



Kerala History and Studies Journal

Published by Kerala History Conference

ISSN No. XXXX-XXXX

The Emergence of Epigraphical Studies in Malayalam: The role Of V. R. Parameswaran Pillai

Author(s)	Sahira M. K.
Publication	Vol. 1 / Issue 1 / 2026
Stable URL	https://journal.keralahistoryconference.org/article/40
Date of Release	28.11.2026

IP Address	216.73.216.134
Downloaded	04-Oct-2026 16:47 IST



The Emergence of Epigraphical Studies in Malayalam: The role Of V. R. Parameswaran Pillai

Sahira M. K.

Research Scholar

PG & Research Department of History
Government Arts and Science College,
Kozhikode, Calicut University
sahirashraf22@gmail.com

Until the mid-twentieth century, historians were unable to produce a factual and evidence-based account of Kerala's past. Scholars such as P. Shankunni Menon¹ constructed their historical narratives by combining the limited available evidence with traditional accounts and legends like the *Keralolpathi*, which they regarded as authentic sources.² William Logan³, however, marked a significant shift in Kerala historiography by distinguishing between history derived from legend and history grounded in verifiable evidence. A key feature of his approach was the separation of "traditional ancient history," rooted in oral traditions and myth, from "early history based on other sources," which relied on documentary materials such as inscriptions, foreign accounts, and records from neighbouring regions.⁴

William Logan, the author of *Malabar* (1887), the official manual of the Malabar district, was a pioneer in presenting Kerala's history through a research-oriented approach. Although the work was originally produced to meet the administrative requirements of the Madras Presidency, it went far beyond a routine district record and emerged as one of the earliest analytical studies of Kerala's historical development. However, the *Manual* did not yet present a precise or comprehensive history of Kerala; nevertheless, William Logan clearly indicated the path that future historical research on the region should take.

One of the major categories that William Logan referred to under "history from other sources" was inscriptions. The study of epigraphy in India began with the establishment of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784 by Sir William Jones⁵, marking the formal beginning of systematic epigraphical research in India. As it did for many areas of research on India, the Asiatic Society provided a rallying point, an established institution where contributions to the study of epigraphy could be submitted, discussed, published, and widely distributed. The abundance of

inscriptional papers in the first volume of *Asiatic Researches*⁶ clearly indicated that a considerable corpus of material was already available and ready for systematic publication.

Sir William Jones⁷ and Sir Charles Wilkins⁸ were the pioneers of Indian epigraphical studies, initiating research through the Asiatic Society of Bengal and publishing the first epigraphical studies in *Asiatic Researches*. Their efforts were continued by scholars such as Henry Colebrooke⁹, who established the scholarly methods of accurate dating, transliteration, and facsimile reproduction, and emphasized the historical value of inscriptions.¹⁰ The field reached a major breakthrough with James Prinsep¹¹, whose decipherment of the Brāhmi and Kharosthi scripts in 1837¹² and 1838, respectively, revolutionized Indian Epigraphy and opened access to the earliest phases of Indian history.

Along with James Prinsep, scholars such as Christian Lassen, E. Norris, Alexander Cunningham, A.C. Burnell, James Burgess etc. gradually advanced the study of Indian epigraphy. By using stone inscriptions and copper plate grants, they expanded the scope of Indian history, introducing new information, correcting earlier narratives, and filling in previously unknown or partially known aspects of the past. For instance, the role of inscriptions in reconstructing ancient Indian history is clearly illustrated by the discovery of records relating to King Buddha Gupta. Until the early 19th century, his name was unknown. The first evidence appeared in 1838 with an inscription from Eran (Madhya Pradesh), dated Gupta year 165 (A.D. 484–85), revealing Buddha Gupta's authority over the Malwa region. Later discoveries of his silver coins (1894) and inscriptions from Sarnath (1914–15) extended his reign to at least 18 years (A.D. 476–495) and showed that his dominion reached from Malwa to Banaras. The final confirmation came in 1943, when a clay seal from Nalanda identified him as a descendant of the Imperial Gupta dynasty, being the son of Puru Gupta and great-great-grandson of Samudragupta. Thus, over a century of inscriptional discoveries—from 1838 to 1943—transformed Buddha Gupta from an unknown ruler into a well-documented monarch of the Gupta Empire. In this way, Indian history began to be written with greater accuracy and clarity through the systematic use of inscriptions,

which provided concrete evidence for reconstructing political lineages, territorial extents, chronological frameworks etc. that had long remained uncertain.¹³

