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# Palm-leaf Manuscript Libraries in Southern India Around the Thirteenth Century: The Sarasvatī Library in Chidambaram

**Abstract:** Palm-leaf as a medium of writing occupies a major place in ancient India because of the long period of its use. Its vulnerability however required frequent copying. It seems to have been initially used to preserve and disseminate administrative and political documents; its use for transmitting literature, particularly religious literature, is accessory, late and even accidental. Libraries of manuscripts, archives, mnemonic collections (*mnémothèques*), and epigraphic collections (*lithothèques*) are four entities with various kinds of interrelationship. Two Tamil inscriptions from the thirteenth century, which attest to the activities and transformations of the Sarasvatī Library in the temple of Naṭarāja in Chidambaram, illustrate connections between these four entities.

## 1 Palm-leaf manuscripts, writing, and various categories of textual storing spaces

This paper will mainly discuss religious libraries of palm-leaf manuscripts in Southern India. These manuscripts were made from palm leaves which, after being processed and cut into an oblong format, were a medium for engraving or writing with ink (see Fig. 1). On the Indian subcontinent, the leaves of two species of palms were used for this purpose.[1] This use of palm leaves started at least as early as the century prior to the Christian era, and lasted up until the twentieth century.[2] The long-standing and continuous use of palm-leaf manuscripts and their role as a historical model of the Indian book make them a major benchmark with regard to the numerous other writing and printings mediums used in India.[3] When collected into

**1** For more details on palm leaves, see Colas 2017.

**2** To compare, paper manufacture appears to have started during the eighth century on the subcontinent, more specifically in the Kashmir region; the Chinese-Nepalese path of this technique is another possibility (see Janert 1995, 75–78).

**3** Palm-leaf manuscripts were the model for the book format called *pothī* (a feminine term from the Northern Indian subcontinent denoting an oblong book). Regarding other manuscript mediums, see Janert 1995, 38–87.


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a bundle, palm leaves formed a manuscript. They were pierced with one or multiple holes so that a string could be passed through to bind them. When the bundle of leaves was thick, a stick would be passed through a hole instead of string. The manuscript was protected by cover leaves or by boards that were often made of wood, sometimes of pieces of dried palm stalks, or even of ivory or other materials.

Even though there were perhaps numerous manuscript libraries in pre-modern India, the historical data about them remain relatively uncertain.[4] This is because the age of extant Indian manuscripts – large numbers of which still exist today – often does not date back to before the sixteenth century, though, of course, older manuscripts do exist.[5] This chapter does not seek to establish a rigorous classification of manuscript libraries in India or to trace a history that could but be superficial. I will simply point out that a wide variety of manuscript libraries existed in the contexts of highly different social and intellectual practices: the libraries of Buddhist universities and monasteries, Jain libraries, ritual and technical libraries (often family ones), the sometimes important libraries of scholars,[6] archives, village libraries, the libraries of Vedic colleges, of Hindu temples and monasteries, and yet probably other kinds of libraries.[7] The observations that follow will be limited mainly to religious libraries in Southern India, and more specifically to that of Chidambaram temple in the Tamil country.

It is nevertheless important first to understand the Indian palm-leaf manuscript tradition from its specific perspective. Whereas in other scholarly cultures in the world, the concept of the age of a manuscript relates to a material document whose conservation spans centuries, this is most often not the case for a palm-leaf document. This is because palm leaves had to be constantly re-copied, given their exposure to humidity, rodents and insects, even though in ancient India attempts were made to postpone the natural decline of palm-leaf manuscripts through different means, such as coating the leaves with insect-repellent oils. The duration of a palm-leaf manuscript could thus vary from a few years to a

**4** Compared to those of the ancient Chinese world, for example; see the contribution of Jean-Pierre Drège in this volume.

**5** See the overview article by Wujastyk 2014.

**6** Such as that of the famous library of Kavīndrācārya Sarasvatī (seventeenth century) (primarily paper manuscripts), that of the Deśamaṅgalam Vāriyar family in Kerala (primarily palm-leaf manuscripts), or the large anonymous library today known as the Chandra Shum Shere Collection brought to the Bodleian Library at the beginning of the twentieth century (primarily manuscripts on paper).

