



## Research Report

# Cheng Ho's Visits to Sri Lanka and the discovery of Oldest Arwi Script Found in Galle Trilingual Inscription

Faiz Marikar<sup>1\*</sup> and Manjula Karunathilaka<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University, Ratmalana, Sri Lanka.

\*Corresponding author, Email: [faiz@kdu.ac.lk](mailto:faiz@kdu.ac.lk)

(Received 26 January 2024; Accepted 29 February 2024; Published 16 May 2024)

**Abstract** - The study of history has traditionally been centered on Europe, and it is widely acknowledged that modern civilization represents the pinnacle of Western scientific and cultural traditions. Most people thought that Asia was a colossus that had been sleeping and had only recently woken up by contact with the West. There has been a significant shift in historical perspectives regarding the genesis of modernity. Recent studies have shown that non-European nations have had high levels of intellectual and cultural success as well as rapid economic expansion. With a magnificent trilingual inscription, Cheng Ho traveled to Sri Lanka in the fifteenth century. This amazing work provides the earliest record for Arwi, which was mistakenly thought to be Persian. Together with Chinese, it further emphasizes the significance of Tamil and Arwi. It will be seen that, a few centuries later, the extent of invention in medieval China amounted to an economic and social upheaval similar to that in Western Europe.

**Keywords:** Arwi, Tamil, Chinese, Trilingual Inscription, 15<sup>th</sup> Century, Cheng Ho

## Introduction

Early Exchanges between Sri Lanka and China due to its strategic location in the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka has long drawn traders, explorers, and sailors from both the East and the West ([Attanayake and Atmakuri 2021](#)). In addition, Sri Lanka's status as a storehouse of traditional Buddhism, its wide range of goods, its pleasant environment, and its kind populace have all added to the country's notoriety. Although trade appears to have been the initial cause of interaction between Chinese and Sri Lankans, a deep connection was forged by their shared interest in Buddhism. The 1368–1644 Ming Dynasty China developed into a powerful, cohesive, international feudal empire under the Ming dynasty ([Ditmanson 2020](#)). After putting an end to the Mongol threat for 89 years, Yung Lo, also known as Yung Le or Zhu Di, became the third monarch of the Ming Dynasty and ascended to the throne in 1403 ([Anderson and Anderson 2019](#)). Declaring himself to be the emperor, he adopted the Yung Lo dynasty title.

The interest Cheng Ho or Zheng He (1371–1433) had in Sri Lanka Arab-Mongol by birth, Cheng Ho had fought bravely for Emperor Yung Lo in the battles against his adversaries ([Gunn 2018](#)). The emperor appointed Cheng Ho the Director of Eunuch Affairs in the Imperial Court as a thank you and honor for his valor in combat. He was a Muslim, and he had traveled to Mecca with both his father and grandfather. He was well-suited to go to several nations where Islam was the dominant religion due to his fluency in Arabic and Arab culture. The Ming Shilu is a key contemporary record detailing Cheng Ho's expedition. This historical text is recognized as an essential source for understanding Cheng Ho's voyages and provides specific accounts of his diplomatic missions and travels. The Ming Shilu is widely cited in scholarly works and has been referenced in numerous studies on Cheng Ho and the Ming Dynasty's maritime history ([Dewaraja 2006](#)).

These ambitious Ming dynasty plans must be considered when examining Sino-Sri Lankan relations in the fifteenth century, including Cheng Ho's first expedition to Sri Lanka in 1405–1407 ([Jain 2022](#)). The purpose of Cheng Ho's Second Expedition, which took place between 1407 and 1409, was to honor the new Calicut ruler ([Leão 2019](#)). Cheng Ho did not take part in this journey, despite being its official organizer. The trilingual inscription system and the Third Expedition, which took place between 1409 and 1411 Even though Cheng Ho led the Second Voyage, it is officially called the Third Voyage. Early in 1409, the eunuchs Cheng Ho, Wang Ching-hung, and Hou Hsien