While Indian history was steadily advancing through the systematic use of epigraphy, such progress was relatively limited in Kerala. In the same year that William Logan's *Malabar Manual* was published (1887), E. Hultzsch edited the first *Annual Report on Indian Epigraphy*¹⁴, issued under an order of the Madras Government.¹⁵ These reports included the publication of a few inscriptions discovered from Kerala. In addition, some Kerala inscriptions were later published in the *South Indian Inscriptions*¹⁶ Volumes V¹⁷ and VII¹⁸, which had begun in 1890.

By this period, only a limited number of Kerala inscriptions had been published; however, it would be inaccurate to claim that epigraphical studies in Kerala were entirely absent. European scholars such as Hermann Gundert, V. Venkayya, E. Hultzsch, A. C. Burnell, F. Kielhorn etc. had examined several Kerala inscriptions—particularly the copper-plate inscriptions – that were available at the time. Moreover, their work made significant contributions to the early development of epigraphical research on Kerala.¹⁹

However, epigraphical studies in Kerala received significant impetus with the publication of the *Travancore Archaeological Series* (TAS) by the Travancore Archaeological Department. Its editors—T. A. Gopinatha Rao²⁰, KV Subramanya Aiyer and A S Ramanatha Iyer²¹—discovered inscriptions from various regions in and around Travancore and published them through TAS. In addition to this series, the *Kerala Society Papers* (KSP)²² and the *Rama Varma Research Institute Bulletin*²³ were the principal journals through which epigraphical research was carried out in Kerala during the early decades of the twentieth century.²⁴

Although these scholars contributed substantially by collecting, transcribing, and publishing inscriptions, they did not aim to construct a systematic or comprehensive historical narrative of Kerala. Their work largely consisted of presenting the inscriptions and offering limited interpretations based on the knowledge available to them.

What stands out most prominently in this early phase of epigraphical studies is its linguistic orientation. All these journals published their studies exclusively in English and Tamil, revealing not only the linguistic preferences of early twentieth-century scholarship but also the absence of Malayalam as an academic medium for inscriptional analysis. Several factors may have contributed to this situation. The epigraphical writings of that period were not directed towards the general public; rather, they were intended for a relatively small, educated group. It is also possible that there was insufficient interest in using Malayalam as a medium of scholarly communication. Consequently, discussions and debates pertaining to epigraphical studies were conducted almost exclusively within a limited circle of individuals proficient in both English and Tamil.

However, from the 1930s onward, epigraphical studies in Kerala began to move in a new direction. Important Malayalam periodicals such as *Mathrubhumi*, *Mahila* etc. started publishing articles on inscriptions, marking a significant shift in the dissemination of epigraphical knowledge. By the 1950s, the number of epigraphical articles appearing in Malayalam had increased considerably. A review of the earlier phases of epigraphical studies reveals a common pattern: the texts of the inscriptions were typically presented in Tamil, while the explanations and commentaries were provided in English. In contrast, evidence of inscriptional studies in which both the texts and their exegetical discussions are provided wholly in Malayalam becomes visible only from the 1930s onwards.

There is an important point to be noted here. It was during the 1950s that Eḷamkulam Kuñjan Pillai²⁵ began publishing his seminal writings on Kerala in the Malayalam language. Through his rigorous study of inscriptions, careful chronological reconstruction, and historically grounded analysis, he succeeded in situating these materials within a precise historical framework. With the publication of his landmark work *Cēra Sāmrajam Onpatum Pattum Nūṭṭāṇṭukalil*²⁶ in 1961, a clearly defined historical period—lying between the Megalithic age and the advent of the Portuguese—was presented to both the scholarly world and the wider public for the first time. From this point onward, epigraphical studies and historical writing in

Kerala progressed more systematically and with greater confidence in the Malayalam language as well.

