

A recent IAS workshop brought together esteemed scholars to look at the production, distribution and collection of Sanskrit manuscripts in Ancient South India.

# Uncovering hidden treasures: establishing the discipline of Indian manuscriptology

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Literary works in India have traditionally been written down on various materials such as palmleaf, birchbark and paper. In South India books - that is to say manuscripts consisting of bundled leaves (Sanskrit: *pustaka*) - have been mainly made from palm leaf; that is, leaves either from the Talipot (*Corypha umbraculifera*, Sanskrit: *āritāla* or *tālī*) or from the Palmyra (*Borassus flabelliformis*, Sanskrit: *tāla*). There are various aspects involved in dealing with manuscripts and most of them were discussed when several experts on this subject came together for the IAS workshop "Production, distribution and collection of Sanskrit manuscripts in Ancient South India," convened in the Sieboldhuis in Leiden on the 20th and 21st of April, 2007. The workshop was organised by Dr. Saraju Rath in connection with her ongoing work on the Johan van Manen collection of South Indian palm leaf manuscripts which has been carefully preserved at the Kern Institute, Leiden, since 1929.

The aim of the workshop was threefold:

(1) to study the production, distribution and collection of palm leaf manuscripts from early to modern times;

(2) to get a better picture of the ancient, pre-modern, and recent history of currently available manuscripts of the smaller and larger, public and private collections inside and outside India;

(3) to place the Johan van Manen collection of circa 400 South Indian palm leaf manuscripts in a larger context.

After an opening recitation and chant from the *R̥gveda* and *Sāmaveda* by Shri Chaitanya Kale, the workshop was opened by the Director of the International Institute for Asian Studies, Prof. Max Sparreboom, and with a brief overview of the Van Manen Collection by Dr. Saraju Rath. The Introductory Lecture, entitled "The Lives of Manuscripts and the Defects of Scribes", was given by Prof. Christopher Minkowski (Oxford). It dealt with the information that can be gleaned from the lines which are often found at the end of manuscripts, (beyond the final colophon), in which the scribe gives information about himself and frequently a statement regarding the possible faultiness of the manuscript, a prayer for its protection, etc. Moreover, Minkowski suggested that the voice of the scribes in the colophons reveals aspects of the history of manuscripts.

## Dating dilemmas

Since scripts and writing techniques vary, manuscriptology shares a palaeographical dimension with epigraphy. In South India, Sanskrit texts are usually written in characters of the Malayalam, Telugu, Kannada, Nandinagari scripts (Grünendahl 2001) and in various styles of Grantha, for

instance Grantha Tamil. All these scripts are associated with particular regions and periods. As Saraju Rath demonstrated in her lecture, it takes a lot of experience to distinguish the scripts perfectly, but with the help of precise criteria it is possible to determine the period of a certain manuscript by means of palaeographical details. In some manuscripts the scribe concludes the writing process with a date in the colophon. As in epigraphy, the date may include the number of a year in an Indian era such as *saka* or *vikrama*. On the face of it, it would seem easy to convert these dates into a year of the Gregorian calendar since the beginning of these eras is known (Salomon 1998: 168-198). However, Kim Plofker pointed out, in her lecture, the difficulties surrounding the exact computation of Indian dates as they are based on a precise astronomical lunisolar calendar which in fact cannot be calculated easily. A lunar day (Sanskrit: *tithi*) is sometimes also given, and this can help in determining the year. When the year is missing or defective, or if the 60-year Jupiter cycle (Sanskrit: *ṛhaspati*) is used, (as is the case with many South Indian manuscripts), a conversion of the date of the manuscript may not even be possible. Furthermore, the given year may be wrong.

