

# A Brief Survey of Archaeological Sources for The History of Karnataka

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**Abstract :** The archaeological sources played an important role in constructing or/and reconstructing the history of a region. The archaeological source of Karnataka history is only about two centuries old. The While there are a handful of defined methods for working with primary historical sources in archaeology, few archaeologists take these as their main points of departure or rely upon them too rigidly. This is to do both with the highly variable nature of the historical and archaeological material available for certain African contexts, and also with how archaeologists conceive of the relationship between these two bodies of evidence: as antagonistic, supplementary, entangled and subjective, mutually creative, and so on. Some methodologies focus on the potentials for consonance and dissonance between written and material sources. Others utilize oral traditions to provide insights into chronology, memory, historical and political dynamics, and the material aspects of these. Still other approaches focus on how historical and archaeological sources offer complementary perspectives on the local and the global, events and processes, and other shifts in scale. While these methods are diverse and contingent, they are united insofar as archaeologists take their cues from objects and from preoccupations with time and space. Archaeologists see their work concerning primary historical sources not as filling in gaps in written records but as addressing the partialities of the records themselves by engaging with an array of complex questions about meaning, authority, and materiality.

**Keywords:** archaeology, primary historical sources, methodology, Africa, colonialism, historical archaeology, material culture, slavery, landscape

**Introduction :** The inscriptions are the most important and reliable sources of Karnataka history. Inscriptions are the contemporary documents those are free from later interpolations as it is impossible to add something to it at a later period. Therefore, it comes in the original form as it was composed in and engraved. The surest ground on which the history of our country could be reconstructed is the vast inscriptional material, more so in respect of Karnataka, where the inscriptions are available in large numbers, to the total extent of several thousands, quantitatively speaking, next only to the inscriptions of Tamilnadu. The inscriptions of Karnataka have enabled us to reconstruct much of our past from the point of view of political history, as also its social, religious and cultural aspects including language, literature and art. In spite of the fact that the inscriptions have their own limitations and do not always give us a correct and complete picture, still their value cannot be underrated. True, legend and metaphor have also sometimes found place in these records; yet, it is possible to sift the grain from the husk. As most of the inscriptions are dated or can be assigned approximate dates on palaeographical considerations and other internal evidences, they enable us to provide a sound chronology in respect of many ruling dynasties and important events connected with them. Although the object of most of the records was primarily to commemorate religious transactions like gifts to institutions or individuals or events like the construction of temples, installation of deities, demise of devotees and heroes etc., their authors found in it a welcome opportunity to introduce descriptions of the ruling king and his officials and to narrate their virtuous deeds; and if the composers were endowed with literary fervour, they would embellish them with poetic merit. Thus, in fact, so far as Kannada inscriptions are concerned, a class of literature which might be termed inscriptional, literature came into existence and, we know of several poets of great literary merit only through their inscriptional

compositions. It is interesting to note that famous poets like Janna were also authors of such literary inscriptions.

A noteworthy feature of Kannada epigraphical records is the large number of hero-stones or memorial slabs set up in almost every village to commemorate the martyrdom of persons who sacrificed their lives while heroically defending their hearth, home and honour against the aggressors. The historical details of the event are narrated in the inscriptions and depicted in sculptures carved in stone.

Taking an overall view, the inscriptions of Karnataka occupy a high place among the historical sources of ancient and mediaeval India. According to a very rough estimate, their number would be to the tune of thirty thousand strong. About half of them have so far been noticed and published..

Thousands yet remain untapped and unfathomed. It is a matter of serious thought to note that a large number of Kannada inscriptions are found deep in the areas outside the present Karnataka State, like Andhra Pradesh, Tamilnadu, Goa and Maharashtra. This is an indication of the shrinking of the political and cultural boundaries as a result of the historical forces that have adversely affected this province.

An important historical aspect of Kannada inscriptions is their sound chronology. More than other inscriptions particularly those of South India, these records are of great value for chronological studies. They generally specify the years of the Saka era and also of the cycle of sixty years, with months, days of the month and week days alongwith other notable occurrences. They state the regnal years of the kings, often combined with the above details. This system has proved to be of immense use in fixing the chronology of kings and dynasties with precision. Two outstanding instances may be cited in this connection. The Badami cliff inscription of Pulakēsi I, dated Śaka 465, corresponding to 543 A. D., is the earliest inscription so far known to be clearly dated in the Saka era. The Aihole inscription of Pulakesi II is dated both Saka 556 and Kaliyuga year 3735 corresponding to 634 A. D. Thus they are important sources for the broader study of Indian chronology.