received an imperial order to explore the Western seas (Leão 2022). In Sri Lanka's perspective, this is the most significant journey. From prehistoric times until the fifteenth century A.D., trade links between Sri Lanka and West Asia thrived via sea routes, helped along by individuals such as Chen Ho, who promoted both economic prosperity and cross-cultural interchange (Dasanayake 2017). During his journey, Cheng Ho made a stop at the Galle harbor, where he organized a trade fair. There, he showcased an array of Chinese goods, such as textiles, lacquer ware, gold and silver, candlesticks, silk embroidery, blue and white porcelain, Buddhist sutras, and incense burners for the Buddhist community. The date 15 February 1409 (the date in Chinese) is inscribed on the majesty and benevolence of the Ming commemorative tablets Trilingual Inscription that were also set up in Galle and are currently housed in the Colombo National Museum. In 1911, a province in the town of Galle made the discovery. It is written in Tamil, Arwi (erroneously identified as Persian), and Chinese (Dewaraja 2006). The well-preserved Chinese letters document the donations made to the Buddhist temple atop a mountain in Sri Lanka by eunuchs Chen Ho, Wang Chin Lien, and others. The Arwi, which is regarded as the majority of them being Persia, is mostly defaced, but what is readable indicates that this also contains a list of offerings to the Islamic light. The beneficiary of the Tamil inscription, which follows the same pattern, is Tenavarai Nayanar, whom renowned Sri Lankan scholar S. Paranavitana recognizes as Devinuvara or Vishnu. According to the Tamil text, the great Chinese emperor sent his envoys bearing gifts and an offering catalog after learning of Lord Tenavarai Nayanar's reputation in the Ilangai (Lanka) kingdom. The assessment raises a compelling opportunity for scholars to expand the discourse on Cheng Ho's visit through a deeper exploration of overlooked perspectives. The absence of references to Tamil writings, which are notable for their nuanced discussion of the visit, and the language's diminishing use underscore a gap in existing literature. This oversight not only limits the richness of the narrative but also hinders a more inclusive understanding of historical events. By addressing this lacuna, researchers can not only enrich the current discourse but also foster a more inclusive understanding of Cheng Ho's visit and its broader historical significance.

The so-called Galle Stone, a stele that Zheng Ho erected in Ceylon (Xilan, modern Sri Lanka) in 1411 that documents the emperor's donations to various temples, is the only surviving Arwi document pertaining to Zheng Ho's travels. There are translations into Tamil and Arwi for the Chinese text. This paper clarifies an instance in which it was misinterpreted as Persian. Zheng Ho carried the carved stele to Ceylon after it was

finished in 1409 at the Ming court in Nanjing, where the text, translations, and calligraphy were finished. Without a doubt, Zheng Ho's fleets made stops at Galle, the principal trading port in southwest Ceylon. Nearby was Devundara, also known as the "city of gods," a sizable port and temple complex situated atop Ceylon's southernmost promontory, whose imposing gilt roof served as a landmark for passing ships (Siriweera 1994). The stele must have stood here for 178 years before the temple precinct was looted and destroyed by Portuguese forces in 1588, making this a suitable location for an imperial monument (Pieris 1920). Seventeenth-century Portuguese missionary accounts, penned between 1671 and 1686, attest to the stone's continued presence amidst the ruins (Queyroz 1930). This implies that it stood outside in a public area rather than inside any of the demolished temples (Dewaraja 2006).

All three texts variously indicate that gifts were offered to Buddha, Vishnu, and Muhammad. The stone now stands in the Colombo National Museum, but no rubbing or image of the Arwi text has been published, and only the transcription by Khwaja Muhammad Ahmad is available for study. This study was done with his transcription and proved it was not Persian and it was written from Arwi. Arwi demonstrated the importance of the Galle stone as evidence of the use of Arwi as a language of international communication for the Ming maritime expeditions and it was misinterpreted as Persian.

## Methodology

The Galle Trilingual Inscription (GTI) is a unique and important archaeological find that has shed light on the history of Sri Lanka. The inscription, which is written in three languages - Chinese, Tamil, and Arabic which is Arwi- dates back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century AD (Fig. 1). It records the granting of a land grant to a Muslim merchant by a Sinhalese king.

Linguistics is the study of language, and it can be used to learn about the history of a people from their language. The GTI is written in three languages - Chinese, Tamil, and Arabic - and this has allowed linguists to learn a great deal about the history of these languages in Sri Lanka.

These methodologies have been used by anthropologists to study the GTI and to develop a number of theories about the history of Sri Lanka. These theories include: The theory of Arabic-Tamil bilingualism: This theory suggests that Arab trades and Tamil were both widely spoken in Sri Lanka in the 14<sup>th</sup> century AD. They have developed this language to communicate and educate Muslims in Sri Lanka. This is supported by the

fact that the GTI is written in both Arabic (Arwi) and Tamil. Chinese influence on trade made a big impact on the travel route.



