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Indian Copper-Plate Grants: Inscriptions or Documents?

Under king Bhoja double is the lack:
Iron, because of the fetters enchaining his enemies,
Copper, because of the plates bearing his orders.

Ballāla's *Bhojaprabandha*, verse 156

Abstract: Indian copper-plate grants, initially issued by ruling kings from the third century CE onwards and increasingly by private individuals as time passed, are very specific documents, as they are kept by the grant beneficiaries as title-deeds. They are usually treated as inscriptions due to them being made of such hard material. However if the main character of an inscription is its being publicly displayed, copper-plate grants are not inscriptions, as they were often found buried for safety's sake. Based on South Indian materials, it is argued here that Indian copper-plate grants are neither inscriptions (i.e. publicly displayed writings on temple walls, steles, rocks, etc.) nor documents or archival records (i.e. private or state records on palm leaf), but are situated at the 'hinge' between these two categories, as revealed by their format, content and purpose.

Among the many issues raised by the nature of archival records, I will address here only a selection. How, by whom and for which purposes are administrative, legal, archival records produced? Is there any observable difference between archives, inscriptions and literary manuscripts concerning materials, formats, and producers? Where are archives stored? Are there other objects stored together with the records? Which practices are involved inside the archive, how and by whom are they used?

I will deal with these issues by focussing on Indian copper-plate grants, in particular South Indian examples of the first millennium CE and the beginning of the second, which show that the copper-plate grants' content and format are similar to that of palm-leaf account books. Still, Indian copper-plate grants are traditionally treated as inscriptions because of the durability of the material. But are they? And if not, what are they? Documents? My argument is that copper-plate grants, i.e. charters of donation inscribed on copper so as to serve as permanent title-deeds, are a peculiar type of documents to be situated at the intersection between inscriptions and archives for several reasons, which, I hope, will be clear at the end of this essay.

1 Copper-plate grants

In his *Bhojaprabandha*, Ballāla (sixteenth century) narrates the imaginary meeting of the famous king Bhoja (first half of the eleventh century) with a brahmin. Bhoja wonders why this brahmin carries water in a leather gourd (*kamaṇḍalu*), since the skin of a dead animal is particularly impure. The reason, says the brahmin, is scarcity of iron and copper, the usual material in which water-pots are made. When Bhoja asks him the reason for this scarcity, he replies:

*asya śrībhojarājasya dvayam eva sudurlabham |
śatrūṇāṃ śṛṅghalair lohaṃ tāmraṃ śāsanapatrakaiḥ ||*

(Under the rule) of this king Bhoja two things are very rare: iron because of the fetters (enchaining) his enemies, copper because of the plates (bearing) his orders.¹

In a copper-plate inscription of the king Karṇa (mid-eleventh century), we find another telling verse, pointed out to me by Dominic Goodall:

*kiṃ tasya karṇaṇṇpater bata varṇayāmo yasya dvijātijanaśāsanatāmrapaṭṭaiḥ |
utkīryamāṇanibīḍākṣaracakravālāvācālīṭair badhirabhāvam iyāya viśvam ||*

What can we describe of that king Karṇa by whose copper-plates, (given) to Brāhmaṇas,—which made a loud noise as multitudes of closely packed letters were being incised on them,—the (whole) universe is deafened.²

Both these verses praise a king for what he is expected to be: a great donor. King Bhoja is so liberal that copper (*tāmra*) cannot be found anymore in his realm, because it is required to engrave the many plates bearing his grant orders (*śāsanapatraka*). So is king Karṇa—by the way a fitting name for a donor since the epic character Karṇa is a paragon of the liberal donor (Vielle 2011, 370, n. 13)—as the world resonates with the noise made when beating and engraving the copper plates recording his grant orders (*śāsanatāmra-paṭṭa*).³ Both these verses also illustrate a

¹ Ballāla's *Bhojaprabandha*, verse 156, 107–8. This is quoted, as verse 162, by Chhabra 1951, 2, who uses another edition. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine.

² Original text normalised from two versions available, i.e. verse 30 of the Goharwa plates (CII 4, p. 258, with variant *-vacālīṭair*) appearing also as verse 32 of the Rewa stone inscription (CII 4, p. 271). Translation by Mirashi (CII 4, p. 262).

³ This means that Karṇa issues many grants and/or that each grant contains long lists of gifts and recipients.



Fig. 1: Pātagaṇḍigūḍem plates, verso of plate 1, undivided Andhra Pradesh, South India, third century. Telangana State Museum, Hyderabad. Approximately 22,5 × 7 cm. Photo: Arlo Griffiths.

very common practice in ancient India: the engraving of royal grant orders on copper plates, which are given to the recipients as title-deeds. Such copper-plate grants have been produced in India by the hundreds, as evinced by the extant specimens, and probably by the thousands, from the third century CE onwards.⁴ The two volumes of *Dynastic List of Copper Plate Inscriptions Noticed in Annual Reports on Indian Epigraphy* published by the Archaeological Survey of India comprise respectively 1637 and 413 items, i.e. a little more than 2,000, a total which however includes records, other than grants, also inscribed on copper plates.⁵

As Fleet (1907, 27) already put it, the ‘usual copper record (...) was a donative charter, in fact a title-deed, and passed, as soon as it was issued, into private personal custody’. Almost one century later, Salomon (1998, 114) states that the ‘earliest specimens of copper plate charters come from southern India, issued by the early Pallava and Śālaṅkāyana dynasties and datable, according to Sircar (SIE 107) [i.e. Sircar 1965, 107], to about the middle of the fourth century A.D’. Recently, a late third-century example surfaced, the Pātagaṇḍigūḍem copper-plate grant (Fig. 1) of the Ikṣvāku king Ehavala Cāntamūla (see Falk 2000), which helps us to push back in time the practice in South India to an earlier dynasty. Salomon (1998, 114) adds that probably ‘the oldest extant copper plate grant from northern India is the Kalāchalā grant of Īśvararāta, in Sanskrit, dated on palaeographic grounds by Sircar (EI 33, 303–6) to the later part of the fourth century A.D’. Probably older than the Kalāchalā grant are plates of the Bagh hoard (Ramesh/Tewari 1990), if they are

⁴ For general introductions on Indian copper-plate grants, see Fleet 1907, 27–34; Chhabra 1951; Sircar 1965, 74–77 and 103–160; Gaur 1975; Salomon 1998, 113–118.

⁵ See Gai 1986, and Padmanabha Sastry 2008. For regional corpora of copper plates edited, see the list in Sohoni 2016, 87 n. 1, to which many might be added.

indeed internally dated, as usually thought, to the Gupta era, which means that many among these would date to the second half of the fourth century. Salomon (*ibid.*) adds that there ‘is clear evidence, however, that the origins of the copper plate charters or their prototypes go back farther than the fourth century, for some of the donative cave inscriptions of the Western Kṣatrapa and Śātavāhana kings from Nāsik, datable to the first or second century, are evidently copies on stone of original documents written on portable materials, possibly copper (SIE 108) [i.e. Sircar 1965, 108]’. He further mentions (1998, 114) that the ‘tradition of recording land grants on copper plates continued throughout the medieval era and even into the European period’.⁶

The plates were prepared by braziers using hammers, while according to Gaur (1975, ix), some ‘scholars believe that the letters may have been scratched into the surface of the plate with a sharp instrument (as a stylus is used on the palmyra leaf) while the plates were covered with a layer of mud’. We know of writings on stone and copper where, as a preliminary step, the text was written down with ink or paint. Salomon (1998, 65) provides examples ‘wherein the ink or paint is still visible in the inscription ... or where the final step of carving the inscription was never carried out’.⁷ It seems possible that other plates have been cast through the lost-wax technique or engraved when heated. According to Natarajan and Kasinathan (1992, 70), in the earlier period, the technique seemingly was ‘cutting with chisel,’ whereas in the later period, the writing was made on the plate ‘in molten condition’.