**7** In addition to Wujastyk 2014, see in particular Sircar 1996, 100–102; Cort 1995 (on Jain libraries); Minkowski 2010 (on the relationship between the manuscripts of technical texts and literary texts in certain libraries).

century, but not much longer, exceptional circumstances aside.[8] It was only from the eighteenth century that people became concerned with conserving them for longer durations, influenced in particular by the Western museographic notion of the manuscript.

The cultural value of palm-leaf varied, depending on the context, in a way that is paradoxical in appearance only. Palm-leaf was a medium for conserving legal and political documents (along with other materials), but erudite traditional Brahmans disdained or underrated it for religious texts in comparison with the authoritative speech; as a writing material accepted nonetheless, it was long considered superior to paper in Southern India; as a medium for texts transmitted from person to person (especially from master to disciple), it resisted the pull of printed texts which were disseminated without regard for the reader's qualification. Economic reasons also postponed the transition from manuscripts to printing: in India, the manuscript era lasted until the twentieth century, therefore long after the introduction of the printing press by European missionaries in the mid-sixteenth century.[9]

Historically, writing was probably primarily a practical communication tool in Indian society. It served to publicize political and administrative decisions applicable to all individuals, regardless of their moral, social, or religious status, as illustrated by the edicts of Aśoka engraved during the third century BCE and read aloud by public announcers. Writing recorded religious donations, contracts, or accounts on media with a varying lifespan, thus perpetuating legal and administrative decisions. Buildings were devoted to keeping the administrative documents of states. The political treatise *Arthaśāstra*, estimated to date back to between the fourth century BCE and the fourth century CE, recommends that kings build an archive to hold their accounts books.[10] These books listed the activities of the different government departments, wages for production workshops, the price of consumer goods, laws and customs, payments and receipts in their relationship with the friends and enemies of the king, and so on. The *Arthaśāstra* does not appear to expressly mention the function of an archivist, but the *kāraṇika*, who seems to have been the king's accountant, partially fulfilled

**8** The oldest palm-leaf manuscripts today conserved in Southern India appear to date back to the twelfth century: see Colas 2017, 119–121.

**9** See Schurhammer and Cottrell 1952.

**10** This building is called *nibandhapustakasthāna*, which R.P. Kangle translates as the 'Records Office' (Kangle 1963, 92); translation by Patrick Olivelle: 'bureau of official records' (Olivelle 2013, 111). See *Arthaśāstra*, ed. Kangle 1960, 2.7.1–2; tr. Kangle 1963, 92–93; tr. Olivelle 2013, 111–112.

this role: he was required to keep the account books, at least over a certain period of time, in order to present them to the king.[11]

Up until recently, the conservation of archives on palm-leaf continued to exist on a small scale in family libraries, where ownership deeds recorded on palm leaves sat side-by-side with manuscripts of texts.[12] It also developed on a large scale at the archives of Hindu temples. A more lasting and prestigious medium of recording these temple archives was the inscriptions which covered the temple walls (see Fig. 2).[13] These inscriptions form veritable epigraphic collections whose contents are often comparable to that of palm-leaf archives. They can be called, in French, *lithothèques* to highlight the particularity of their material in contrast with palm-leaf.[14] Carved by engravers who were at times illiterate, they reproduced and perpetuated, on stone, documents that had previously been written on palm-leaf[15] and kept in temple archives.[16] Stone inscriptions were intended to be read out loud for and in front of a sometimes illiterate audience.[17] They concerned the donations made to the temple (lands from which the income allowed for the maintenance of certain acts of worship, or of a garden, of staff members and so on). When engraved on the walls of sanctuaries of a regional importance, they

**11** See *Arthaśāstra*, ed. Kangle 1960, 2.7.22 and 2.7.34, as well as the discussion by Olivelle 2013, 518.

**12** See Sarma 2012, and in particular the top photograph on Plate XVII in that same volume, here Fig. 1. I thank Mr S.R. Sarma and Brill Publishers for having allowed me to reproduce this photograph in the present volume.

**13** One may also mention copper plates, another long-lasting, but transportable medium frequently used for legal deeds and kept in family as well as temple libraries: see Sircar 1996, 103–160; Salomon 1998, 113–115. Naturally, Indian epigraphy, in both Southern and Northern India, also includes genres of texts other than legal, some of which are literary; on the variety of engraved texts, see Salomon 1998, 110–126.

