

Scripts of Maldives

Introduction

Ancient Maldives was known by many different names, among them *Mahiladvipika*, *Diva Mahal*, *Maldiva* and the *Cowrie Islands*, but the traditional name for these islands is *Dhivehi Raajje*, the inhabitants are Dhivehin, and their language is Dhivehi.

The Dhivehi civilization dates back more than two thousand years. Cowrie shells from the Maldives travelled the ancient world, from Africa and the Middle East to South East Asia and China. If the history of the ancient Maldivian cowrie shell trade could be traced, historians could perhaps go back even further in time. The identity of the first settlers in the archipelago remains unknown, but the language and old place-names show Aryan and Dravidian origins, suggesting early migrations from the Indian subcontinent.

The Dhivehi people built places of worship out of coral stone, cutting the blocks and fitting them together with amazing mastery. Regrettably, all that exists now of the oldest of these buildings are only the foundations, or at most, only the lower parts of what must once have been strong edifices. What existed of the old structures have been covered with the soil and vegetation of the passing centuries, so that these places now exist in the form of mounds or gentle hillocks, still to be seen in many islands of the Maldives.

The history of writing in these islands is more than 1400 years old. Inscriptions have been found on some of the artifacts discovered at heritage sites and on artifacts unearthed in various islands. The Dhivehi scribes of long ago carved their inscriptions on soft coral, probably using a metal instrument. The coral stone inscriptions that have been found are religious mantras of the *Vajrayana* Buddhist sect; the earliest is dated to the 6th century AD.

In Dhivehi, letters of an alphabet are called *akuru*, the word originating from the Sanskrit *akshara* or from the Pali *akkhara*. Three main scripts or *akuru* were used in Maldives over different periods of history. These were *Eveyla*, *Dhives* and *Thaana*. Until the late 18th century AD, Dhivehi was written in a script that had strong similarities to South Asian scripts such as *Grantha*, *Elu* and *Vatteluttu*. Although there were differences between earlier and later forms of the letters used in Maldivian writing, *Dhivehin* (Maldivians) called the old scripts *Dhivehi* or *Dhives Akuru*, literally meaning “letters of island people”.

Ancient Scripts

A recently discovered inscription from the *Maabudhuge* archeological site, on the island of Landhoo in South Miladhunmadulu Atoll, is now thought to be the oldest script found in Maldives. The letters are inscribed on four sides of a block of coral, in a version of the Southern *Brahmi* script of the *Pallava* period, estimated to date back to the 6th century AD (Fig. 1). The inscription is a *mantra* of *Vajrayana* Buddhism, a form of Buddhism that had existed in Maldives in ancient times.(Gippert 2003). The stone may have been buried in the foundation of a religious building to ensure safety from evil spirits, a practice known to have been used during the pre-Islamic period. The letters show some resemblance to the later *Eveyla Akuru* leading to the theory that this early script may have played a

part in the formation of the first known Dhivehi alphabet. Some letters of this script are similar to letters inscribed on relics found in 1962 in Aifaanu Magu in Male'.



Fig. 1: Coral stone from Landhoo in South Miladhunmadulu Atoll.
Photo: Yassin Hameed - f8 Professional Photography.

Another palaeographically datable legend was inscribed on the cover of a coral stone casket found in Maalhos in Ari Atoll. This is a *Vajrayana* Buddhist inscription in Sanskrit and, dates back to the 9th or 10th century AD. This inscription is written in an early form of *Nagari*. (Ragupathy 1994). The same *Nagari* script is also found in some parts of the old copperplate grant called *Isdhoo loamaafaanu*, written in 1195/96 AD. This is the oldest *loamaafaanu* (copperplate grant) found so far in Maldives.

A gold leaf found in a relic casket on Veymandoo Island of Kolhumadulu Atoll has a very interesting inscription (Fig. 2). The general appearance of the letters is in the category of the *Grantha* alphabet evolved to write Sanskrit, and belongs to the *Grantha* of 10th-11th centuries AD which was used by the *Cholas* of South India. However, the nature of the writing in some of the letters show affinities to the Sinhala alphabet and Tamil *Vatteluttu* of that period and to Maldivian *Eveyla Akuru* of the later period (Mohamed, Ragupathy 2005:10-12). This inscription on the gold leaf may show a stage in the development of *Eveyla Akuru*, the first truly Dhivehi script.



Fig.2 : Gold leaf inscription from Veymandoo Island in Kolhumadulu Atoll.
Photo: Yassin Hameed - f8 Professional Photography.