**Fig. 1** – Galle Trilingual plaque in all three languages

The theory of Arabic influence in Sri Lanka specifies the theory which suggests that Arabic culture had a significant influence on Sri Lanka in the 14<sup>th</sup> century AD. This is supported by the fact that the GTI is also written in Arabic. The theory of a multi-ethnic Sri Lanka: This theory suggests that Sri Lanka has always been a multi-ethnic society. This is supported by the fact that the GTI was written in three languages spoken by three different ethnic groups. The study of the GTI has been important for anthropologists because it has allowed them to learn about the history of Sri Lanka in a way that was not possible before. The GTI is a unique and important find, and it has helped to shed light on a complex and important period in Sri Lankan history.

## Results and discussion

Arabic follows a consonantal system it has distinct symbols or letters only for consonants, while the vowels are optional and not represented by separate letters but by a few diacritical marks without which Arabic texts can still be readable and understood. Arabic has 28 consonants and it is written usually from right to left (**Fig. 2 A**). The Arabic-Tamil script represents the Tamil language using an Arabic style of scripts. In addition to Arabic script, 13 characters were added. It is conveniently written with vowels. For those vowels which also exist in Arabic, that is -a-, -i-, -u-, -aa-, -ii-, -uu-, and the diphthongs -ai- and -au-, the same signs are in use that are used in Arabic, i.e., fatha, qasra and damma for the short vowels, long vowel being indicated by additional alif, yaa and waaw, respectively, and the diphthongs being written with fatha (-a-) plus yaa or waaw. In addition to the basic Arabic letters, several characters have been introduced to write Tamil sounds not found in Arabic.

The Arabic-Tamil consists of 41 letters, out of which 28 letters are from Arabic and 13 letters are devised by adding some marks and dots to the original Arabic Alphabet. Eighteen Arabic letters do not have their equivalents in Tamil from the phonetic point of view and similarly ten Tamil letters and two vowel sounds have no equivalents in Arabic. Thus, the Arabic-Tamil alphabet is the Arabic alphabet with the devised twelve additional letters to represent the Tamil vowels and several Tamil consonants that could not be mapped to Arabic sounds. As can be seen from what has been said, some Tamil letters can be written with more than one Arabic or Arwi letter, or one of these Arwi letters can stand for more than one Tamil letter.

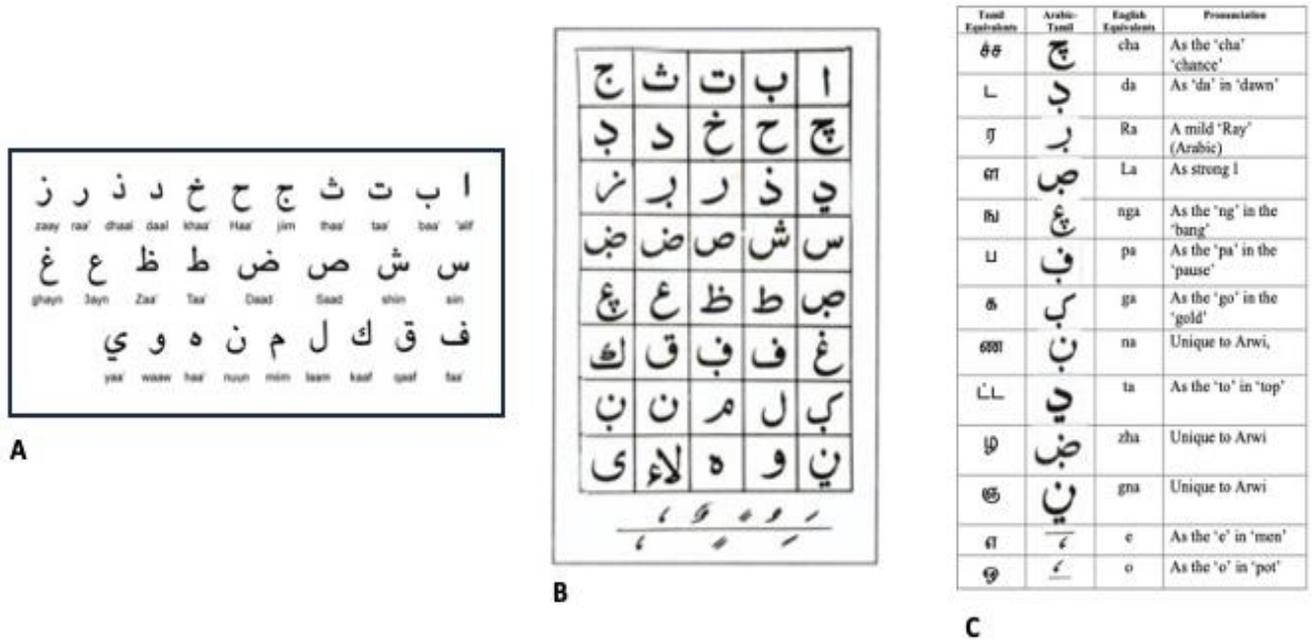


Fig. 2 – Scripts A- Arabic Alphabet; B-Arwi; C-Arwi 13 letters.