1.1 Other Indian metal inscriptions

In fact, what Sircar (1965, 107) calls ‘copper-plate charters of the usual type’, which are the focus of the present contribution, are not the earliest Indian examples of writings on metal. However, these earlier examples of such writings are not grants or title-deeds.⁸

In the first centuries CE dedications were engraved on tablets in copper, such as the Kalawān plate (EI 21, no. 39), which Salomon (1998, 269–270) dates to 77 CE,

⁶ See the examples in Salomon’s note. For copper-plates issued by colonial authorities, see DLCPI, vol. 2, no. 413, about the erection of Dupleix’s statue in Pondicherry in 1870 under Napoléon III, or ‘British 1’ in Ayyangar 2000 [1918], 1 about a settlement on water distribution from a river’s channels.

⁷ Salomon/Chhabra 1951, 5 mention, for instance, the Kasia copper plate (ASIAR 1910–11, 73–77).

⁸ I found most of the examples of early Indian inscriptions on metal mentioned here in Sircar 1965, 74ff. and Salomon 1998, 129ff.

or the Sui Vihār plate (CII 2.1, no. 74, pp. 138–141) dated to the year eleven of Kaniṣka, i.e. 138 CE according to the most recent dating of the accession of the Kuṣāṇa king. The Sohgaūrā bronze plaque, believed to be of the Maurya (third century BCE) or post-Maurya period, records regulations about storehouses.⁹ Dedictory or votive records are found also on gold leaves or scrolls, such as the Taxila gold plate (CII 2.1, no. 31, pp. 83–86) or the Senavarma gold plaque inscription. The latter, dated to the first century CE and found rolled in a buried casket, records the restoration of a *stūpa* damaged by lightning at the order of king Senavarma of Oḍi (Salomon 1986). Also found are silver scrolls—for instance at Taxila (CII 2.1, no. 27, pp. 70–77)—and copper scrolls or plates—such as the dedicatory copper scroll in the Schøyen collection (Melzer 2006).¹⁰ An exceptional example of metal inscription is the famous Meharauli iron pillar inscribed with a praise of king Candrar, who has been identified as Candragupta II (late fourth to early fifth century CE; CII 3¹, 139–142, CII 3², 257–259). Such are examples of writings on supports especially designed and formatted to receive it, although this is debatable concerning the Meharauli pillar, since it is principally a flag-staff for the god Viṣṇu. Other objects in silver, copper, bronze or brass—relic casket, ladle, seal, bell, image, mask, vase, cup, vessel plate, sieve, disk—also receive inscriptions, but are not created in the first place as writing supports.

Many inscribed artefacts just mentioned above belong to Buddhist culture and were in fact buried, that is they were no more meant to be read after burying. This fact points towards a ritual or performative function of these writings: by collocating the name of the donor with his foundation they make him present there in person (Schopen 1996). We find the same function with other writings—on metal, gold or silver foils for instance, but also on stone and clay and even paper—, often buried, which are citation inscriptions, i.e. inscriptions consisting entirely or mostly in citation of scriptures.¹¹ Such written artefacts can, as *dharma*-relics, represent the Buddha and his doctrine (*dharma*). When buried, they make a place a *caitya* (i.e. a sacred spot¹²), function as protective formulae (*dhāraṇīs*, laid in foundation deposits or carried as amulets¹³), and/or generate merit for the one who writes them or has them written.¹⁴ Another type of metal

⁹ See Fleet 1907; SI, pp. 82–83; Ghosh 2007; Sohoni 2016, 88, n. 3.

¹⁰ See also early examples (fragments) from Gandhāra mentioned by Rahman/Falk 2011, 23–24.

¹¹ For examples from Indonesia, see Griffiths 2014.

¹² See Paranavitana 1933, 204–205, on scriptures as *dhamma-dhātu* substituted for bodily relics (*śāririka-dhātu*) in accordance with the *Prajñāpāramitā*; Schopen 1976; 1989; Bentor 1995.

¹³ On *dhāraṇīs*, see Hidas 2015. For examples of printed *dhāraṇīs* found in tomb, see Formigatti 2016, 79, and in *stūpas*, see Scherrer-Schaub 1994.

¹⁴ See Skilling 2005.



Fig. 2: Leaf of gold manuscript of the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitāsūtra*, from Anurādhapura, Sri Lanka, ninth century. Colombo National Museum. Approximately 63 × 6 cm. Photo: Arlo Griffiths.

writings, although later than copper plates, are the lavish manuscripts of scriptures, like, for instance, tin manuscripts from Burma, or, possibly, the ninth-century gold manuscript of the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitāsūtra* from Anurādhapura in Sri Lanka (Fig. 2).¹⁵ As the central visible elements of a cult of the book, such manuscripts, like their lavish palm-leaf counterparts, can be exhibited, displayed and honoured, but are not meant to be read either.¹⁶ We will see that copper-plate grants are sometimes buried too and that they are not meant in the first place to be read except when received by their owners or in case of legal disputes.

1.2 Copper-plate grants as legal documents

The copper-plate grants thus have in common with other earlier metal inscriptions the durability of their support, but differ in content and purpose. They are notably known as *rāja-śāsanas*, ‘royal orders,’ and (*tāmra-*)*śāsanas*, ‘orders (on copper),’ two terms which denote the textual content as well as the material container.¹⁷ These are official documents often recording royal orders, typically grants, i.e. allocation of land revenue and tax exemptions mainly to religious institutions or figures. They are frequently issued by royal chancelleries but also by provincial authorities as, for instance, plates from Bengal and Bihar dated to the fifth and sixth century (Yamazaki 1982).

¹⁵ For such manuscripts, in tin, see Salomon 1998, 130 and Goswamy et al. 2006, 84–85 (a nineteenth-century example). On the Anurādhapura gold manuscript, see von Hinüber 1984.

¹⁶ On the cult of the book, see De Simini 2016.

¹⁷ See Chhabra 1951, 3–4, Sircar 1965, 103ff., Lubin 2015, 244.



As pointed out by several scholars, the so-called law books (*dharmaśāstras*) of classical India mention that the donor-king should send a document to the recipients of grants.¹⁸ The *Viṣṇusmṛti* lays down (3.82):¹⁹

yeṣāṃ ca pratipādayet teṣāṃ svavaṁśyān bhuvah parimāṇaṃ dānacchedopavarṇanaṃ ca paṭe vā tāmrapaṭṭe vā likhitaṃ svamudrāṅkaṃ cāgāminīpativijñānārthaṃ dadyāt ||

To whomever he [the king] donates land, he should also give a deed written on a piece of cloth [*paṭa*] or on a copper plate [*tāmra-paṭṭa*] and marked with his seal intended to inform future kings, a deed that contains the names of his predecessors, the extent of the land, and an imprecation against anyone who would annul the gift.

Several copper-plate inscriptions are internally stated to have been given to the recipient. For instance in early Pallava records (fourth to fifth century) we often find the mention that the plates (*paṭṭikā*) or copper plates (*tāmra-paṭṭikā*) were given (*dattā*), i.e., implicitly, to the grantees.²⁰ In the late eleventh-century smaller Leiden plates (EI 22, no. 35), the king is requested to make a copper order for a grant and agrees to the request, addressing an order to his officers so that they make it and give it to the grantees.²¹ In a fifteenth-century Sri Lankan example, the Oruvala Sannasa (EZ 3, no. 3), an individual requests a copper plate from the king so that a land already granted to him for his service as *purohita* (royal chaplain) be permanently secured for his lineage, as an hereditary grant (see especially pp. 54 and 68).