Yet the question of who first initiated the practice of writing and publishing epigraphical studies in Malayalam remains an intriguing one. Departing from the prevailing format of the time and choosing to undertake inscriptional research in the mother tongue must undoubtedly have been the work of a scholar deeply rooted in Malayalam's literary and linguistic traditions.

Evidently, Elamkulam was not only a distinguished scholar of Malayalam but also a respected polyglot, and his writings consequently received wide acceptance. However, even before his contributions—and in fact fourteen years prior to his earliest Malayalam writings—epigraphical studies in Malayalam had already been initiated by another scholar. This was V. R. Parameswaran Pillai, a Malayalam scholar, an epigraphist, and the *Pandit Assistant* of the Travancore Archaeological Department.

Parameswaran Pillai inaugurated inscriptional studies in Malayalam by publishing an otherwise unknown inscription located on the inner side of the gopura of the Śucīndram temple, which records a reference to Rāmarāya Vitthala, a ruler of the Vijayanagara Empire²⁷. Following this, he wrote on the Aśokan edicts, some of which appeared in the *Mathrubhumi* weekly. Notably, an article discussing an inscription related to Aśoka's queen was published in the Malayalam magazine *Mahila*.

V. R. Parameswaran Pillai entered the field of epigraphical studies with the guidance of Kavimani Desavinayaka Pillai, from whom he learned Vattezhuthu, Kolezhuthu, and other early scripts²⁸. In 1963, he published his work *Prācīna Likhitaṇṇal*²⁹ in Malayalam. In this volume, Parameswaran Pillai organised a selection of Kerala inscriptions under thematic categories such as memorial, religious, and educational records, and offered a careful and systematic analysis of each. The book also includes samples of old scripts as well as several inscriptions that had not been published previously. Notably, the text, interpretation, and annotations of the inscriptions are all presented in Malayalam, demonstrating his commitment to establishing the mother tongue as a medium for epigraphical scholarship.

In 1978, he published yet another significant contribution to the field of epigraphy. With the introduction of epigraphy as a subject in university curricula, the Kerala Bhasha Institute commissioned and released his work *Śilālikhitā Vijñānīyam*³⁰ to serve as a foundational text for students. The work provides an overview of Indian epigraphy—its historical development, the formal structure and content of inscriptions, and the principal methods employed in their study. Importantly, the appendix (Appendix I) features a number of inscriptions from Kerala, selected to familiarise students with the regional corpus. These inscriptions are presented in Malayalam, further demonstrating his consistent commitment to promoting the mother tongue as a medium for epigraphical scholarship and ensuring broader accessibility to primary sources.

One of the notable features of this work is the glossary of terms occurring in inscriptions, provided as Appendix II. Epigraphists often experience a lack of reliable glossaries when attempting to read and interpret inscriptions. Parameswaran Pillai prepared this glossary precisely to address that need and to support systematic study in the field.

In Sum, the contribution of V. R. Parameswaran Pillai to Malayalam epigraphical studies is both pioneering and transformative. At a time when inscriptional research was largely confined to English and Tamil, he dared to depart from convention and demonstrate that Malayalam could serve as an equally effective vehicle for scholarly communication. Through his meticulous transcriptions, insightful analyses, and dedicated pedagogical works, he not only opened up the world of inscriptions to a wider readership but also set in motion a tradition of vernacular epigraphical scholarship in Kerala. His legacy endures as an essential chapter in the intellectual history of the region.

End notes

1. P. Shankunni Menon (1838–1911) was one of the earliest native historians of Kerala and a formative figure in the development of modern regional historiography. His position in the Travancore administration granted him access to a wide range of archival sources, which enabled him to compose his seminal work *A History of Travancore from the Earliest Times* (1878). A distinctive feature of his historiographical method was his attempt to substantiate the narratives of the Purāṇas by correlating them with the inscriptional evidence available at

the time, thereby seeking to anchor traditional accounts within a historical framework. Although his work reflects the intellectual milieu and limitations of nineteenth-century historiography, it marked the first systematic effort to craft a continuous narrative of Travancore's past and laid the groundwork for subsequent, more rigorous studies.