Under Indic climatic conditions palmleaf is constantly threatened by fungus and insects, even if it is kept in under careful conditions. P. Perumal explained in his lecture that it is for this reason that manuscripts in private ownership have been stored in the kitchen of the house because the steam and smoke protect them. Manuscripts in India were normally copied by professional scribes (Sanskrit: *lipikāra*, *lekhaka*). This was done because the lifetime of palmleaf is limited, but also because extra copies could be distributed to other readers. It is well known that copying is a strenuous job and it is natural that the scribes made errors. It is fair to assume that with the number of copies made, the original text would become more and more corrupted. Furthermore, sometimes corrections to the manuscripts were made by scribes that while plausible, were different from the version that the author invented. For this and other reasons, different manuscripts of the same text frequently transmit different readings and recensions. It is the task of textual criticism - a discipline that is intimately connected with manuscriptology - to uncover which variants are original.

Classical philology comes Lachmann's method: a process of comparing and evaluating the variant readings of a manuscript and then classifying them in a stemma tree. In an uncontaminated transmission, missing nodes of the tree can be systematically reconstructed (Katre 1954: 35 ff.). In metrical Sanskrit the metrical schemes give additional evidence for the elimination of errors. The appearance of a manuscript is not a decisive factor, a general rule is that, theoretically, even the youngest

manuscript can carry the best text. Unfortunately this classical method fails when dealing with contaminated texts, i.e. when multiple exemplars have influenced each other horizontally as well as vertically. And it seems that this occurs with regularity in the case of Indian transmission. Vincenzo Vergiani, for example, described how difficult it is for a project to produce a new critical edition of the *Kāśīkāvṛtti* to bring all the copies into a stemmatic sequence in order to see which are the most reliable variants.

Another approach has been to apply stemmatic methods derived from bioinformatics to textual criticism. In his lecture, about his research on the Ramcaritam written in Old-Malayalam, A.G. Menon gave an example of electronic data processing.

There remain several valid reasons to search for and to read manuscripts even when a text has been edited. One such reason is to compare the editions with the existing manuscripts when an edition seems to be inadequate. Or as suggested above, perhaps a previously ignored manuscript carries a better text. Or one may wish to uncover exactly why various editions differ so significantly. Silvia D'Intino described such a case in her lecture concerning the existing editions of the *Skandasvāmībhāṣya* of the *R̥gvedasamhitā*. Finally, manuscriptology holds the promise of revealing a large number of unedited and even unknown texts. It is always possible to discover hidden treasures.

## Manuscript Hunting

In illustration of this, Christopher Vielle described the manuscript stocks in Kerala and Cezary Galewicz described his successful hunt for manuscripts of the *Yāmālā.s.takatantra*, a text previously thought to be fictitious. In his lecture, Masato Fujii spoke about several unknown manuscripts of the Jaiminiya Samaveda tradition in Kerala and Tamil Nadu which have been listed in the preliminary catalogue published together with Asko Parpola. N.V. Ramachandran gave an insight into the new Asian Classics Input Project (ACIP) focussing on Sanskrit manuscripts and the extensive labour of cataloguing and digitising exemplars from libraries and private collections in South India. In this regard, there remain questions about central cataloguing and about standardised cataloguing guidelines, as well as important issues regarding copyright as it applies to the digitisation of manuscripts. Gérard Colas's paper "South Indian manuscripts sent to the King's Library by French Jesuits at the beginning of 18th century," dealt with the establishment of some of the earliest collections of Sanskrit manuscripts outside India.

The workshop demonstrated that there is a particular aspect of Indian manuscriptology which might be sociological manuscriptology. Manuscripts are not

only vehicles of the transmission of texts from the past but also elements of India's everyday cultural life. Maps of manuscript holdings can be translated into intellectual maps, as Kenneth Zysk pointed out in his lecture. Manuscripts have often been stored by collectors, but the relationship between owner and manuscript may also tell us something about its history, as, for example, in the case of the manuscripts from a chest of S.R. Sharma's grandfather. There is a strong association between the pedigree of manuscripts and the family-based religious traditions in South India such as those of the Nambudiris or of the academic community still prevailing in the village of Tiruvishainallur in the Kaveri Delta as described by Dominik Wujastyk in his lecture. The workshop ended with a discussion of the necessity and potential of Indian manuscriptology and its importance for the study of Indian texts and of the social and cultural history of India. A publication on the basis of the papers of this workshop is planned. ■

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