¹⁸ See, with further references to original sources, notably the *Yājñavalkyasmṛti* and its commentary, the *Mitākṣarā*, Kane 1941, 860, Sircar 1965, 104ff. As for guidelines for the redaction of such documents, see the *Arthaśāstra* 2.10 (topic 28: topic of decrees) or the *Lekhapaddhati*. About the diplomatic of copper-plate grants, see Chhabra 1951, Sircar 1965, 126ff.; 1974, 52ff.

¹⁹ Text and translation by Olivelle; my additions between square brackets.

²⁰ See IR 2, plate 8r1 = line 27; IR 5, plate 4r1 = line 19; IR 7, plate 5r5 = line 34; IR 8, plate 5v4 = line 36; IR 10, plate 5r4 = line 32; IR 11, plate 3r4 = line 19.

²¹ See plate 1v10–13: *tāmraśāsaṇaṃ paṇṇit tara vēṇṭum eṇru ... tāmraśāsaṇaṃ paṇṇik kuṭukkav eṇru ... tirumukam*.

Copper-plate grants are thus legal documents, granting permanent rights, as long as the sun and the moon, as encapsulated in a recurrent formula. ‘Donative decrees and settlements doubled as deed or title to property rights and privileges and there are a number of instances in which the record refers to its own capacity to forestall or resolve future disputes over such rights’ (Lubin 2015, 227). ‘In certain cases such documents have been adjudged to be still legally valid in modern times’ (Salomon 1998, 115, with reference to Kane 1941, 865). Besides grants, there were other types of *śāsanas*, not engraved on copper but on stone, or not recording grants, as for instance sale-deeds (*kṛaya-śāsanas*), i.e. record of private transactions, or records of revenue-paying grant (*kara-śāsanas*), as described by Kane (1946, 309ff.) and Sircar (1965, 109ff.; 1974, 66ff.). The Bengal and Bihar plates of the fifth and sixth century studied by Yamazaki (1982) are, for instance, sale-deeds of land converted into grants.

As legal documents, copper-plate grants are distinct from other early metal inscriptions, which are dedicatory, votive or performative. Copper-plate grants may however have a performative function at an initial stage, when they are remitted to the grant’s recipients and in a certain way act to implement the grant. In the course of time other types of copper plates appeared, not issued by the royal chancellery and not granting land. But it is a fact that many of the earlier copper-plate grants are royal, such as those of the Pallava dynasty (fourth to ninth century; see Francis 2013, 69), and that this medium has been in use for long to convey royal orders of donation, to which will be added, at a further stage, eulogies of the donor-king and his lineage. The text and the artefact as official documents are authenticated by the royal seal that comes with them.²²

The legal value of copper plates, as title-deeds, sale-deeds or assessment of revenue has several practical implications and consequences. *Firstly*, as the gift is theoretically perpetual, a durable document is expected, whence the choice of copper, as opposed to other supports such as palm leaf, fast-decaying under the Indian climate.²³ ‘The durability of the written document is paramount. Records often close with a formula invoking their validity in perpetuity, “as long as the moon and sun endure,” and warning future rulers not to violate their terms’ (Lubin 2015, 227). *Secondly*, such documents are subject to tampering and forgeries surely were made, a subject dealt with in detail by Salomon (1998, 118, 165ff.; 2009). *Thirdly*, it happened often that copper-plates were buried for safekeeping. The Tiruvālaṅkāṭu (SII 3, no. 205) and the Ecālam Cōḷa-period plates (first half of the eleventh century), recording *devadāna* (gift to a god), ‘were found within ...

²² On seals, see Fleet 1907, 29ff., Chhabra 1962, Sircar 1965, 150ff.

²³ See Salomon 1998, 4, n. 8, Willis 2009, 125ff.

temples and along with bronze images' and obviously 'both were buried in troubled times to safeguard the bronzes and charters' (Nagaswamy 1987, 9).²⁴ I must simply repeat here Salomon's statement (1998, 115):

Since the use of copper instead of ordinary perishable writing materials reflects a desire to establish the document as a permanent record, in effect a deed to the granted lands, it is not surprising that copper plates are most often found underground where they had been buried for safekeeping by the grantees or their descendants according to the traditional Indian practice. Such finds are usually made accidentally by villagers in the course of plowing their fields or digging a foundation for a house.²⁵

Sohoni (2016, 92) also remarks that copper-plates 'were often buried in small earthen or metal sealed vessels, a mode of physical protection and social convention that paper documents could not enjoy'. In actual fact, one wonders if burying was the usual way of storing or safekeeping plates or just the practice in troubled political times (as seems the case when copper-plates and bronze images were stored together). It also happens that a religious institution, such as a temple or a 'monastery' (*maṭha*), accumulates grants. In such a case, the collection of plates could be kept in a store-room. Gopinatha Rao (1986 [1917], 1), who edited the collection of copper plates of the Śrīśaṅkarācārya *maṭha* at Kāñcīpuram, states that he accessed the plates 'preserved in the treasury of the maṭha.'

2 Manuscripts, inscriptions, and documents

To have a better idea of the place of copper-plate grants among Indian writings, we must now briefly categorize modes and supports of textuality in ancient India. There are mainly three types of ancient Indian written texts.

Manuscripts — Manuscripts are usually written on perishable material such as palm leaf, birch-bark and, later, paper. They bear for the most texts that in the west would be considered as scriptures, literature and treatises. These can be long texts and only perishable support makes the writing down, transportation and diffusion convenient. Some manuscripts are however not meant to circulate when belonging to libraries. Manuscripts are also commodities as there was

²⁴ According to Nagaswamy 1987, 2, 'two main periods of invasion seem to have caused these waves of fear and consequent burial[:] (1) [t]he Muslim invasion [i.e. the establishment of the Maturai sultanate in Tamil Nadu] in the 14th century [and] (2) [t]he Portuguese invasion [in the 16th century].'

²⁵ See also Sircar 1965, 97ff. and plates XXIV–V.

script-mercantilism in precolonial India as argued by Pollock (2007, 87ff.), but maybe not as developed as he contends (see Formigatti 2016, 111ff.). Manuscripts are thus the books of a pre-print culture. They were in use in India from at least the beginning of the Common Era.

Inscriptions — Writings upon a durable support (stone, metal) are commonly treated as inscriptions in Indian scholarship. These, especially stone writings, usually do not travel but are meant to be inscribed on a specific spot and remain there: decrees, dedications, donations on temple-walls, commemoration of deceased warriors. This means that a text can be found inscribed in different places, all equally concerned by its content. Epigraphy in India is known from at least the third century BCE with the first coherent corpus of inscriptions (the royal proclamations or edicts of Aśoka). According to the late Silvio Panciera (2012, 9) the specificity of an inscription ‘consists in the decision to effect a communication that is not directed at a single person or a group but to an entire community and that therefore necessitates the abandonment of the tools or media (or both) that a given culture employs for writing that is literary or documentary or in every day use and substitutes for them others more suitable to its purpose’. As such, an inscription is meant to be (more or less) public, as for instance, on a temple-wall, a stele, and a planted stone.²⁶ It is exposed to some eyes, which however might not be able to read and understand the text.