2. P.Shungoonny Menon, *History of Travancore*, (1878), Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 1998. p. 48.
3. William Logan (1841–1914) was a Scottish civil servant in the British Indian administration and an early, influential historian of Kerala. After entering the Madras Civil Service in 1865, he eventually rose to the position of Collector of Malabar, a post that provided him with direct access to the region's socio-economic structures, political frameworks, and administrative mechanisms. His seminal publication, *The Malabar* (1887), the official manual of Malabar district, continues to be regarded as a foundational source for the study of Kerala's history, society, agrarian relations, and revenue systems. Drawing upon an extensive range of materials—including colonial archival records, land revenue registers, oral traditions, and the earliest available epigraphic references—Logan produced one of the first systematic and comprehensive regional studies of Malabar.
4. William Logan, *Malabar*, Vol. I, Government of India, Madras, 1887. Pp. 221–275.
5. The Asiatic Society of Bengal, founded in 1784 in Calcutta by Sir William Jones, was one of the earliest and most influential scholarly institutions established under British rule in India. Conceived as a centre for the systematic study of Asian civilizations, the Society played a pioneering role in developing the disciplines of Indology, Linguistics, Philology, Archaeology, and Epigraphy. Throughout the nineteenth century, it served as a major forum for intellectual exchange, bringing together European scholars and Indian savants in the pursuit of research on the subcontinent's History, Languages, Literature, and Material Culture. The publications of the Society—particularly the *Asiatic Researches* and later the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*—became authoritative platforms for announcing new discoveries, including inscriptions, coins, manuscripts, and archaeological findings.
6. William Jones, (Ed.), *Asiatic Researches*, Vol. I, (1788), Cosmo Publications, New Delhi, 1979.
7. Sir William Jones (1746–1794) was a pioneering Orientalist, philologist, and judge whose intellectual contributions laid the foundations for modern Indology. As a judge of the Supreme Court of Judicature in Calcutta, he founded the *Asiatic Society of Bengal* in 1784, envisioning it as an institution dedicated to the systematic study of the history, languages, literature, and antiquities of Asia. As part of his research, he was the first to assert the kinship of the Indo-European languages.
8. Charles Wilkins (1749–1836) was one of the earliest British Orientalists and a foundational figure in the study of Indian languages and literature. As a member of the East India Company's service, he mastered Sanskrit at a time when few Europeans had access to the language. His most celebrated achievement is the first English translation of the *Bhagavad Gītā* (1785), which marked a turning point in the Western understanding of Indian philosophical and literary traditions. As one of the founding members of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Wilkins contributed significantly to the establishment of institutional frameworks that later facilitated epigraphical and historical research in India.
9. Henry Thomas Colebrooke (1765–1837) was one of the most distinguished early Orientalists and a central figure in the institutional and intellectual development of Indology. A senior officer of the East India Company, he combined administrative responsibilities with rigorous scholarship in Sanskrit, Indian law, religion, mathematics, and philology. Colebrooke is best known for his authoritative works such as *A Digest of Hindu Law* (1798) and *Essays on the Religion and Philosophy of the Hindus* (1805–1827), which introduced systematic and textually grounded understandings of Indian legal and philosophical traditions to Western scholarship. His contributions, however, extended beyond textual studies. As a key member of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Colebrooke published several important articles on ancient inscriptions, coins, and Indian numeration systems, thereby laying early methodological foundations for the study of epigraphy and historical linguistics in India.
10. Henry Colerbrooke, "Translation of One of the Inscriptions on the Pillar at Dehlee, Called the Lāt of Feeroz Shah", In *Asiatic Researches*, Vol. VII, (1801), Verner and Hood, London, 1803. pp. 175–182.
11. James Prinsep (1799–1840) was a British antiquarian, numismatist, and philologist whose pioneering contributions transformed the study of early Indian history. Serving as the assay

master of the Calcutta Mint and later as secretary of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Prinsep combined scientific precision with historical curiosity, producing foundational work in epigraphy, numismatics, and Indian scripts.