**14** I wish to thank Jean-Pierre Drège for having pointed out the French term 'lithothèque' to me. The use of the English term *library* or French *bibliothèque* for epigraphic inscriptions may be considered inappropriate given that these terms specifically and etymologically mean 'book deposit'.

**15** As we can surmise with respect to the Tamil country. Other mediums may have been used as intermediaries in other parts of India and at other times. For more details on the transfer of text onto stone and on epigraph engravers, mainly in Northern India, see Sircar 1996, 85–88; on the process, see also Salomon 1998, 65–66.

**16** According to V.G. Ramakrishna Ayyar, based on *Epigraphical Reports* (1913), 298, 299, 306 and 309, 'Original documents, pertaining to gifts of lands made to the temple were preserved in the treasury of the temple and engraved on its walls' (V.G.R. Ayyar 1932, 41). Here, 'treasury' probably translates a term denoting a place for storing archives and objects of value (Sanskrit *bhāṇḍāra*, Tamil *paṇṭāram*).

**17** The audience for the oral reading of stone inscriptions was most likely similar to that of the readers and listeners of the inscriptions on copper plates: inhabitants of the village, administrative officials relaying royal orders on-site, etc. See Sircar 1996, 162–169.

also recorded legal deeds and royal decrees of public interest, at times in relation also to the surrounding villages. The temple's epigraphic collection, which had a close functional relationship with that of its palm-leaf archive library, therefore had an almost notarial dimension. At times, the inscriptions also contained poems, such as praises of monarchs.

While palm-leaf, just like its epigraphic copies, played a leading role for keeping legal, administrative, and political documents, it had only a secondary role in transmitting religious texts, as was the case with all other physical writing media. Certain Indian textual collections long remained exclusively oral and mnemonic, to the extent that they could even be called *mnémothèques* in French, that is, 'mnemonic collections'. While writing had a testimonial value in everyday affairs (including the concrete management of religion), it had none compared with the speech of an authority delivering religious and spiritual texts: in this domain, what prevailed was the principle of oral transmission from a spiritually, intellectually, or socially authorized person to a select audience. This authority of the transmitter and trust in his reliability were fundamental for the conservation, understanding, but also at times the emendation and updating of the text.

The example of the ancient Vedic corpus, the core of which could date back to approximately 1500 BCE, is significant. Its oral transmission has been maintained almost perfectly to date. Eleven different but complementary styles of recitation have enabled a quality of transmission which no manuscript transmission could have provided.[18] Works of this ancient corpus are conserved and provided for learning in a traditional taxonomy that bears no relation to their history in the Western sense of the word. Even today, certain traditional Brahmans still possess immense mnemonic collections, to which access is in principle reserved to those who are ritually fit.[19]

To take another example, the early Buddhist corpus was also transmitted exclusively orally during the first five centuries of its existence – the Buddha died during the sixth or fifth century BCE, according to the chronology adopted – whereas the use of writing had been known in India since at least the third century BCE.[20] It was not until 35–32 BCE in Ceylon that the decision was

**18** See Colas 2011, 495.

**19** Certain comparatively late Vedic texts state that learning the Veda from a manuscript is incorrect (see Malamoud 2002, 142). To commit a text to a physical medium was to risk it falling into the hands of unqualified individuals (see also Colas 1997, 352 and 359). The Jains long restricted access to their libraries to members of their religion only (Cort 1995, 79–80). Some scholars preferred to drown their collections than let them be read by people deemed to be unqualified (Minkowski 2010, 89).

**20** But Buddhism did not seek to protect the words of the Buddha from diffusion in any unau-

made to methodically record the existing canonical texts on manuscripts, as war and famine had endangered the oral transmission of the words attributed to the Buddha.[21] A dramatic historical event thus probably accidentally established a relationship between Buddhist texts and the specific technique which is writing, through transcription on manuscripts.

The mainly oral nature of the ancient Vedic tradition is not an absolute historical model for Indian religious texts, but their recording on palm leaves took place in a constant dialectic with orality. Orality constituted a fundamental benchmark in both transmission and reading, with manuscripts being a much weaker testimony in textual traditions than they were in Europe.[22] The example of the coexistence during the third century BCE of the oral transmission of the Buddhist canon and the Mauryan emperor Aśoka's edicts on rocks and pillars publishing Buddhist moral and political measures confirms a dichotomy at that time between mere oral transmission and the use of writing: on the one hand there were texts supported above all by a tradition of recitation and a socio-spiritual authority, and on the other hand there were political or legal documents engraved on stone or another long-lasting material such as copper plates. In such context, palm-leaf, whether engraved or written, formed a fragile medium between the extreme and strict orality epitomized by the oral transmission of the Veda, and the mineral pseudo-eternity of epigraphy (on stone or other durable materials such as copper plates).