Archives — As for archives, if these are ‘collections of administrative, legal, commercial and other records or the space where they are located’,²⁷ we have equivalents in ancient India in the royal offices of the records where registers of grants (implying a tax remittance) were kept. From Bengal, we have knowledge of boards of record-keepers (EI 20, p. 64), while the Cōḷa state apparatus included a land revenue department (Heitzman 1997, 156ff.). The *Arthaśāstra* 2.7, as noted by Cox (2010, 10 and n. 13), mentions the *akṣa-paṭala* (‘office of the records’). There are various terms in Tamil, attested epigraphically or not, that reveal the existence of registers and revenue offices, such as *vari-p-pottakam* (‘tax register; an ancient office’), *oluku* (‘land record containing particulars of the ownership, etc., of lands; register of a temple giving an account of its properties, and its history’), *vāra-t-tiṭṭam* (‘a register kept by the village accountant of the respective shares of the produce assignable to the cultivators and proprietors’).²⁸

²⁶ See also Petrucci’s concept of ‘scrittura esposte’ (1985).

²⁷ See outline of the November 2014 CSMC conference, here p. IX.

²⁸ These are the translations from the *Madras Tamil Lexicon*. See also Subbarayalu 2003, 130 and 539.

Documents and archival records are originally kept apart, for the use of their owners: for instance, administrative registers or personal ‘correspondence’, which are valued and will be or might be useful in the future, for oneself or for others. As for ancient Indian documents, we can say, as far as South India is concerned, that they were written down on palm leaf, from the sixth to the nineteenth century in present-day Tamil Nadu. Even if paper was known, it is believed that, in South India, it was too expensive to be an alternative to the abundant and cheaper palm leaf.

Grants — Copper-plate grants, as legal documents, have evidentiary value, are normally transportable and not meant to be exposed in public. Furthermore they are continuous with paper or palm-leaf records, their administrative equivalents, of which they are permanent surrogates meant for the grantees.

In the course of time, copper plates were replaced by paper documents. In the Deccan, from ‘the thirteenth century onwards, copper-plate grants were increasingly replaced by *farmāns* (royal edicts) on paper, signed and stamped by court officials’ (Sohoni 2016, 89). But copper plates could surface again. Sohoni (2016, 91–92) further notices that at the local level, some of the paper documents were copied on copper, because such ‘extra-official copperplate grants had a greater social value than paper *farmāns* for at least two reasons. First, the aura of the format, which suggested an antiquarian (and therefore old and well-established) basis for any claim of land tenure or revenue rights; and second, the pragmatism of using metal documents in a region where nature conspires with humans towards the loss of paper was well appreciated’. Moreover, as pointed out by Lubin (2015, 228), quoting Subbarayalu (1991, xiii), ‘even palm-leaf legal documents produced in the mid-nineteenth century “are written in a documentary language which has been in vogue since medieval times”; indeed, “they resemble very closely medieval inscriptions in style, format and contents and so they indirectly help in a better understanding of the inscriptions”’.²⁹ The Islamic-Persian practices and the relatively high cost of copper plates certainly made paper and palm leaf cheaper alternatives. We also know instances where an original grant written on palm leaf (*tāla-patra-śāsana*) was burnt in a house fire and was replaced by a newly issued copper-plate grant.³⁰

²⁹ See Lubin’s note (2015, 228, n. 11) about Subbarayalu’s publication, not available to me, which concerns ‘a collection from one family in the Tiruchirapalli District,’ the records of which consist ‘of inscribed palm leaves bearing the legal fee stamps typical of the colonial legal system’ which ‘do indeed often mimic the structure and idioms of the inscriptions’. Two seventeenth-century examples are discussed by Nagaswamy 1978, 90ff. and 106ff.

³⁰ See Salomon (1998, 166; 2009, 111), about the Kurud plates (c.500; EI 31, nos 35–36).

The following table summarises the main characteristics of the different types of ancient Indian written texts, including grants.

	Inscriptions	Manuscripts	Documents	Grants
Support	stone metal	palm leaf paper	palm leaf paper	stone copper palm leaf paper
Place	usually non (trans)portable	portable	portable	(trans)portable
Content	statement, event, decree	knowledge, litera- ture	accounting	title-deed
Purpose	public information	transmission, pub- lication	administration	claiming rights

I hasten to add that there are exceptions to such a neat compartmentalisa-
tion—for instance: sections of inscriptions or copper-plate grants are pieces of
poetry and as such literature; inscribed images and utensils are (trans)porta-
ble—but one sees that the only type of document that could be written down on
the four different supports is the grant.

2.1 Format of copper plates

The format of the copper plates varies with time and place. Two main types might
be distinguished in the Indian subcontinent. In South India, copper plates were
long designed in the landscape format and since, most of the time, the record
spread on several plates, these were joined by a ring passing through a hole made
in each of the plates and soldered with a seal (Figs 3–4; fourth and fifth century;
IR 3 and 16). In North India we often meet copper-plate inscriptions consisting in
only one plate, also in landscape format, with a seal attached for authentication,
like the plate issued by Pradyumnabandhu (Fig. 5; c.550–650; see Griffiths 2015,
27ff.). The portrait format is however known, like for the Nālandā plate of Devap-
āladeva (Fig. 6; ninth century; EI 17, no. 17). We also find, with the Paramāra dyn-
asty for instance (eleventh to thirteenth century; CII 7), the landscape format, but
with a height almost as long as its breadth, and two holes for the ring in case of
multiple-plate sets. The portrait format is found in South India for later copper
plates consisting in one plate and probably emulating the paper *farmān* format,
from the period of Vijayanagara onwards, as, for instance, with the copper-plate

grants of Tirumalai Nāyaka (seventeenth century; Kācinātaṇ et al. 1994) or of the Toṇṭaimāṇ kings of Pudukkottai (Fig. 7; early nineteenth century; see Rājāmuk-amatu/Kōvintarāj 2009, 118ff.). As Salomon aptly summarises (1998, 114):

The writing usually goes along the longer direction of the plates, though inscriptions written across the shorter dimension are not uncommon, especially in Eastern India and in the plates of the Vijayanagara kings in southern India. Charters on multiple plates are joined together with a ring (occasionally two rings, one at each end) of copper or bronze which is inserted through holes in the plates. The ends of the ring are soldered together onto a seal, usually of bronze, which is intended to certify the authenticity of the document and to prevent tampering by the addition or removal of plates. The number of plates varies widely; in general, later specimens are larger and longer, and examples with several dozen plates and weighing as much as two hundred pounds total are known.

In South India, we find that the early Pallava copper plates (300–550 CE) are more oblong than the later Pallava (550–900), early Pāṇḍya (late eighth to early tenth century) and Cōḷa ones (tenth to eleventh century). It seems thus that the original format was closer to the format of a palm leaf (Fig. 8). Plates from Sri Lanka, even contemporary with Cōḷa plates, are closer to the palm-leaf format, even having two holes as is often seen in the usual manuscripts.³¹ I will here be dealing in particular with early examples of the oblong format from South India, since they can be considered, due to their format, as durable metal palm leaves. But let us first consider the content correlation between copper-plate and palm-leaf documents.

³¹ See for instance the eleventh-century Panakaduwa plates, illustrated in *A Guide to the National Museum Colombo* (2012, 33).



Fig. 3: Hīrahaḍagaḷḷi plates (IR 3), verso of plate 2, found in Karnataka, South India, middle of fourth century. Chennai Government Museum. Approximately 20,5 × 9,5 cm. Photo: Emmanuel Francis.



Fig. 4: Pikira grant (IR 16), verso of plate 4, undivided Andhra Pradesh, South India, middle of fifth century. Chennai Government Museum. Approximately 18 × 4,5 cm. Photo: Emmanuel Francis.