Examples of similar letters can be seen on an old coral stone casket found in Nilandhoo in North Nilandhoo Atoll. Here, the legends are written in a mixed script containing elements of the *Kannada-Telegu* alphabet of the Western and Eastern *Chalukyas* dated to the 10th-11th century AD. A marked influence of the *Sinhala* alphabet and elements of the *Grantha-Tamil* and *Vatteluttu* scripts are to be seen. Some of the letters are closer to *Eveyla Akuru*. All these seem to show a stage in the evolution of *Eveyla Akuru*. (Mohamed, Ragupathy 2005:24-27). The coral stone casket has been tentatively dated to the 10th -11th century AD. It should be noted that during the latter part of the 10th century and the 11th century AD, two of the Maldives northernmost atolls, Thiladhummathi and Malikatholhu, were occupied by the *Cholas* of South India.

Eveyla Akuru

When Mr. H. C. P. Bell came to Male' in 1922, he collected all the available documents containing old scripts. At that time Maldivians referred to all the old scripts found in these documents as *Dhivehi Akuru*. Among the material collected by Mr. Bell were old documents from past centuries. He found great variation in these scripts, mainly due to changes brought to the scripts over a long period of time. To distinguish the early form of the scripts from the later variant, Mr. Bell named the early form of the letters, *Eveyla Akuru*. (Bell 1940:166). *Eveyla* means "ancient" in the Maldivian language. The

word *e* means “that” and *veyla* is “time” or “period”, thus together *eveyla* means “that time”, or “ancient”. *Eveyla Akuru*, therefore simply means “ancient letters”.



Fig. 3. Eveyla Akuru inscribed on a Buddhist relic found in Male’.
 Photo: Yassin Hameed - f8 Professional Photography.

The *Eveyla Akuru* alphabet had twenty- seven consonants and nine symbols representing vowels, and was written from left to right. A consonant written by itself had the inherent a sound, and vowels written in non-initial positions were represented by vowel strokes called *fili*. Early forms of *Eveyla Akuru* have been found, inscribed on some of the Buddhist relics found at sites in Male' and the atolls (Fig. 3.).

The later form of *Eveyla* is found in the old *loamaafaanu*, official records of grants made for the upkeep of mosques. These were narrow plates of copper on which these records

were inscribed. The inscribed plates were threaded on a metal ring and hung inside the mosque. Each mosque is said to have had one of these grants, but very few remained at the beginning of the 20th century.

The existing copperplate grants are from the 12th, 13th and 14th centuries AD, and reveal several variations in letter forms. Of these, the *Bodugalu Miskithu Loamaafaanu*, written in 1356 AD, the sixteenth year in the reign of Sultana Rehendhi Khadheeja, has been described by Mr. H .C. P. Bell as showing “distinct modification from the characters of the earlier Haddummati, and Palace *Loamaafaanu*, belonging as it does, to a period nearly two hundred years later and already exhibits clear tendency towards the later evolution into *Dives Akuru*.” (Bell 1940:182-186). No paper or parchment documents with the *Eveyla* script have been found.