In a palm-leaf manuscript library, texts survived only through regular re-copying, and therefore thanks to permanent or periodic scriptorium activity. Libraries themselves existed and perhaps flourished only owing to the financial efforts of donors, that is, an uncertain and all too human support. To sum up, palm-leaf manuscript libraries pertain to a broader whole that also encompasses mnemonic collections, epigraphic collections, and archives. These four types of collections involve four sorts of storing spaces (library building, *mnémothèque*-memory, *lithothèque*-temple walls, archive building). Each of these storing spaces is to a certain extent and in various ways contiguous with one or several of the other three, but has a specific purpose: for example, epigraphic collections partly perpetuate the content of documents on palm leaves; archival libraries also contain reference books (containing doctrinal texts, for instance), as we will see; and the restorers of palm-leaf manuscripts use their mnemonic collections.

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thorized social environments, contrary to what the Brahmans did with their Veda. The Buddha gave speeches in multiple languages, and these were disseminated in multiple languages.

**21** See Lamotte 1988, 368 and 557–558.

**22** See Colas 2011, 495.

## 2 The prescriptive ideal

The observations that follow will be limited to a few collectively used religious libraries, mainly in Southern India at the beginning of the second millennium. The *Pauṣkarasaṃhitā* prescribes an ideal way of establishing such libraries. This text is a Hindu ritual manual from the Pāñcarātra denomination that may date back to before the eleventh century. It was most likely written in Southern India. Around twenty verses from this Sanskrit work recommend the 'installation of knowledge' or 'of the seat of knowledge' or even 'of the seat of scriptures'; in other words, the establishment of a library,[23] possibly in a temple.[24] First, a collection of manuscripts is assembled, the core of which naturally consists of texts of the Pāñcarātra. It is specified that the texts from this religious denomination are to be edited (*pariśuddha*) beforehand, so that the manuscripts can then form an up-to-date scriptural reference for the followers of the Pāñcarātra.[25] The remainder of the collection consists of Vedic texts, socio-religious codes (*smṛti*), mythological stories, as well as works on logic, etc. The textual ensemble is therefore not exclusively religious. These manuscripts are placed in solid cases (*saṃpuṭa*).

The passage then presents the prescriptions concerning the library itself. It should be built in a very stable neighbourhood with a good reputation, near (or in?) a royal city. This neighbourhood must be populated with *dvija-s* ('twice-borns')[26] and maintained by a community of upstanding people. Such a social environment was probably assumed to promote the maintenance and financing of the future library. The building should be built of stone, have a metal lock (*lohayantra*), and door leaves with bolts (*argala*). It should be whitewashed (*sudhādhavalita*) and decorated with a painted representation of Vāgīśvarī, another name for Sarasvatī, the goddess of speech and knowledge, protectress of literature and the arts.

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**23** In the text, respectively: *jñānapratiṣṭhāna, vidyāpīṭhapratiṣṭhāna, śāstrapīṭhapratiṣṭhāna*. See *Śrīpauṣkarasaṃhitā*, ed. Yadugiri Yatirājasampatkumāra Rāmānujamuni 1934, 41, verses 77–98a. For a brief summary of the passage in question, see Sankaranarayanan 1993, 26–27. My interpretation of this known passage disagrees on multiple occasions with that of Florinda De Simini, who sometimes modifies the text according to her particular understanding (for example, she reads *sapuṭeṣv* instead of *saṃpuṭeṣv* in the edition [verse 80], *lohayantrāsane* instead of *lohayantrāyane* [verse 86]) (De Simini 2016, 346–347).

**24** As hypothesized by Sankaranarayanan 1993, 26.

**25** Another famous text from the Pāñcarātra denomination, the *Jayākhyasaṃhitā*, mentions the work of experts in sacred scriptures to edit the texts of the Pāñcarātra, restoring where necessary passages that have been corrupted, and the work of keepers of Scriptures who gather the texts: see Colas 1994, 118 and 131 and n. 37 and 38.