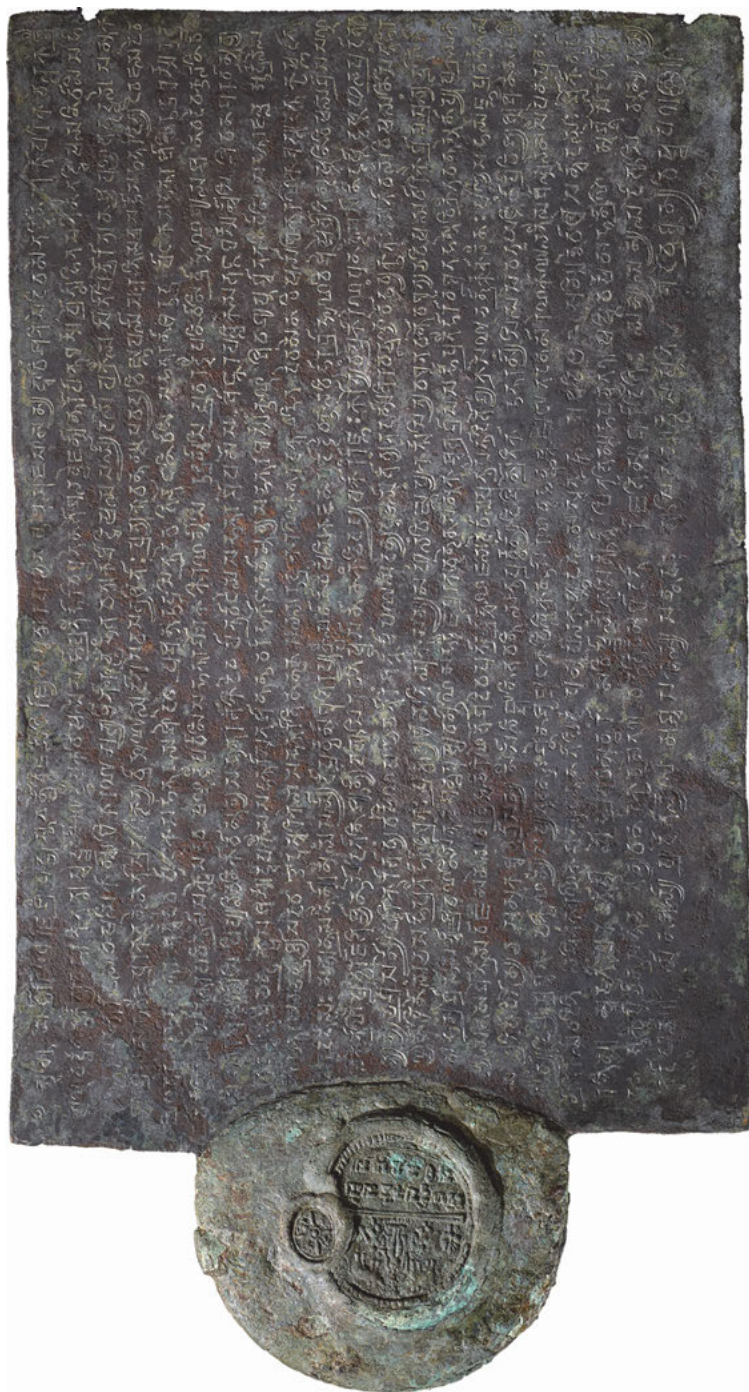


Fig. 5: Pradyumnabandhu plate, recto, probably from Bangladesh, c.550–650. Private collection. Approximately 37 x 24 cm. Photo: Arlo Griffiths.

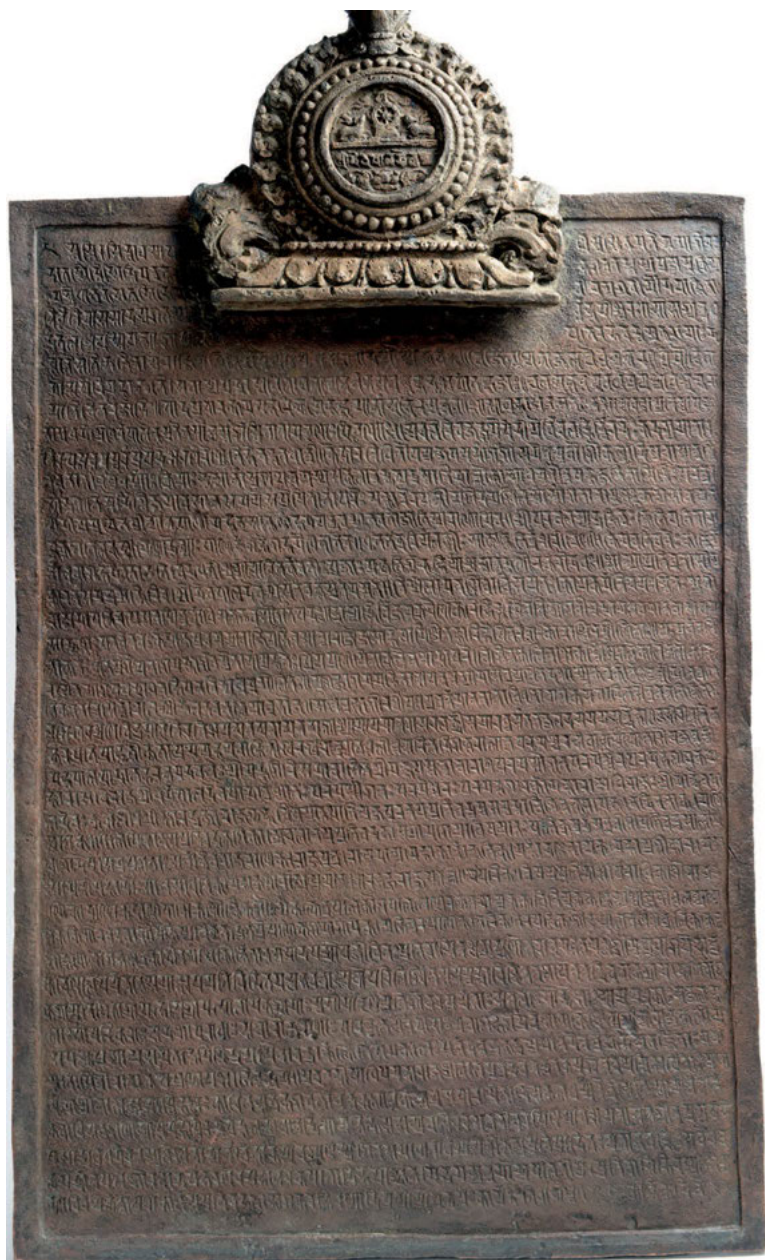


Fig. 6: Nālandā plate of Devapāladeva, recto, Bihar, North India, ninth century. National Museum, New Delhi. Approximately 38 × 42.5 cm for the inscribed surface. Photo: National Museum, New Delhi.



Fig. 7: Tonṭaimān Raghunātha's grant, recto plate, Tamil Nadu, South India, 1803 CE. Pudukkottai Museum (copper plate no. 30). Approximately 27 × 19 cm. Photo: Emmanuel Francis.



Fig. 8: Folios 1v and 2r of a manuscript copy of a mid-nineteenth-century printed edition of the *Tirumurukāṟruppaṭai*, Tamil Nadu, nineteenth or twentieth century. Annamalai University Library (cat. no. 97; Acc. no. 340049 [old] and 860 [new]). Approximately 19 × 3,5 cm. Photo: Emmanuel Francis.