Absence of such a system has rendered it difficult to fix with certainty the chronology either of the Pallavas or of the Eastern Chalukyas of Vengi. As for the Chōla records, they have a characteristic way of describing the achievements of their rulers year after year. Such prasastis found in their epigraphs constitute historical enumeration of important events. Yet, even this method does not enable us to fix the chronology of Chōla rulers for want of other necessary details.

The inscriptions in general are conveniently classified into two groups, viz., those inscribed on stone, brick or similar hard material and those engraved on copper plates and other metals like gold, silver, brass or bronze. The stone inscriptions are the largest in number when compared to the copper plate records; and those engraved on other materials and metals are few and limited. Inscriptions on stone are mostly in Kannada language and script, while the copper plate records are generally in Sanskrit language and Nagari script.

The copper plate records which comprise mostly donative charters like title deeds given to individuals or to institutions are found in private custody. They bear the seal with emblem of the dynasty and sometimes the name of the king who issued the charter. In some cases the sign-manual of the king appears at the end of the record as for instance, 'svasthōyam mama Sri Karkarājasya,' 'Sri Kannaradevasya' etc. The Vijayanagara kings commonly adopted for this purpose the name of their tutelary deity in place of their individual names and thus in the copper plate grants of these rulers we persistently find the sign-manual Sri Virupaksha. engraved invariably in Kannada script.

The inscriptions on stone, on the other hand, which usually register gifts to religious institutions like the temples or mathas, are in the nature of public announcements. The stone inscriptions may also comprise records of commemorative character relating to the death of heroes in fights for a noble cause and grants made for the maintenance of the dependants of the deceased. Similarly, there are other memorial monuments of stone, the Sati stones, set up in honour of devout wives who committed self-immolation after

the death of their husbands. To this class belong the memorials called nishidhis, which speak of the pious devotees of the Jaina doctrine, who voluntarily courted death by fasting according to the religious rite of Sallekhana. All the above categories of memorials contain besides the writing, sculptures in relief depicting the relevant episodes or scenes.

The main purpose of the donative records is to specify details of the donors, the donees and the donations. Such donations were made either by the kings or their subordinate officials, or provincial governors who were authorised to make such grants. The records of this class registering such transactions cite the authority, specify the rank and jurisdiction of the donor and give details about himself and the ruler whose approval was secured for the grant.

Such details are commonly found in the introductory and earlier portions of the inscriptions where further information relating to the concerned authorities, particularly the ruling king and his family, their achievements etc., is added. The introductory passages containing such details, called prasastis, are common to all the records of a particular dynasty, with of course, such additions and changes as were necessitated by specific cases. Such writings are therefore useful for reconstructing historical account of the ruling dynasties. As the information thus furnished by the inscriptions is mostly reliable, these could be treated as brief historical narratives.

### **Collection and Publication :**

As early as in 1796 Col. Mackenzie started copying inscriptions in Southern India with the help of an able staff and by the twenties of the 19th century he had collected about 9000 inscriptions. Similarly Elliot copied from various areas more than six thousand inscriptions. Many of these records were from the Kannada country. The credit however, of laying the foundations of intensive and extensive study of epigraphic records in Kannada and pertaining to Karnataka goes to the untiring efforts of J. F. Fleet and B. L. Rice.

These scholars almost simultaneously started the work of systematically collecting and publishing inscriptions, the former from the northern Karnataka areas in the then Bombay Province, and the latter from the old Mysore State. Fleet edited and published inscriptions in Sanskrit and Kannada in a series of articles in the Indian Antiquary. Subsequently, he incorporated the results of his researches in Karnataka history and epigraphy in a historical sketch, entitled Dynasties of the Kanarese Districts, published in the Bombay Gazetteer, Vol. 1, Part II (1896). This is a monumental work critically presenting a history of Karnataka for the first time with the help of available inscriptional material. Rice conducted a thorough village to village epigraphical survey of the southern Mysore areas and published twelve volumes of inscriptions, arranged in the order of districts (1886 to 1904). These volumes contain historical introductions wherein the contents of important inscriptions included in the particular volumes are discussed. The Mysore and Coorg from Inscriptions (1922) is the outcome of Rice's epigraphic studies, giving a brief account of the entire history of Karnataka. In course of time three more volumes in the Epigraphia Carnatica series (Nos. XIV to XVI) have been published by the Mysore Government.