**26** This term can refer either to people from the three upper classes of Hindu society, or only those of the highest class, the Brahmans.

After the manuscripts have been revered and enclosed in pieces of fabric, they are to be transported to this locked building and venerated once again. Thereafter, the passage recommends daily worship, which mainly consists in carrying incense and walking clockwise around a pedestal-altar (*pīṭha*) located in front of the library. The text then requires that a maintenance fund (*vṛtti*) be procured for the conservation of the manuscripts (*jñānakośānupālana*) and confirmed by its inscription in a charter (*śāsana*). We may surmise that this fund should cater also for the salaries of employees of the library (see below on Chidambaram Sarasvatī Library). These prescriptions are followed by the recitation of two mantras in the library then designated as a divine temple (*devagṛha*).

## 3 On the importance of the librarian

Regardless of whether this primarily religious library is built in a temple or elsewhere, it is thus built within a conservative social context. However, let us move beyond the recommended ideal. A few rare inscriptions from southern India record the foundation or extension of public libraries of Brahman villages, schools, monasteries, and temples, sometimes mentioning the donation of lands generating regular income to finance the employment of librarians. The compound words *sarasvatī-bhaṇḍāra* (or *-bhāṇḍāra*), literally 'storehouse of Sarasvatī', and *pustaka-bhāṇḍāra*, 'storehouse of books', or their Tamil forms, refer to manuscript libraries and *sarasvatī-bhaṇḍārika* to their librarians. In Tamil epigraphy, these establishments were distinguished from the archives of temples, called *tirukkai-ōṭṭi-paṇṭāram*, which kept official documents, including *inter alia* temple ownership deeds, rulings of the village assembly regarding tax exemptions, and sometimes sale contracts.[27]

The number of librarians varied, depending on the size of the manuscript library, and their position appears to have been hereditary. An inscription in the Kannaḍa language on an obelisk of the Nāgavāvi temple,[28] dated to 1058 (śaka 980), mentions the creation of six librarian positions at a traditional school (called *ghaṭikāsthāna*) consisting of two hundred students of the Veda and fifty-two students of established disciplines (*śāstra*). They received land as reward for their work, as did the three commentators (*vyākhyātṛ*) in speculative disci-

**27** V.G.R. Ayyar 1932, 32 and 41. See also below the inscriptions of Sarasvatī Library at the Chidambaram Temple.

**28** Nagai today, located near Chitapur in the current state of Karnataka.

plines and the bell-ringer. The size of the land assigned to each of the librarians was as large as that of the land given to one of the commentators and to the bell-ringer.[29] This seems to indicate that the status of the librarians was comparable to that of the commentators (and the bell-ringer!), whereas the tutors (*upādhyāya*), totalling six, do not seem to have received land.[30] The number of librarians (six) is important with respect to the total number of teachers (nine), commentators and tutors included. Last of all, librarians also benefited from a general allowance that covered the food and accommodation expenses of all of the scholars and students at the school, totalling two hundred and sixty-seven people.[31] Librarians were therefore well paid at this eleventh-century Brahman teaching establishment. More important than ordinary tutors, librarians were on the same level as commentator scholars, who were masters capable of interpreting texts and revealing their meaning, and not only of teaching them.

Librarian status was most likely hereditary, or at least it was the case in certain contexts. The inheritance of the lands received as a part of this position usually obliged the heir to perform the same professional service, in the same way as the donations of lands to temple priests engaged their heirs and enabled continuity of worship. Two inscriptions from the beginning of the fifteenth century in connection with the library of the Śaṅkarian monastery in Śṛṅgeri (in the modern-day state of Karnataka) confirm the hereditary nature of this position and the family accumulation of real estate assets from one generation to the next. The first (1406, śaka 1328) records a gift of land to librarian Purāṇika Kavikṛṣṇabhaṭṭa, the second (1432, śaka 1354) a gift of land to his son Kaviśaṅkarabhaṭṭa.[32]

The planning of new Brahman villages could include a library for collective usage. According to an inscription from the second half of the thirteenth century, the four *vēli-s* of land that the founding patron bought for the site of the future

**29** *Inscriptions of Nagai* 1928, 7, 15 (lines 193–196), 16 (line 206), 23. Each librarian received 30 *mattar*-s of land; the commentator in *Nyāya* ('logic', the engraver most likely carved by mistake *nyāsa* for *nyāya*) and the bell-ringer as well. The commentator of the Bhāṭṭa school of the speculative discipline of Mīmāṃsā exegesis received 35 *mattar-s* of land, and that of the Prābhākara school of Mīmāṃsā received 45. We cannot help but wonder, on the one hand, about the importance of the 'bell-ringer's' socio-ritual status (*ghaṭikā-prahāri*, 'striker of hours'), which this gift of lands places on the same level as a commentator; and on the other hand, on the reasons for the difference in treatment between the commentators in the different disciplines (age, reputation?).