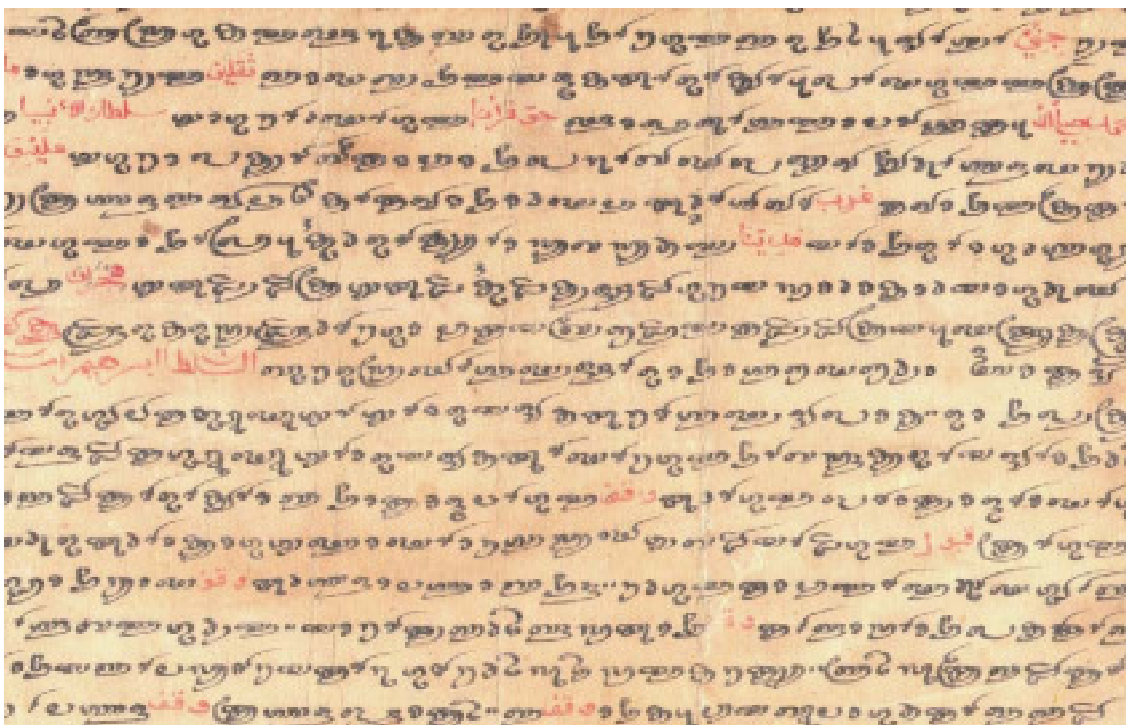


Fig. 3. Part of official missive of 18th century written in Dhives Akuru.
 Photo: NCLHR Collection.

Dhives Akuru

Eveyla Akuru underwent many changes over the centuries and evolved into the later form, now called *Dhives Akuru* or *Dhivehi Akuru* (Fig. 4.). Many features of *Eveyla Akuru* were retained in *Dhives Akuru*. As in the earlier *Eveyla Akuru*, *Dhives* also had vowels and consonants, and vowel strokes or *fili*. It was also written from left to right, and consonant characters standing on their own had the inherent a sound.

Many modifications had been made to the shapes of letters and new symbols had been incorporated into the *Dhives* alphabet, to represent new sounds. In the *Dhives Akuru* alphabet, the consonant symbols numbered forty-one and there were fifteen symbols for vowels, including in some cases, more than one symbol for the same vowel. In documentation written in *Dhives Akuru*, verses from the Qur'an as well as all Arabic words, including Arabic names and words commonly used in Dhivehi, were always written in the Arabic script. This often led to difficulties since *Dhives* was written from left to right and Arabic from right to left.

Very beautiful examples of *Dhives Akuru* can be seen in the inscriptions on the walls of the Hukuru Miskiy, on ancient tombstones carved from coral slabs, and in some finely written official land grants, inscribed on wood or parchment. This script was used extensively for all official purposes until the end of the 17th century, and the beginning of the 18th century. A few copperplates written in later years have been written in this script.

Thaana Akuru

Thaana is a system of writing, which was developed to meet the needs of the Dhivehi language. Although the influence of Arabic and Persian can be seen clearly, vestiges of the early *Dhives Akuru* writing system can still be found in its basic rules (Mohamed 1999:39).

Early Dhivehi scripts were written in the left to right direction, unlike scripts used in many Islamic countries. Arabic, Persian and Urdu, languages used by Muslims in the Middle-East and India, were written from right to left. The late 16th to the 18th centuries was a period when trade was well established between Maldives and other countries and Maldivians were in constant contact with people from these countries. Trading ships came regularly to Maldives to buy cowries and other products and learned Muslim teachers often arrived on these vessels. By the 15th and 16th centuries Maldivians too were travelling to Arabia for religious studies and some of them were well-versed in Arabic. The religious awareness of the time, and a desire to belong to the community of other Islamic nations may have been one of the chief reasons for the change to *Thaana* (Fig. 5.).

Wilmott Christopher who stayed in Male' from 4th June to 9th September 1835 AD, writing in his memoirs of his visit to the Maldives, spoke of the scripts then in use. He writes thus of *Thaana*, which was in extensive use at that time:

The modern alphabet contains eighteen letters, and is called by the natives *Gabuli-Tana* (early *Thaana*). There are some auxiliary letters in it, derived from the Arabic and Persian, in common use, but not included in the alphabet. It is written from the right hand, and was introduced when the Portuguese garrison were overcome, and *Mahomedanism* (Islam) re-established by a chief and men from the Northern Atolls, and is now used throughout the islands.