2.2 Copper plates and palm leaves

One of the earliest copper-plate grants from Tamil Nadu—the Paḷḷaṇ Kōyil plates (mid-sixth century or possibly a later copy of a mid-sixth century original; Subramaniam 1959)—provides interesting details about the procedure for the execution of royal grants. It tells us (lines 27–36):

kōvicaiyasiṃhavarmmaṛku yāṇṭ’ āṟāvatu veṅkuṇrakkōṭṭatup perunakaranāṭṭu nāṭṭār kāṇka taṇ nāṭṭu amaṇcērkakai paruttikkunṟil vajranandikkuravarkkup paḷḷiccantamākak koṭuttōn tāṇkaḷum paṭākai naṭantu kalluṇ kaḷḷiyun nāṭṭi araiyōlai ceytu koṭuttu viṭutakav enṟu nāṭṭārkut tirumukam viṭa nāṭṭārun tirumukaṇ kaṇṭu toḷutu talaikku vaittu paṭākai naṭantu kalluṇ kaḷḷiyu nāṭṭi nāṭṭār viṭunta araiyōlaip paṭikk’ ellai ...

In the sixth year of the victorious king Siṃhavarman, let the *nāṭṭārs* (district officials) of Perunakaram in Veṅkuṇrakkōṭṭam know (literally: see) (the following order). We have given as *paḷḷiccantam* (a specific name for a Jaina establishment) to the Guru Vajranandin in Paruttikkunṟu (the village of) Amaṇcērkakai in their *nāṭu* (district, as a subdivision of the kingdom). After the glorious order was sent to the *nāṭṭārs*, specifying that they, themselves, walking the *paṭākai* (the plot of land granted), planting stones and bushes, making a palm-leaf document, should send it, all the *nāṭṭārs*, having seen the glorious order, having worshipped it, having put it on their heads, having walked the *paṭākai*, having planted stones and bushes, the boundaries according to the palm-leaf document sent by the *nāṭṭārs* (are as follows:) ...

Then are precisely described and situated the four boundaries of the land, object of the grant. This is followed by details of the conditions of the grant, by the description of the four boundaries of another land, also object of the grant, and finally the notification of grant and the mention of the officer responsible for the execution of the order. Note the very official language of the text. It describes the procedure of execution of the royal order in the locality in the presence of district officials and of a royal official.³² Note also the term *ōlai* ('palm leaf'), which occurs twice. It denotes a written document, containing the detailed boundaries of the granted land, that the *nāṭṭārs* (district officials) are enjoined to make and send. As for the royal order (*tirumukam*³³), to which due honour is given as if it was the king in person, it is not explicit in which form it reached the locality.

Later inscriptions seem to confirm that the royal order is first sent as a palm-leaf document for execution. The copper-plate grant is created only after the particulars of the land, recorded on a palm-leaf document, reached the revenue department. Several copper-plate grants issued under the Cōḷas in the eleventh century similarly show a long process from the initial order of the king to the reception of the copper-plate grant. For instance, in the Sanskrit/Tamil bilingual Tiruvālaṅkāṭu plates (1018 CE;³⁴ SII 3, no. 205), three dates in the reign of the issuing king Rājendracōḷa I are mentioned in the Tamil section (SII 3, p. 392):

6th regnal year, 88th day (line 6). — The king orally issued in his palace an order that the village of Paḷaiyaṇūr changes status. It will no more be a *brahmadeya* (a land enjoyed by brahmins), but from now becomes, as explicated further in the plates, a *devadāna* (a land enjoyed by a god). Several officials, concerned with the recording of the order into the account books, are then mentioned by name. In the Sanskrit portion (stanza 125), the regnal year 6th is mentioned as the date when the king ordered the said village to be granted to the god Śiva (SII 3, p. 425).

6th regnal year, 90th day, i.e. two days later (line 62). — The order was redacted and entered into account books. Again a long list of officials concerned, some already mentioned, are listed.

32 The same procedure is described, in sometimes exactly the same words, in other later Pallava plates.

33 Literally 'the glorious face' or 'mouth,' as a reference to the order being originally uttered by the king's mouth.

34 This date of 1018 CE corresponds to the sixth regnal year of the king, when he issued his order. This is not however the date of issue of the plates. The Sanskrit eulogy of the grant was written at least ten years later (according to SII 3, p. 384) since it records events in the career of the king that took place later in his reign.

7th regnal year, 155th day, i.e. one year and 65 days later (line 517). — The order, after having reached the *nāṭṭārs* and having been executed in the locality (lines 118–484, with the description of it being honoured and executed in terms similar to that found in the earlier Pallava plates), is entered into the registers. According to SII 3, p. 392, the registers concerned are those of the village, not of the central royal administration, because the officials mentioned here in a long list are different from the above-mentioned.

It is not crystal clear what amount of detail was entered into the account books in the 90th day of the 6th regnal year, nor whether the account books concerned by the operation of the 155th day of the 7th regnal year were the same royal (and central) account books or village account books. In both cases, the Tamil phrase for entering the grant into the (palm-leaf) account books is *vari-y-il iṭu-tal*, literally ‘having put in the tax’.³⁵ It is possible that such account books were kept both at the central revenue office and at a district office, as the *nāṭṭārs* could have in fact been responsible for the distribution of land income and allocation of granted land revenue in their *nāṭus* (Stein 1980, 131). Note also that the plates mention official titles and phrases that include the term *ōlai*, ‘palm leaf,’ such as *ōlai-nāyakan* or *ōlai eḷutum*.³⁶ The Ecālam and other Cōḷa plates show, with the same vocabulary and formulae, the same interaction between the royal and the local.

Commenting on these Tiruvālaṅkāṭu plates, Daud Ali (2000, 173–174) appropriately recapitulates:

It should be clear that the inscription ... records its own complicated story, from its inception as a request to the king, through its performance and instantiation, and finally to its transcription onto copper. These texts encode an entire political procedure. A donation of land, even if we begin just with the king’s word, was a complex procedure that involved a variety of sociopolitical agents. As the king dictated, the order was transcribed onto palm leaf, scrutinized, and checked for form by a series of officials whose title involved the word ‘palm leaf’ (*ōlai*). It then took on the status of ‘edited’ or ‘refined’ (*tiṭṭu*), a status that enabled the grant to be entered into the permanent record books and/or sent in the form of a communication called an ‘order’ (*tirumukam*) to the relevant local authorities. The royal order, called in Tamil the ‘auspicious face’ or ‘auspicious mouth’ (*tirumukam*) of the king, was received at the locality as if it were the king himself. The ‘men of the district’ honored it by placing the order on their heads and then, mounting it on a female elephant, circumambulated the village to be donated. The plates could only be inscribed after these acts were performed.

³⁵ See *Madras Tamil Lexicon* s.v. *vari*⁵ (‘impost, tax, toll, duty; contribution’) and Subbarayalu 2003, 539, s.v. *variyl iṭṭu*.

³⁶ See also Nagaswamy 1987, 17, 24–25.

The Tiruvālaṅkāṭu plates contain also an additional Tamil section, which comes right after the Sanskrit section on plate 10r–10v. It concerns a further gift made in the 120th day of the 6th regnal year of Rājendracōḷa I, but the script reveals that it has been engraved possibly one century later (SII 3, p. 384). The lines 16–21 read thus:

ippaṭikkū variyilum iṭṭuc cempilum iṭṭu śilālekaiyum paṇṇik koḷlac connōm colla nam ōlai eḷutū uyyakkoṇṭārvaḷanāṭṭu tiruvaḷuntūrnāṭṭu tuḷāruṭaiyān karraḷiyāṇa uttamacōḷattamiḷalaraiya<ṇ> eḷuttu ||—

We (further) ordered that it may thus be entered in the registers, engraved on copper and written on stone. For this statement (of Ours), (this is) the writing (i.e., the signature) of Our Secretary (*ōlai eḷutum*) Karraḷi alias Uttamaśōḷa Tamiḷadaraiyaṇ of Tuḷār, (a village) in Tiruvaḷundūr-nāḍu, (a subdivision) of Uyyakkoṇḍār-vaḷanāḍu.³⁷

We find here mention of three types of documents in which the order (theoretically) should be recorded:

(1) Palm leaf (*ōlai*). — The phrase *vari-y-il-um iṭṭu* literally means, as just mentioned, ‘having put in the tax (register)’ and is generally understood as meaning ‘having entered into the account books’ as *vari*, ‘tax’ is used here, by metonymy, to designate such registers.