Select inscriptions pertaining to Karnataka, critically edited, have appeared in the pages of the Epigraphia Indica from the year 1888 onwards. The Epigraphical Branch of Archaeological Survey of the Government of India has been conducting systematic epigraphical survey and collection in northern Karnataka since 1925. The inscriptions thus collected are being published in a series of volumes entitled Bombay Karnatak Inscriptions, included in the general series of South Indian Inscriptions. Three such volumes, viz., XI, XV and XX have been issued so far. Kannada inscriptions collected from the regions of Bellary and South Kanara and from the areas outside Karnataka proper like Andhra and Tamilnadu have been published in volumes IV, VI, VII, VIII, IX and XVII of the Series.

The old Hyderabad Government and the present Andhra Pradesh Government have published monographs on Kannada inscriptions picked up in their territories. Thus their publications such as Hyderabad Archaeological Series, Nos. V, VIII, XII, XVIII and Andhra Pradesh Government Archaeological Series, Nos. III, and IX contain a good number of Kannada inscriptions. Volumes of inscriptions from Karimnagar and Warrangal Districts, recently brought out by the Department of Archaeology of the Government of Andhra Pradesh also contain important inscriptions in Kannada and those pertaining to Karnataka History. The Kannada Research Institute of the Karnatak University has published a good number of inscriptions from the old Bombay Karnatak area in six handy volumes. It has continued the work of surveying the rich areas of North Karnataka. Individual scholars devoted to historical studies, like Prof. K. G. Kundangar, Dr. S. C. Nandimath Dr. P. B. Desai have published Kannada inscriptions through volumes and articles.

### **Asoka to Vijayanagara :**

The earliest inscriptions discovered in Karnataka are the six versions of the minor Rock Edicts of Aśoka. They are at Maski and Koppal in Raichur District and at Brahmagiri, Siddapur and Jatinga Ramēśvara in Chitradurga District. Two of them are at Koppal. They indicate that a major portion of Karnataka was included in the Maurya empire, forming its southern boundary. The contents of these edicts are more or less the same as those of other minor edicts of the emperor found elsewhere. The Maski edict, however, deserves special attention as it revealed for the first time the name of Aśoka, who was the author of several edicts spread all over India, mentioned therein as Devanām priya Priyadarsi. The only other edict similarly mentioning him by name, lately discovered, is at Gujarra in Madhya Pradesh. It is interesting to note that in the Brahmagiri edict orders from the prince and provincial officers at Suvarnagiri are conveyed to the officers of Isila, which appears to be Brahmagiri itself.

From the time of Aśoka, Buddhism made its headway in Karnataka as evidenced by epigraphical and other sources. The strongholds of this faith that flourished in the early and late periods were Mangalore-Kadri region in South Kanara, Banavāsi and Karwar-Goa region in North Kanara, Dambal and Kōlivāḍ in Dharwar District and Indi in Bijapur District. Recent explorations have shown that this doctrine had a wider prevalence. For instance, Sannati in Gulbarga District was a thriving centre of Buddhism in the early centuries of the Christian era as revealed by the relics of the stūpas, chaityas and other antiquities at the place.

Inscriptions at Myākadoṇi, Malavalli and Banavāsi point to the rule of the Satavahanas and their feudatories, the Chutus as successors to the Mauryas in Karnataka. And this is further confirmed by the recent discovery of an inscription of the Satavahana ruler Sivaśripulumāvi at Banavāsi. The reference to Satavahanihāra and Sātāhaniratṭha in the Myakadōṇi inscription of Pulumāvi and the Hirehaḍagali plates of Pallava Sivaskandavarma respectively corroborate this fact. The Hirehaḍagali charter indicates the Pallava rule in this area subsequent to that of the Satavahanas and the Chutus. This is supported by the account in the Talagunda inscription of Kadamba Kākusthavarma that MayuraSarma carved out his kingdom by vanquishing the Pallava rulers.