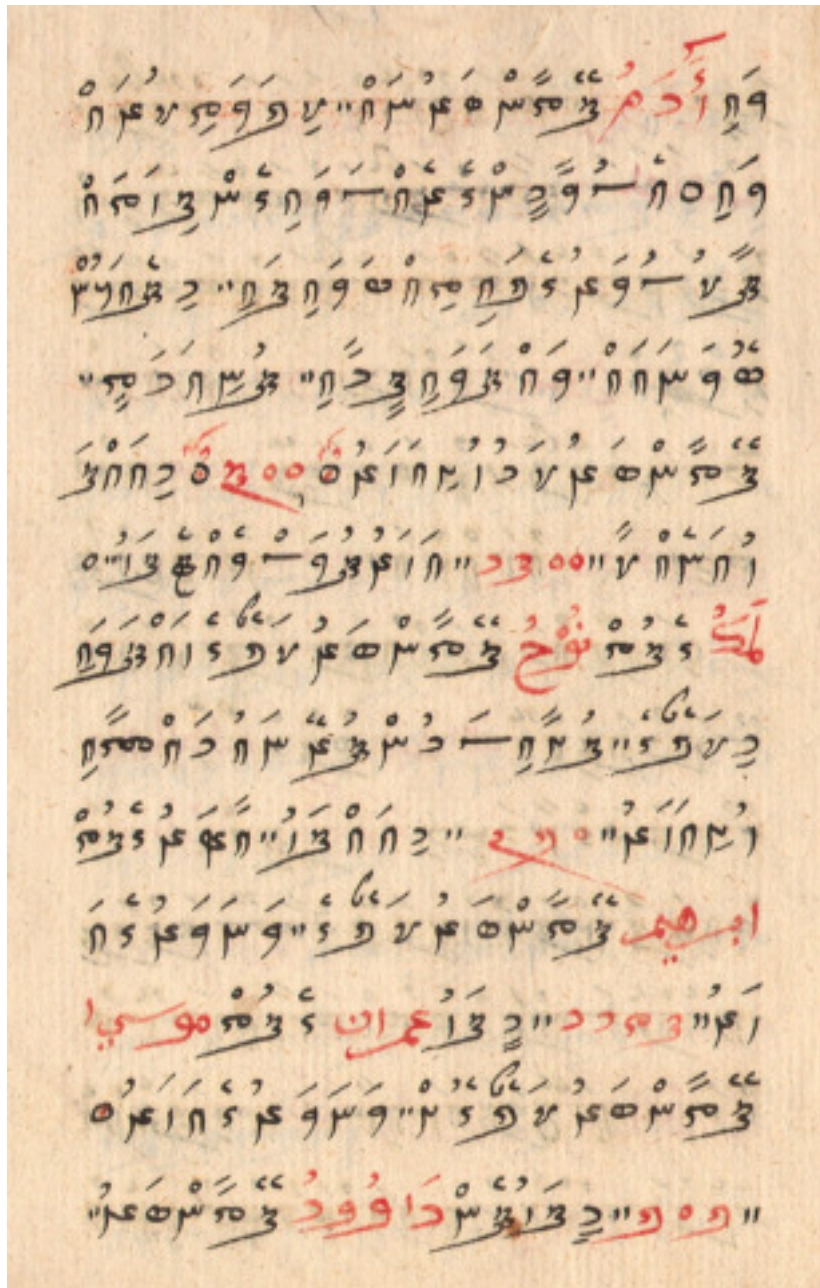


Fig. 5. Old Thaana script. Page from late 18th century Raadhavalhi. NCLHR Collection.

The chief and men from the Northern atolls referred to in this context were Muhammad Thakurufaanu and his companions from Utheem in Thiladhumathi. This is the story told in oral tradition, which says that *Thaana* was introduced to Male' by Muhammad Thakurufaanu.

There are different theories about the origin of the name *Thaana*. Since many Dhivehi words have their origins in old Sanskrit and a few in old Indonesian as well as some other languages, one of the following derivations might be possible:

Tana (Sanskrit), meaning offspring or posterity

Tanah (Indonesian), meaning land or country

Than (Dhivehi), meaning place.

Thaana Akuru would then mean 'script of the country', or 'script of the people'.

The *Thaana* alphabet consists of twenty-four letters, the first nine of which are derived from the first nine Arabic numerals, and the next nine from a set of old Dhivehi numerals. (Salahuddin, 1928). The last six letters of the alphabet are adaptations of existing letters to accommodate the remaining sounds. In early *Thaana*, the term *viyani* was also used to indicate the letters of the alphabet. In the mid-twentieth century, more letters were added to this original alphabet, to enable the phonologically correct writing of names and loan words, mostly from Arabic. These were formed using a system of placing dots on individual letters. Unlike the earlier Dhivehi scripts, the *Thaana* script is written from right to left.