12. James Prinsep, "Interpretation of the Most Ancient of the Inscriptions on the Pillar Called the *Lāt* of Feroz Shāh, near Delhi, and of the Allahabad, Radhia and Matttah pillar, or Lāt, Inscriptions which agree therewith", James Prinsep, (Ed.) *Journal of the Asiatic Society*, Vol. VI, Part II, Baptist Mission Press, Calcutta, 1837. pp. 566-609.
13. D.C.Sircar, "Inscriptions in Sanskrit and Dravidian Languages", In *Ancient India No. 9*, Bulletin of Archaeological Survey of India, Special Jubilee Number, Archaeological Survey of India, November 1953. pp. 214-215.
14. The *Annual Report on Indian Epigraphy (A.R.I.E.)* refers to a series of annual reports first initiated in 1887 by the Public Department of the Government of Madras as the progress reports of the Government Epigraphist. From 1887 to 1921 (*A.R.I.E.* 1887-1888 to *A.R.I.E.* 1920-1921), these were issued as Government Orders (G.O.) of the Madras Presidency, designated as the official reports of the Government Epigraphist.
15. GO 1462, 1887-10-24 (21st November 1886 to 20th September 1887).
16. For the epigraphic records of South India, a separate series known as *South Indian inscriptions* has been running since 1890.¹⁶ The grouping of the inscriptions has, however, varied from time to time, being according to localities, dynasties or even the language of the inscriptions.
17. Rao Bahadur H. Krishna Sastri, (Ed.), *South Indian Inscriptions*, Vol. V, The Superintendent, Government Press, Madras, 1925.
18. K.V.Subramanya Aiyer, (Ed.), *South Indian Inscriptions*, Vol. VII, The Superintendent, Government Press, Madras, 1932.
19. Sahira M.K., "Epigraphical Studies by the Europeans in Keralam, 1847-1893", In Proceedings of the South Indian History Congress 41, South Indian History Congress, GTN Arts College, Dindigul, 2023. http://journal.southindianhistorycongress.org/show_article.php?atL_id=MzA=
20. T. A. Gopinatha Rao (1872-1919) was born into a Marathi Brahmin family in 1872 and obtained his M.A. in Chemistry from Trichy College in 1899. He joined the Travancore Archaeological Department in 1902, marking the beginning of his distinguished career in archaeology and epigraphy.
21. T A Gopinatha Rao edited the first two volumes of TAS. KV Subramanya Aiyer was the editor of the next two volumes and the next three volumes were edited by A S Ramanatha Iyer.
22. The Kerala Society was established on September 26th, 1927, with its headquarters at Thiruvananthapuram. Regular meetings of the 'Kerala Society' were held with the participation of renowned academics. The research papers given at the meetings were later published in 'Kerala Society Papers', the society's publication. It was formed on the model of the 'Journal of Royal Asiatic Society'.
23. The Rama Varma Research Institute Bulletin debuted in 1930 with its initial edition. Fifteen volumes in total were released, with the final one appearing in 1948. Scholars like K. R. Pisharody, A. Govinda Varrier, V. K. R. Menon, Anujan Achan, and others were among the distinguished contributors to the volumes of the Rama Varma Research Institute Bulletin.
24. Sahira M.K., "Epigraphical Studies in Kerala: Early Attempts", In Proceedings of the South Indian History Congress 42, South Indian History Congress, University College, Thiruvananthapuram, 2024. http://journal.southindianhistorycongress.org/show_article.php?atL_id=NDY5
25. Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai (1904-1983) was one of the most influential historians of modern Kerala and a pioneering figure in the critical study of the region's early and medieval past. Trained as a polyglot scholar with deep expertise in Malayalam, Sanskrit, and Tamil, he brought a rigorous philological and epigraphical approach to the reconstruction of Kerala's history. His writings—characterized by analytical clarity, meticulous use of inscriptional evidence, and a commitment to linguistic precision—introduced a new methodological discipline into Kerala historiography.
26. Elamkulam .P.N Kunjan Pillai, *Chera Samrajyam Onpathum Pathum Noottandukali*, (Mal), Kerala University, 1961.
27. V.R. Parameswaran Pillai, *Aa Ezhupathu Varshangal*, (Mal.) P. Kamalamma, Poojappura, Thiruvananthapuram, 1974. p. 56.
28. *Ibid.*

-
29. V.R. Parameswaran Pillai, *Prajeenalighithangal*, (Mal.), National Book Stall, Kottayam, 1963.
 30. *Śilālikhitā Vijñānīyam*, (Mal.) Kerala Language Institute, Thiruvananthapuram, 1978.