Tamil has 30 basic letters comprising 12 vowels 18 consonants and follows essentially a syllabic system of writing, the combination of the consonant and the vowel is represented by a syllabic symbols or letters. Tamil has 216 syllabic symbols or letters apart from the basic symbols or letters of vowels and consonants and it is written from left to right (Fig. 3A). The Persian alphabet, also known as the Perso-Arabic script, is the right-to-left alphabet used for the Persian language. It is a variation of the Arabic alphabet with four additional letters added: پ چ ژ گ (Fig. 3B).

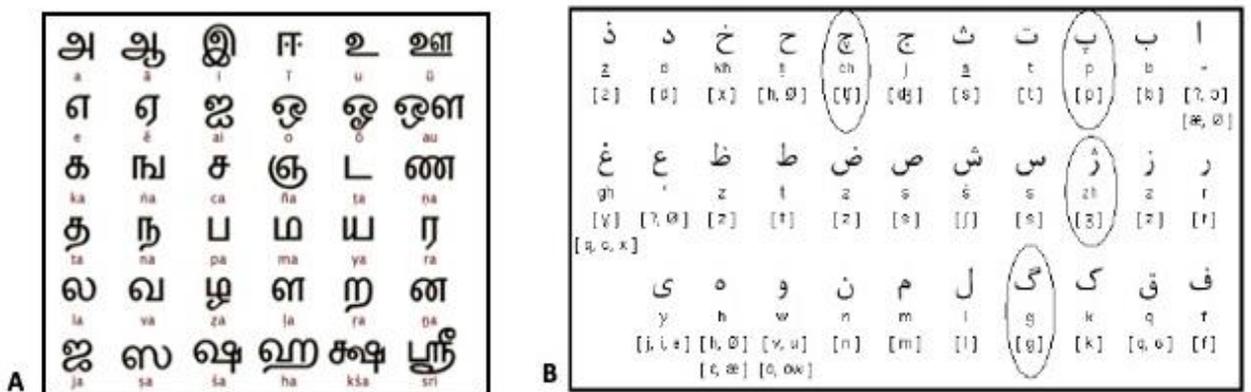


Fig. 3 – Other scripts A - Tamil Script; B-Persian Script

Observation in the Galle Trilingual plaque was out of 13 Arwi 10 characters were observed. Though records say its Persian none of the special Persian Characters were observed. Furthermore, it was witnessed that one letter in Arwi was used as one of the known Sinhalese characters and then later it was changed to real Arwi characters (Fig. 4).

Arwi letters – Unique to Sri Lankan and South India						Missing letters – Unique to Persian			
ர	ر	Ra		ل	ي	ta			
ள	ص	La		ظ	ض	zha			
ப	ف	pa		غ	ن	gna			
க	ب	ga		ع	د	c			
ண	ن	na		ه	و	o			
						Missing letters – Present in Sinhalese			
						ل	د	da	

**Fig. 4** – Observations of Arwi in Galle Trilingual plaque.

Every generation faces a choice about what it wants to preserve and take forward and these are often painful difficult choices but choose we must. Languages and scripts link us with the histories and experiences of our people and keep us rooted otherwise in this era of globalization where we all claim to be ‘world citizens’, we could be everywhere but really nowhere. True, Muslims of Sri Lanka have played a pivotal role in the promotion and preservation of Tamil language. However, “Arabu-Tamil” or Arwi figures in the past and present identity of the Tamil speaking Muslim communities both in Tamil Nadu and India. Be it the numerous words it has added to spoken Tamil, the rich history recorded in old texts and medieval inscriptions, or the cultural, literary and religious influences, Arwi in its essence will live on in the identity of these communities. Although some Tamil nationalist discourses identified ‘Arabic-Tamil’ as a danger to the

unity of the 'Tamil speaking people', Muslims celebrate it as the symbol of a separate identity, without sacrificing the beauty of the Tamil language itself.