On examination of early *Thaana* documents, it seems probable that the existing *Thaana* script of the 17th century was modified for official use during the early 18th century. Early *Thaana* writing shows a strong Arabic influence in the use of vowel strokes and in the shapes of individual letters. The script shows a radical change in the form of the letters, and the system of Dhivehi writing. This script did not evolve from *Dhives* or *Eveyla Akuru*, but was developed from other existing sources to fit the needs of the Dhivehi language. It does not have the inherent a sound as in *Eveyla* and *Dhives Akuru*, and is written from right to left unlike the earlier scripts, showing the Arabic and Persian influence of the post-Islamic era. It can be clearly seen, that some of the characteristics of Arabic writing had been modified, indicating that the creators of this system of writing were well versed in Arabic as well as Dhivehi.

Early *Thaana* was known as *Gabulhi Thaana*. In Dhivehi, the word *gabulhi* was frequently used as a derogatory term to indicate incompleteness, or a lack of finish. Thus it can be conjectured that the *gabulhi* here refers to the incomplete stage of the script, taking the term from the Dhivehi word for the in-between stage of the coconut, when it is neither the ripe nut nor quite tender, meaning that it is not fully developed. Early in the 20th century, the script became known simply as *Thaana*.

From the early years of the 18th century, until about 1780 AD, *Dhives* and *Thaana Akuru* were both used for official documentation, but at the end of this period, *Dhives Akuru* was superseded by *Thaana*. At the time of Christopher's arrival in Male' in 1835, *Dhives Akuru* had been almost forgotten in Male'; only a few individuals were able to write the script, but it was still in use in the Southern atolls.

Pyrard de Laval's Observations

Pyrard de Laval and his companions were shipwrecked in Maldives, on 2nd July 1602, following which, Pyrard spent about seven years in Maldives, until his departure in February 1609. During this time, he made a number of observations on the people, their culture and the country. He observed that there were three scripts in use in Maldives at that time. Among the observations he made was the following:

Their letters are of three sorts: the Arabic, with some letters and points which they have been added to express their language; another, whose characters are peculiar to the Maldivian language; and a third, which is common to Ceylon and to the greater part of India.

Pyrard's eyewitness account proves that three scripts were in use at the time. The first of these, "the Arabic, with some points added to express their language", is clearly the script known to Maldivians as *Hedhi Akuru*, a less common script, which used the Arabic alphabet and had additional letters included, to express sounds not present in that alphabet. These additional letters were formed, by

placing a dot (point) or dots at different positions on particular letters. This script was used mainly to write names, and continued to be used until the 20th century.

The second script, which Pyrrard says is peculiar to the Maldivian language, could only be the very early *Thaana Akuru*. This is the script that eventually superseded *Dhives Akuru* in the late 18th century. The earliest records of *Thaana* found so far, date from 1705 AD. According to oral tradition, the *Thaana* script was introduced by the national hero Muhammad Thakurufaan in the 16th century. Pyrrard's account shows that this script was in use at the beginning of the 17th century, suggesting that oral tradition may be correct in saying that *Thaana* was in fact introduced by Muhammad Thakurufaan. His son Ibrahim III (Kalaafaanu), was the reigning sultan at the time of Pyrrard's stay in Maldives.

The third script referred to by Pyrrard as, “common to Ceylon and the greater part of India”, must be the *Dhives Akuru* script which was in common use during the 16th and 17th centuries. This script has a marked resemblance to the Malayalam script of South West India, and also to the Sinhalese script of Ceylon (Sri Lanka); therefore, it is quite possible that Pyrrard made the mistake of thinking that they were the same.

Conclusion

If civilization is to be measured by the time when writing started in a culture, Maldivians had achieved this almost one and a half thousand years ago, the earliest existing inscription being dated to the 6th century AD. The evidence from the following centuries, show experiments at different stages in the evolution of a script that became part of the nation's identity. This script *Eveyla Akuru*, was further developed with additional letters, to facilitate the writing of the new sounds in words that were constantly being introduced into Dhivehi. The script eventually became the elegant *Dhives Akuru*.

In later years when it became necessary to break with the old traditional way of writing, the learned Dhivehi scholars formed a totally new alphabet that suited the demands of the time and was capable of adaptation. Modern *Thaana* has changed considerably from its early style. The rules of writing have been modified to meet changing needs, and may have to evolve still further, to accommodate future demands of the Information Technology age.

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