The Chandravalli inscription alludes to the conquests of Mayurasarma or Mayuravarma, the first ruler of the Kadamba dynasty. The Halmidi inscription of Kākusthavarma, belonging to the 5th century A. D., is the first record to be written entirely in Kannada language. The Talagunda epigraph, mentioned above, written by the Sanskrit poet Kubja, provides a historical narrative of the Kadamba dynasty from its origin. An inscription recently discovered at Guḍnapur near Banavasi adds significant details by mentioning the names of the father and grand father of this ruler. These are valuable sources for the study of early history of Karnataka.



With the Chalukyas of Bādāmi, Karnataka enters into an epoch of glory. Two records of this family, viz. the Bādāmi cliff inscription of Pulakesi I and the Aibole inscription of Pulakesi II, noticed above, form important landmarks in Indian chronology. The latter epigraph contains a valuable account of the early rulers of the Chalukya family. This charter also enables us to fix the upper limit of the date of Kālīdāsa with whom the poet of this record, Ravikirti, compares himself. It also refers to Bhāravi. The Nerur plates introduce Vijayabhāṭṭārikā, the daughter-in-law of Pulakesi II, who was a renowned Sanskrit poetess, described as Sarasvati of Karnata. The Kanchi inscription of Vikramaditya II testifies to the supremacy and prowess of the Chalukyas. It further exemplifies the magnanimity of that king who, after his victory over the Pallava ruler Para mēśvaravarma and occupation of his capital, visited the Rajasimhēśvara temple and made over to it all the wealth he had captured in the expedition.

In the subsequent period, the epigraphical source materials become rich and abundant. The stone inscriptions and the copper plate records in particular, of the Rashtrakutas, furnish valuable information about their political and military achievements and cultural attainments. As an example, we may cite the Jethwai plates which disclose that Silabhaṭṭārikā, the queen of Dhruva, was associated as sovereign with the administration of the empire. The Sañjan plates of Amoghavarsha I recount in detail the dazzling victories of the early Rashtrakuta monarchs and their ascendancy in the fields of battle in north India. A noteworthy incident mentioned in this record is that this Rashtrakuta king offered his finger as sacrifice to the goddess Mahalakshmi to ward off a calamity on his subjects. The British Museum inscription of Govinda III is one of the few early copper plate records composed in Kannada. Mention should be made here of a 10th century poetic inscription from Kurkiyal in Karimnagar district of Andhra Pradesh. This unique inscription written in three languages, Sanskrit, Kannada and Telugu, contains an eulogistic account of the great Kannada poet Pampa. It was got written by the poet's brother Jinavallabha who was also a noted scholar of the period.

We have numerous records of the Chalukyas of Kalyāṇa which contribute to our knowledge of the political history and various aspects of life of the period. Notable among them are the Chikkerur inscription, which fixes the date of the decisive battle between Taila II and the Paramāra king Muñja, in February 995 A. D.; the Kilaraṭṭi inscription which shows that Sōmēśvara I had a brother named Jayasimha; the Waḍageri and the Hyderabad Museum inscriptions of Vikramaditya VI, which fix the starting point of the Chalukya Vikrama era.

Similarly, a large number of epigraphical records of this period have come to light, providing copious information about the rulers of the Kalachuri, Seuna and Hoysala dynasties. To mention just a few among the many: The Balgeri and Tambūr inscriptions indicating the commencement of Kalachuri Bijjala's career from about 1126. A. D.; the Devalāli plates furnishing interesting information on the political relationship between the Seunas and the Chalukyas of Kalyāṇa; and the Lakkundi inscription of Hoysala Ballala II, dated 1212 A. D., demarcating his northern expansion.

Coming to the Vijayanagara period we have a volume of epigraphical records diffusing welcome light on the myriad activities pertaining to the kings and the subjects of this great empire. An inscription at Bādāmi shows that Harihara I was wielding power in the region of Bādāmi north of the Tungabhadra in 1:40 A. D., four years subsequent to the traditional date of the foundation of Vijayanagara in 1336 A. D. In this epigraph he is described as the lord of the eastern and western oceans'. The Sringeri inscription of 1346 A. D. describing the visit of the five Sangama brothers to this religious centre to celebrate their historic achievement of subjugating the enemies, is of supreme importance as it proves beyond doubt that these chiefs had, before this date, completed the work of establishing the new kingdom. The Sravanabelgola inscription of Bukka I of 1366 A. D., proclaiming the catholic policy of religious toleration and protection of the minorities in the State by the Vijayanagara kings, underlines one of the important objectives of the Vijayanagara rulers. It is a document of great significance in the history of polity of a nation. Krishnadevaraya's Kalinga expedition is spotlighted by a number of epigraphs in the Andhra area.