The presence of Muslims in Sri Lanka from early times is supported by various historical and archaeological evidence, which contradicts a political stance that attempts to marginalize or deny their historical significance. The arrival of Muslims in Sri Lanka dates back to the early 7th century CE, coinciding with the spread of Islam in the region. Historical records and inscriptions, such as the Gira Sandesha, a 15th-century Sinhalese poem, and the writings of Arab geographers, document the presence of Muslim traders and settlers on the island (De Silva and Pillay 2001).

Furthermore, archaeological excavations have unearthed evidence of Muslim settlements, including mosques and artifacts with Arabic inscriptions, dating as far back as the 9th century CE. These findings corroborate historical accounts and underscore the long-standing presence of Muslims in Sri Lanka (De Silva and Pillay 2001).

Contrary to the political stance that seeks to downplay the historical contributions of Muslims, the evidence firmly establishes their early presence on the island, highlighting their integral role in shaping Sri Lanka's cultural and economic landscape over centuries. This historical reality calls for a more inclusive and accurate narrative that acknowledges and celebrates the diverse heritage of Sri Lanka.

## Conclusion

Rediscovered in 1911, the Galle Trilingual Plaque is a crucial relic that offers concrete evidence of the Arwi language's historical use in Sri Lanka. With texts in Arabic, Chinese, and Tamil, this inscription bears witness to the island's multilingual and cosmopolitan heritage. It highlights the smooth mixing of many language traditions and supports the diversity and depth of Sri Lanka's linguistic history. This story is further supported by Chen Ho's masterpiece, which was completed in 1409 and shows the breadth and depth of Sri Lanka's linguistic and cultural contacts with the larger Indian Ocean region. Together, the Galle Trilingual Plaque and Chen Ho's masterwork provide striking proof of Sri Lanka's rich linguistic and cultural fabric, and their significance is profoundly ingrained in the nation's history narrative.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest

## References

Anderson E.N. 2019. Long-Lived Dynasties: Ming and Its Contemporaries. The East Asian World-System. *Climate and Dynastic Change* pp.171-191. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-16870-4\\_8](http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-16870-4_8)

Attanayake C. and Atmakuri A. 2021. Navigating the Sino-Indian power struggle in the Indian Ocean: the case of Sri Lanka. *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 17(1): 114-133. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2021.1878587>

Dasanayaka R. 2017. Arabs in Serandib: Trade Relations Between Sri Lanka and West Asia from Ancient Time to 15th Century A.D., Historical and Archaeological Survey. Published by S. Godage & Brothers (Pvt) Ltd. Chathura Printers, Sri Lanka. ISBN 978-955-30.

De Silva K.M. and Pillay N. 2001. *Muslims as a minority in Sri Lanka: Historical and political dimensions of the Muslim identity in Sri Lanka* (Colombo: The Sri Lanka Institute of Asian Studies, 2001).

Dewaraja L. 2006. Cheng Ho's Visits to Sri Lanka and the Galle Trilingual Inscription in the National Museum in Colombo. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka*. 52: 59-74. DOI: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23731298>

Ditmanson P. 2020. *Historical and Political Arguments: Debates on the Veritable Records in the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644)*. In *Powerful Arguments* (pp. 47-89). Brill. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004423626\\_003](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004423626_003)

Queyroz F.D. 1930. *The Temporal and Spiritual Conquest of Ceylon*, trans. S.G. Perera (Colombo: A. C. Richards, 1930) 35.

Gunn G.C. 2018. *Overcoming Ptolemy: the revelation of an Asian world region*. Rowman & Littlefield. ISBN: 978-1-4985-9013-6

Jain I. 2022. Sino–Sri Lankan relations and their impact on India. *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 7(4): 922-943. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2057891121997566>

Leão D.P. 2019. Through the Eyes of a Warrior, Traveller and Poet: Portugal, Malabar and Indian Traditions as Seen by Luís Vaz de Camões (Os Lusíadas VII, 17-85). *Cracow Indological Studies* 21(2):159-178. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.12797/CIS.21.2019.02.06>

Pieris P.E. 1920. *Ceylon and the Portuguese 1505–1658* (Tellippalai, Ceylon: American Ceylon Mission Press, 1920), 108–9.

Siriweera W.I. 1994. *A Study of the Economic History of Pre-Modern Sri Lanka* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1994), 142–43. ISBN: 9780706976212