

EARLIEST SANSKRIT INSCRIPTION IN SOUTH INDIA FOUND IN A.P.

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The inscription on Saptamatrikas discovered by the ASI near Guntur in Andhra Pradesh.

In a significant find, the Epigraphy Branch of the Archaeological Survey of India has discovered the earliest epigraphic evidence so far for the Saptamatrika cult. It is also the earliest Sanskrit inscription to have been discovered in South India as on date.

Saptamatrikas are a group of seven female deities worshipped in Hinduism as personifying the energy of their respective consorts. The inscription is in Sanskrit and in Brahmi characters and was issued by Satavahana king Vijaya in 207 A.D.

Dr. K. Muniratnam, Director, Epigraphy branch, ASI, Mysuru told *The Hindu* that it was discovered in Chebrolu village in Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh earlier this month.

The inscription came to light when some local villagers informed the authorities of the presence of a pillar with some engravings when they were restoring and repairing the local Bheemeshwara temple.

The inscription was first copied and studied and it transpired that it records the construction of a prasada (temple), a mandapa and consecration of images on the southern side of the temple by a person named Kartika for the merit of the king at the temple of Bhagavathi (Goddess) Saktimatruka (Saptamatrika) at Tambrape; Tambrape being the ancient name of Chebrolou, said Dr. Muniratnam. He said there are references of Saptamatrika worship in the early Kadamba copper plates and the early Chalukyas and Eastern Chalukya copper plates. But the new discovery predates them by almost 200 years.

The verification of all the available records proved that the Chebrolu inscription of Satavahana king Vijaya issued in his 5th regnal year – 207 A.D. — is also the earliest datable Sanskrit inscription from South India so far, said Dr. Muniratnam.

So far the Nagarjunakonda inscription of Ikshavaku king Ehavala Chantamula issued in his 11th regnal year corresponding to the 4th century A.D. was considered the earliest Sanskrit inscription in South India, he added.

The place also yielded another inscription which is in Prakrit language and of Brahmi characters and belongs to the 1st century A.D. This is the earliest epigraphic reference to Mutts and records the gift of a cloister mandapa and chaitya to the bhavatho (Lord) of the Gadasa Mutt by a person hailing from Tabaava, according to Dr. Muniratnam.

Calling for conservation and preservation of the pillar given its historical importance, he pointed out that there were many such ancient monuments and structures across the country that lacked protection but could contain treasure trove of information.

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