From the Vijayanagara period onwards, there is profusion of literary sources. This was the period when other materials of documentation came to be used more predominantly than the media of stone and copper plates. Hence inscriptions slowly become fewer and less conspicuous in the post-Vijayanagara period and finally they cease to hold the place. Still, even in this late age the epigraphs yield welcome light with precision on other-wise unknown incidents and chronological positions of Vijayanagara history, besides disclosing various aspects of the rule of the feudatory families like the Keladi, Sonda, Haḍuvalli and other chiefs of the west coast.

**Numismatics :** Coins have rendered valuable service in supplementing our knowledge about many rulers of ancient India; as for instance the Indo-Greeks, Kushāṇas, Guptas and so on. But, for the study of the history of Karnataka their contribution is rather limited. Not many coins of the early rulers have come down to us. Epigraphical references indicate a variety of coins issued by different rulers. But as most of them were of gold, they have not unfortunately survived. The few that are sporadically available have their own story to tell. From the coins of inferior material like lead and potin, found in Karwar and Chitradurga districts we obtain information about the rule of the Satavahanas and their feudatories of the Chutu family. The Roman coins of Augustus, Tiberius and other rulers discovered at Chandravalli and Yasavantapur in the vicinity of Bangalore furnish evidence of the trade contacts of Karnataka with the western world. Chandravalli was also found a brass coin with a square hole in the middle and four Chinese characters engraved around. Assigned to the middle of the second century B. C., this piece points to the antiquity of Chandravalli. On account of the precious nature of the material used, few coins of the early Kadambas and the Chalukyas of Bādāmi have survived. Similar is the case with the coins of other dynasties like the Rashtrakutas and the Later Chalukyas.

So far as the Vijayanagara rulers are concerned, large number of coins in gold, silver and copper have been brought out in lumps, hoards and treasure-troves. They testify to the vast resources, wealth and prosperity of the empire, substantiating the eyewitness accounts of foreign visitors and literary descriptions.

Among the coins familiarly known to us, Gadyaṇa, Varaha or Pagoda (Portuguese name) and Hon and Pana were gold coins issued by the kings of Vijayanagara and subsequently by their feudatories like the rulers of Ikkēri. Generally, the obverse of these coins bears the emblems of bull, elephant, lion or boar (Varaha), or the deities like Hanuman, Garuda, Uma-Mahesvara, Lakshmi-Narayana, Balakrishna, and Venkatesa. The reverse contains the names of the ruling kings in Kannada or Nagari characters, as for instance, Sri Vira Bukkaraya, Sri Pratapa Harihara, Sri Pratapa Devaraya etc. We obtain a large number of coins of the later period also pertaining to the Sultans of Bijapur and the rulers of Mysore including Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan. As the political history of these rulers and their dynasties is well known from other sources, their interest is shifted to the spheres of monetary transactions and numismatic studies of the period.

### **Monuments :**

The monuments in the form of ancient temples, forts and other structural remains that abound in many parts of Karnataka are another source material for the reconstruction of the history of Karnataka. This class of material which is very useful to understand the food and dress habits of the people, their religious and social customs and beliefs, their artistic and aesthetic attainments depicted through a variety of sculptures that are yet to be properly utilised by the historians. The temples of Bādāmi, Paṭṭadakallu and Aihole of the Early Chalukyas, those at Gadag, Lakkundi and Itagi and other places, of the later Chalukya period, Bēlūr, Halebidu and Sōmanathapuram, places of the Hoysala times with their sculptural wealth and the ruins of Hampi, the quondam capital of the Vijayanagara empire, the fortifications around Banavasi and many other ancient and mediaeval towns are mute records of the history which can enlighten the pages of the history of Karnataka when they are properly tapped and interpreted.

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