

# Three Sanskrit Collections at the Danish Royal Library

The very notion of a library is one that is changing. With an increasingly rapid speed, the technological means in our electronic age are decisively influencing this change. At the level of interface between libraries and their users, it is a change which concerns particularly the means of access to a given library's collections, as well as the diversity of materials accessible at a modern library.

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LIBRARIES ARE INTERCONNECTED within regional, national and global electronic networks. The specific geographical location of any given library thus decreases in significance for the ordinary user. Given the virtual possibility of almost unlimited access to information, another aspect is the matter of restriction, of finding a balance between preventing misuse and retaining individual freedom, thus of an optimally qualified control of the access to information. Given that, seen in a global historico-cultural perspective, the power relations between political control and intellectual freedom have more often than not been extremely precarious, and academics feel naturally stimulated to hermeneutically reflect the aporia "blessing and/or curse" when looking into the future.

But libraries, not least the Royal and National Libraries in Europe, as well as older university libraries, frequently have interesting histories. That is, histories in terms of the constitution and organic growth of their individual collections. The Danish Royal Library (Det Kongelige Bibliotek) is no exception in that respect. The initial acquisitions of various parts of its Asian collections are associated with the more or less adventurous lives of pioneer researchers. To focus in the following on some of this library's Sanskrit collections, the names of two remarkable scholars immediately come to mind: Rasmus Rask (1787-1832) and Nathaniel Wallich (1785-1854), both of whom brought Sanskrit manuscripts to Denmark in the early years of the nineteenth century.

### Rasmus Rask and Nathaniel Wallich

A linguistic genius and one of the founders of comparative linguistics, Rasmus Rask was driven by his pioneer research interests when in 1816 he left Copenhagen to undertake a long journey, travelling via Sweden, Finland, Russia and Persia to India and Ceylon (Sri Lanka). Though troubled both physically and psychologically by the occasionally rather uncomfortable travel conditions in those days, surviving a shipwreck, penury problems as well as mental breakdowns, he almost constantly engaged in studying new languages and in collecting manuscripts before he finally returned to Denmark in 1823. Covering various literary and religious genres (including epics, narrative literature, poetry, eulogies and much more), most of the Sanskrit manuscripts collected by Rask are written in either Bengali, Telugu or Sinhalese script.

Quite another story is that of the collection reaching The Danish Royal Library due to the efforts of the surgeon and botanist Nathaniel Wallich, who (with interruptions) spent several decades of his life in India. Wallich arrived at Serampore (at that time a Danish outpost called Frederiksnagore) in 1807, but in the course of events he joined the British East India Company's service. In 1814, he founded the Oriental Museum of the Asiatic Society, which is the oldest museum on the subcontinent and subsequently changed its name to The Indian

Museum. As a botanist, Wallich permanently took charge of the Botanical Garden of Calcutta in 1817 and developed it until his retirement in 1846. Besides his multiple tasks at the Botanical Garden itself, he undertook numerous botanical expeditions, collecting specimens and partly cataloguing them in valuable publications, his *Tentamen Flora Nepalensis Illustratae* (1824-26) and *Plantae Asiaticae Rariores* (1830-32) being the most important ones.

Given Wallich's education in medical sciences and his residential position in Calcutta, it is not surprising that this background had some influence on the Sanskrit material he was interested in – the genre of Āyurveda, the traditional Indian medical science, being a prominent field, but also, for instance, traditional Indian law, grammar and lexicography may be mentioned – and on the manner in which he made it available, first to himself and subsequently to the library. Just as he employed Indian artists for drawing and painting the plant specimens he had collected, he was able to get a number of texts copied by Indian scribes in Bengali script on locally produced paper cut in the format of large notebooks and subsequently leather-bound in European style.

### The Nepal Collection

Larger than both the previous ones, and altogether different in character from these, is the library's so-called Nepal Collection, a collection acquired in Nepal by the cultural anthropologist Werner Jacobsen (1914-1979). Jacobsen frequently travelled in various parts of Asia, both as a member of official Danish expeditions and privately. He spent the years 1957-59 in Nepal from where he returned with a large collection of archaeological, ethnographic, photographic and other materials, including a collection of Sanskrit texts.

Subsequently the leader of an ethnographic department at the National Museum of Denmark, Jacobsen's interest was not that of a specialist in either Nepali, indological or buddhological literature. Rather, the somewhat haphazard nature of the Nepal Collection of literary documents may perhaps be taken as likewise revealing the focus of a curator of an ethnographic museum, a curator with an eye for somewhat curious objects which, in the course of time, might prove suitable for being attractively exhibited. Fragments of a delicate and carefully calligraphed manuscript of a Prajñāpāramitā text from the 11th century sit side by side with a sort of local magician's handbook, written (though hardly displaying any knowledge of orthography and grammar) in a gross script on thick paper, with the remains of ritual substances (such as feathers and animal hairs, once ingredients employed in magical rites) still sticking to the outermost sheet.

Among the texts collected by Jacobsen we find rare and precious codices of interest mainly to philologists, there are Buddhist and Hindu texts, Sūtras, Tantras and Dhāraṇīs, texts related to various branches of traditional science as well as mythological materials, but also



Above: The Danish Royal Library, Copenhagen.

Left: Subtle body of a Yoga-puruṣa, the symbolic representation of an ideal Yogi, including the representation of subhuman states at the bottom and of transhuman states at the top.

Below: Illuminated folio 1 of an Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā text produced at Nālanda, North India, at the end of the 11th century.



a good number of quite ordinary *stotras* and ritual texts awaiting the focus of more anthropologically inspired forms of research. Further, there is a comparatively large quantity of valuable materials illuminated by drawings and miniature paintings that will find greater appreciation if properly elaborated by historians of art and iconography.

### The essential value of collections

A fairly extensive analysis and description of these three of the Danish Royal Library's Sanskrit collections may now be found in the recently published *Catalogue of Sanskrit Manuscripts: Early Acquisitions and the Nepal Collection* (Copenhagen, 2010), which forms volume 7.1 of the *Catalogue of Oriental Manuscripts, Xylographs etc. in Danish Collections* (COMDC). The catalogue is illustrated with 78 photographic reproductions to supplement the textual information with rather splendid visual impressions, some of which are reproduced on this page.

Given that diversity and alterity, multidimensionality and open-ended profoundness are conceived as constituting aspects of the essence of humanity, to the extent that library collections are made accessible to stimulate the responsible funding of critical research they act as important witnesses against culturally biased and uninformed agendas (un)consciously ready, it seems, to eliminate this humanity on a global scale by mechanically promoting and controlling increasingly narrow versions of human functioning within predefined standards – conceptual prisons, even – of absolutized normativity.

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