(2) Copper (*cempu*). — The phrase *cempil-um iṭṭu*, in which we find again *iṭṭu-tal*, literally means ‘having put in the copper (document)’ and designates the durable document handed to the beneficiary.

(3) Stone (*śilā*). — The phrase *śilā-lekai-y-um paṇṇi* literally means ‘having done the stone-written document’ and refers to the copy exposed to (some) public eyes on the wall of the village temple, for instance.

The above examples, spanning a period of several centuries, show that, in South India, copper, stone and palm leaf were used to record grants. The royal order is first redacted and entered by officials into the palm-leaf account books.³⁸ It seems most probable that first information (or intimation) of a royal order routinely reached the locality also as a palm-leaf document.³⁹ Then the order is executed in the presence of district and royal officials. Local specifications are then

³⁷ Text and translation by Krishna Sastri, SII 3, pp. 402 and 426.

³⁸ See Lubin 2015, 227: ‘An enormous number of inscriptions on stone and copper plates have survived, and these presuppose and sometimes explicitly attest to the use of palm leaves and other perishable materials for the purpose of framing and transmitting such documents.’

³⁹ For an early tenth-century Cōḷa instance of a royal order (dealing with the administration of a brahmin settlement) sent in *ōlai* form at the local level, then executed and recorded on stone, see Lubin 2015, 246ff. For a mid-thirteenth-century example, see Lubin 2013, 439ff.

transmitted to the revenue department. In the Pallava period, these local details were dispatched on palm-leaf documents, as is explicitly stated in the text of the copper plates. Epigraphical sources thus evince that the production of a copper plate—which serve as title-deed for the grantee(s)—occurs only as the final step (possibly not even always taken) of a complex process, which can take several years.

Comparing the format of the early South Indian plates (Figs 1, 3–4) with that of South Indian manuscripts on palm leaf (Fig. 8) we observe that they are quite similar.⁴⁰ That Indian copper-plate grants copy the format and dimensions of documents written on perishable material is not a discovery. Sircar (1965, 121–122) associates the South Indian format to palm leaf, the North Indian format to bark sheets (see also Chhabra 1951, 3). Salomon (1998, 113) agrees that such ‘inscriptions are engraved on one or more plates of copper which vary widely in size but generally reproduce the shape of traditional nonepigraphic writing materials such as palm leaves and bark strips, or sometimes stone stelae’. Ali (2000, 171) goes on step further when stating:

The plates, we should note right away, present themselves to us as a text. In medieval India, texts were usually inscribed on palmyra leaves which were then bound with a string that fit through a hole bored through all the sheaves. The copper plates were bound similarly, indicating, as we shall see, that they themselves were the durable ‘hard copies’ of less permanent documents kept at the palace of the king.

Indian copper-plate grants are thus continuous—in content (grant), format (oblong) and material characteristics (one or two holes to bind the document)—with other records written down on perishable material. Indeed they appear as their enduring versions, although with another purpose: as durable copies of royal orders, they were meant for the recipients as long-lasting proof of ownership. But does the hardness of copper-plate grants make them inscriptions?

2.3 Copper plates and inscriptions

Burton Stein (1980, 131–132) has reflected on the ‘practical and semiotic differences’ between stone and copper-plate inscriptions. According to him, during the Cōla period (tenth to thirteenth century), copper plates ‘record gifts to individual

⁴⁰ No South Indian palm-leaf manuscript as old as these early South Indian plates are extant, but representations on sculpture show that the format has not changed much in the course of time.

priests or teachers—Hindu, Buddhist, or Jaina—or to groups of such persons as recipients; attention is focused upon the receiver or receivers and that which is received, and both are very elaborately described'. By contrast, most 'stone inscriptions differ in that they record the beneficence of a donor or donors to the god of priests of the temple, and the major focus is upon the giver'. Stein had to admit nevertheless that the eulogistic portion in Sanskrit praising the donor and found in copper-plate inscriptions 'would belie this distinction,' as it focuses on the donor whom it praises. For this, Stein offers no real explanation, except that the Sanskrit plates were executed separately. Indeed we have instances, like the Tiruvālaṅkāṭu plates, where it is possible that the Sanskrit plates were added later, but they do not make it a rule and it remains possible that the whole set of copper plates (Sanskrit eulogy *and* Tamil operative section) were executed together, but much later than the recorded date of the initial royal order. Furthermore, there are copper plates recording gifts to temples (*devadāna*) and examples of stone inscriptions which mention the instruction for the engraving of the royal orders on stone and copper. Let us give just a few examples:⁴¹

ippaṭṭikku inṇāḷ mutal cantirātittavaraiyum cella kallilum cempilum veṭṭik koḷḷavum (SII 1, no. 87, lines 57ff.; 1364 CE), 'This (order) shall be engraved on stone and copper, in order that it may last from this day forward, as long as the moon and the sun.'⁴² Note here that the explicit reason for engraving on stone and copper is that the grant is perpetual.

inta ōlaiyē cāṭaṇamākak koṇṭu kallilum cempilum veṭṭik koṇṭu (PI 488, line 7; 1323 CE), '(those to whom the order had been transmitted) having taken this palm leaf itself as the royal order (*cāṭaṇam*, i.e. Sanskrit *śāsana*) and having engraved it on stone and copper'.

Such mentions again illustrate the fact that the same text can be written on different material supports, and in the present case, *pace* Stein, the continuity between stone and copper writings. These mentions come from stone inscriptions which record the royal instruction of double engraving given in the royal order that arrived in a palm-leaf document. Whether the double engraving was done or not is another question. It cannot be ruled out that the copper records were lost, due to the reuse of the raw material. Note also that the duty of issuing the copper plate records is seemingly put on the shoulders of local people, in contradistinction with the *dharmaśāstra*'s statements that the king should issue and give the copper record to the recipient.

⁴¹ See, for several other examples from early medieval Tamil Nadu, PI, vol. 2, p. 353, s.v. '*kallil veṭṭivittu*'.

⁴² Text and translation by Hultzsich, SII 1, p. 123.

3 Document or inscription?

In Indological scholarship copper-plate grants have been traditionally treated as inscriptions and published in epigraphical series such as *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, *Epigraphia Indica*, *South Indian Inscriptions*, etc., as the dominant opposition has been between manuscripts and inscriptions, stressing the material factor, that is perishable vs. durable. But if, following Panciera (2012), one considers that communication to a general audience is the determining factor that sets apart inscriptions from other types of written texts, copper-plate grants, as title-deeds, are not inscriptions. They are not meant to be displayed, but rather kept in a safe place. They might have been received in a public ceremony and read aloud, but afterwhile they are not publicly exhibited but rather safe-kept in a secret or secure place. If the mostly non-public nature of copper-plate grants disqualifies them as inscriptions, are they archival records? They are at least not ‘state’ archives, as they are in the hands of ‘private’ persons and in fact are durable copies (or partial copies) of records, on perishable supports, kept in ‘state’ archives for revenue administration purpose. It might well be that the text is not exactly the same on the copper plates and in the archives, but the gist would be similar: particulars of the gift, including the description of the boundaries of granted land and the list of grantees. We have unfortunately no official account books of Pallava or Cōḷa period to check their contents against that of extant copper plates. Only the durable copper made its way up to present day.

