Inscriptions in Assamese script in Arakan/Rakhine state of Myanmar (Burma)

Map above and the image below from Pamela Gutman’s “Ancient Arakan”
Shitthaung Pillar Inscription, West face, lower half
The common notion is that the specimens of Assamese script inscriptions on stone and metal from the ancient periods have surfaced only within the confines of the territory of Assam state and neighbouring areas in India. This view has to be altered due to the presence of inscriptions in Assamese script in Arakan/Rakhine state of Myanmar (Burma). From the point of view of the quality of the preserved inscription in their respective temporal situations, the Assamese script inscriptions of Arakan/Rakhine state of Myanmar (Burma) are indeed some of the best of the specimens of ancient Assamese script inscriptions. These inscriptions belong to two ancient civilisations that sprung up in the area of the Arakan/Rakhine state of Myanmar (Burma) and centred around two sites Dhanyabady and Wethali (pronounced Wedali or Waidali in Arakanese and Burmese languages).

A large volume of research works have been produced on the ancient civilisations of Arakan/Rakhine state of Myanmar by
scholars both foreign and Arakanese. The civilisation of the Dhanyabady era pre-date that of the Wethali era. Considerable differences exist between the Rakhine and the foreign scholars regarding dating of these splendid pre-Rakhine or pre-Bamah civilisations. The Rakhine scholars place the existence of these civilisations at a much earlier period than the foreign scholars. While the British scholar estimates the beginning of the Dhanyabady era at BC 2666 and Wethali era at 788 AD the Rakhine scholars put it at BC 3287 and AD 364 respectively.

Up to 3325 B.C. a local dynasty ruled over Vesali. In 3337 B.C. savages (Rakhaik) overtook the city and rendered it without a king. A group led by Marayu, an Indian prince, came down the River Kaladan and subdued the savages.

In 1531 B.C. another migratory wave from Kamarupa (Assam) under Kammaraja came and settled at Kyauk-hadaung (near Paletwa, on its Kaladan) 24 years later the King came downstream and set up the second city of Dhanyawaddy in 1483 B.C. The dynasty that followed, saw a period of political stability. The twentyninth king under this dynasty Canda Thuriya improved the defence of the city and in 554 B.C. the twenty-
Both the Dhanyabady and Wethali civilisations were founded by adventurers from India bearing Hindu names. Citing sources from Rakhine history, Rakhine scholar U Shwe Zan in his book “The Golden Mrauk-U” in page 149 mentions about an Assamese adventurer “Kammaraja” coming from Assam (Kamrup) to set the second kingdom of Dhanyabady. Interestingly, the ancient civilisations of mainland Burma/Myanmar were also supposedly started by adventurers from India and the name “Kammaraja/Kamaraja” is to be found mentioned in several of the Burmese chronicles. The middle and later rulers of these civilisations were followers of Buddhism but those of the earlier part were invariably followers of the Sanatan
(Hindu) religion.

The scripts that were found to be in use in the Dhanyabady-Wethali civilisation are all specimens of the Assamese script. The language mentioned by the scholars is mostly Pali and Sanskrit other languages like Assamese were not mentioned by them. All the scholars who studied those scripts have loosely commented on them as specimens of northern variety of Brahmi script. These are found in stone inscriptions, copper plates and coins. The specimens however are some of the perfect and the best specimens of the Assamese script discernible even by laymen.
Scholars like Pamela Gutman who did her thesis on the civilisations of Arakan/Rakhine state and another named Johnstone did made some relevant comments in this regard.
Although Johnston, with a limited number of inscriptions at his disposal, proposed that all the scripts were analogous with those current in Northeast India, he was only partially correct. His theory must, of course, be modified, for since he wrote, a great number of new inscriptions have been discovered in East Bengal (now Bangladesh) and Assam, and in Burma proper, where epigraphic studies have been half of the 5th century. While certain central Indian characteristics are retained in the first half of the 6th century, notably in the two earliest praśostis on the east face of the Shitthaung pillar and the reverse of the Sārya image, the forms generally belong to the script used in Bengal and Assam during that period. A certain amount of local development is discernible from around the middle of the 6th century, from which time a few Southern forms are noticed.

In one place of her thesis, Pamela Gutman have given reference of the Assamese scholar Dr Pratap Chandra Choudhury's book “Civilisation of the people of Assam”.

Within each group, the inscriptions have been arranged chronologically. The usual Epigraphia India procedure has been followed, although the historical implications have been treated more fully than is usually the case in that journal. The text of each inscription has been separately footnoted.

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P.C. Choudhury, Civilisation of the People of Assam (Gauhati 1966) p.365

The Dhanyabady- Wethali civilisation declined with the coming of the Rakhine people, who are part of the great migratory wave Burmese (Bamah) and allied people from the north.
Kanak Lal Barua the great historian of ancient Assamese history from the Kamrup era established conclusively, the Kamrup's conquering forays into the mainland India to the west of the Karatoya river, negating allegations of being guided by chauvinistic considerations by many mainland Indian scholars. He also postulated the possibilities similar east ward movement of the Kamrup's military power but stopped short of establishing the same. The presence of the elements of Assamese heritage in
the ancient civilisations of Burma (Myanmar) particularly Arakan/Rakhine jumps several steps forward in the process of establishing the veracity of his postulations.

No study has yet been undertaken by scholars from Assam on these inscriptions. A study of the Dhanyabady-Wethali inscriptions is highly essential in order to establish a holistic concept on whole subject of the Assamese script and its origin and distribution.

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