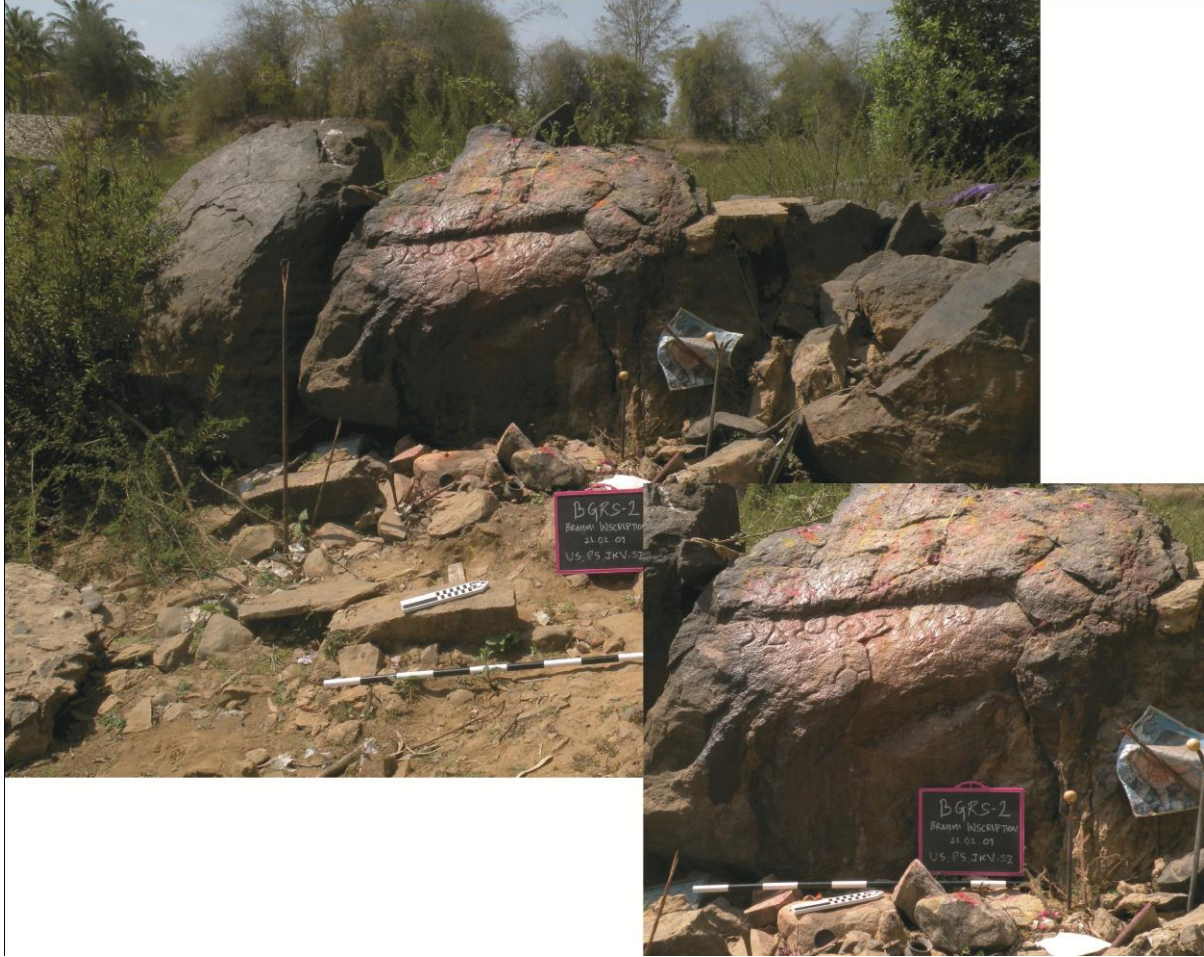


Plate I: Brahmi Inscription from Banavasi