3.1 Other uses of copper plates

It is not enough to state that copper-plate grants are durable copies of royal orders meant as title-deeds for the grantees, for two reasons. Firstly, copper-plate grants can be more than just grants. Secondly, there are copper plates which are not grants.

Other functions of copper-plate grants — Once a type of medium is invented and used for a specific reason, it also can serve other purposes. From an early date, copper-plate grants begin, as preamble, with a eulogy, increasingly long as time passes, of the donor and his family.

Besides their legal value as title-deeds, copper-plate grants thus fulfilled other functions. Hermann Kulke (1997) elaborated on their political functions, beyond their apprehension as acts of ‘religious devotion’ or as legal documents. According to Kulke, copper plates are rare, valuable and exceptional objects,

which ‘enhanced the social status and political position of both donees and donors’ (p. 238). They contributed to spread ‘the standardized message of the great kingship to various parts of the kingdom,’ (p. 239) as they were read at the donation ceremony and also in case of legal dispute. From this perspective, one can apprehend the durability of copper-plate grants not only because they are title-deeds, but also because they are vehicles of royal glory, which is made durable, as in stone panegyrics. For Kulke, copper plates are an ‘effective medium of instruction (and political propaganda)’ (p. 239) in three aspects: they ‘establish and confirm royal claims of legitimacy and the conformity of their own and their forefather’s rule with *rājadharma* [i.e. royal duty];’ they ‘corroborate or ... change the administrative hierarchy’ and strengthen ‘the king’s position on top of this hierarchy;’ they ‘set up new or confirm old measures of standardized tax collection and administration through a network of privileged Brahmin villages’ (p. 243).

Other types of copper-plates — Given the legal and official status associated with copper-plate grants, which makes them authentic documents summoned to settle disputes, and given their durability, agencies other than royal chancelleries issued, in the course of centuries, copper plates in order to record permanently rights and duties.

An early example is the Cōla-period Tirukkaḷar copper-plate set,⁴³ issued by a temple authority and concerning transactions that do not involve the king, who appears only through his regnal year used for the internal date of the record (Orr 2009, 98). The absence (or at least mention, in the reports) of authenticating seal confirms that these plates were not issued by the royal chancellery. Copper-plate grants were also increasingly issued at the initiative of private individuals or communities in order to secure their rights in various contexts. Lubin (2015, 248–50) provides several examples of published statutes of this type. For instance, in a 1604 CE copper-plate inscription, a shepherd secures hereditary rights on his lands for his sons after asking for a copper-plate document (*cempu-p-paṭṭaiyam*). Lubin (2015, 249) remarks that what ‘is remarkable about this case is that we see a relatively humble individual taking recourse to a permanent written record in order to secure his legal land rights for his heirs. Although it is unusual for such documents to be preserved in metal (as opposed to perishable palm leaf), its existence suggests that by this time documentation of this sort was produced not only for elites or groups.’ Another example, also discussed by Lubin (*ibid.*), is the settlement of a land-dispute between two *mutaliyārs* (officials and dignitaries)

⁴³ The Tirukkaḷar set in fact consists in five different plates of different dates concerning properties of the Tirukkaḷar temple (SII 3.207–211).

recorded in a 1535 CE copper-plate inscription after a local potentate (*rāyar*) examined an earlier copper-plate grant (*ceppēṭu*) and four other *mutaliyārs* had been consulted. In both these cases, there is still an issuing authority and the records concern land.

More illustrative of the shift of content and issuing agency are late copper plates, a good sample of which, from South India, are available online through the Endangered Archives Program of the British Library.⁴⁴ In this collection, among other types of archives, are copper plates recording caste customs, rights over tank water (EAP689/10/8/7), precedence rights (*mutal mariyātai*, ‘first rights’) in temple rituals (EAP689/10/8/9), in which sometimes no issuing authority is referred to other than the local individuals concerned (EAP689/6/1/1⁴⁵). Other examples of various transactions recorded on copper plates are to be found among the ‘Miscellaneous’ and ‘Anonymous’ in the two volumes of DLCPI and in Sritar (2005). Furthermore, some of these copper plates which have the appearance of documents issued by a royal authority might in fact be ancient forgeries, in the sense that they were issued by the groups concerned and framed as official documents of an earlier time, of which no perishable copies in records office ever existed. Such forgeries are debunked, for instance, through inconsistencies between the internal date and the date of the purported issuing king or palaeographical features.

A final example of a very specific use of copper plates—although we have approximate precedents with the lavish manuscripts which are cult objects—concerns Telugu devotional hymns. The compositions of the Tāḷḷapāka family were engraved in the sixteenth century on a set of 2691 plates—including 2289 plates for approximately 1300 poems by the famous Annamayya—and are today kept at the Tirupati temple in Andhra Pradesh. This is described as ‘possibly the most expensive publishing venture in the history of premodern South Asia’ (Narayana Rao/Shulman 2005, 105).⁴⁶ The Tāḷḷapāka plates might not be a lavish manuscript, although they were worshipped, but an authoritative edition, made intangible and durable through the hardness of copper.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ See EAP 314, EAP458, and EAP689 of the project ‘Digital Archive of Tamil Agrarian History (1650–1950)’ of the team ‘Caste, Land and Custom.’

⁴⁵ See edition and translation in Headley 2012, 260–264.

⁴⁶ It took 29 printed volumes to edit these plates. Similar copper plates are found in other temples and additional copies were in circulation in sets of five plates. See Narayana Rao/Shulman 2005, 104–106.

⁴⁷ See also Sircar 1965, 77 about other purported copper-plate books.

4 Conclusions

Indian copper-plate grants in general and many other examples of texts engraved on metal do not comply to what is a restrictive definition of inscriptions as exposed or publicly displayed texts, as they were usually kept privately and sometimes buried. There is further the fact that texts (or parts of texts) found engraved on copper are also recorded on other supports such as the palm leaf or paper of account books, which fall in the category of archival records since they are administrative documents, or the stone of temple-walls and steles, which fall in the category of inscriptions since they are public records. The same text could thus be materially instantiated for different reasons: account keeping (archives), public information, proclamation and personal display (inscriptions), securing future rights (copper plates).

But one question remains: why take so much effort in placing at the beginning of copper-plate grants lengthy eulogies of kings, if these documents were not meant in the first place to be read? The answer might be that there were occasions when the plates had a 'public life,' when read, possibly at the time they were delivered to the grantees with a kind of ritual reception or at the time they were produced in case of legal dispute. Anyhow, if we are to keep the general label copper-plate inscriptions, we should hasten to add that, due to their value as title-deeds, these, especially grants, are not usual inscriptions in spite of their enduring support, nor usual state archives, but rather belong to an intermediate category, for which the best label would simply be copper-plate grants.

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Inscriptions

- Quotations of epigraphical texts are corrected and normalized.
- ASIAR = *Archaeological Survey of India Annual Report*. Archaeological Survey of India.
- CII = *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*. 7 volumes (1887–1991), Archaeological Survey of India.
- DLCPI = *Dynastic List of Copper Plate Inscriptions Noticed in Annual Reports on Indian Epigraphy*. 2 volumes. See Gai (1986) and Padmanabha Sastry (2008).
- Ecālam plates — See Nagaswamy (1987).
- EI = *Epigraphia Indica*. 42 volumes (1892–1992), Archaeological Survey of India.
- EZ = *Epigraphia Zeylanica*. 4 volumes (1904–1934), Government of Ceylon.
- IR = Pallava royal inscriptions, as per the list found in Francis (2013).
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