**30** Three of these tutors taught the Veda (lines 194–195); the disciplines taught by the three others are not mentioned (see line 193).

**31** In addition to the six librarians, there are the nine teachers and the two hundred and fifty-two students. The engraver most likely carved by mistake the number 257 instead of 267.

**32** A.S.R. Ayyar 1939–1940, 325.

village of Vikramapāṇḍyacaturvedimaṅgalam in the Tamil region were mainly intended for the temple, the houses of the one hundred and eight Brahmans, and those of the librarians and other professionals from the village.[33] This document thus appears to indicate the relative importance of a library for collective usage (which a priori does not seem to have been religious) and its librarians.[34]

Libraries were at times expanded when donations allowed. For example, a 1269 inscription records the addition of a pavilion to the library of the temple of Raṅganātha in Śrīraṅgam. The patron ordered the images of three divinities of knowledge – Sarasvatī, Vedavyāsa, and Hayagrīva – to be ritually installed there, and provided for their regular worship through a donation.[35] Another example of expansion during the thirteenth century was at the library of the temple of Naṭarāja in Chidambaram, which I will now discuss.

## 4 Sarasvatī Library at Naṭarāja temple in Chidambaram

The manuscript library of the temple of Naṭarāja (a form of the god Śiva), in Chidambaram in Southern India, is an exceptional example, for its epigraphy and architecture record the development of its space and its manuscript copying activities as a result of the support of a thirteenth-century patron. Like most great Hindu sanctuaries in Southern India, the temple of Naṭarāja included the four kinds of textual and documentary repositories mentioned above. First there was a mnemonic collection, in this case consisting of the texts memorized and recited by priests without the help of manuscripts during rites and of other texts which

**33** This would be equivalent to 9.72 hectares if the *vēli* measurement unit is equal to 'six acres' (Anglo-Saxon), as indicated by the dictionary of Johann Philipp Fabricius (*Fabricius's Dictionary* 1972, s.v.). The number 108 is auspicious in ancient India. For this inscription, see *Annual Reports (1911–1914)*, 1914, in the section 'G.O. N° 920, 4th Aug. 1914', 92.

**34** For other mentions of libraries, see Sankaranarayan 1993, 26–32. According to a 1359 inscription (śaka 1282), the god Hastagirīśa himself, at the request of the temple administrator and scholars (*bhaṭṭa*) of the god, instituted a certain 'Vaishnavite servant' (*vaiṣṇavadāsa*) as director of a monastery in Kanchipuram, responsible for the worship taking place there, but also for the manuscripts (*postaka*) that he had collected and the accessories (*upakaraṇa*) associated with them: see A.S.R. Ayyar 1939–1940, 321, 324 and line 4 of the inscription.

**35** The interpretation here is based on that of Sankaranarayanan (1993, 32), according to which the library probably existed already during the twelfth century. For a seemingly different interpretation, see *Annual Reports (1938–1939)*, 1986, 95.

certain scholars and devotees knew by heart. Second there was an epigraphic collection, consisting of the set of inscriptions which covered the walls of the temple, including those dealing with archive and manuscript libraries (see Figs 2, 3a, 3b). I will focus mainly on the other two collections: the library and the archive. Two inscriptions provide valuable information on their functioning.[36] There are twenty-five or thirty years between these thirteenth-century epigraphs in Tamil language, engraved on the base of the pavilion part of the library, here referred to as inscriptions no. 1 and no. 2, in chronological order (see Figs 3a and 3b).[37] Reading these two inscriptions is difficult because they are badly damaged and, besides, a staircase was built over the portion of the base where inscription no. 1 was engraved (see below).[38]

The archive[39] was likely located in the second enclosure,[40] but it seems impossible to situate its exact location today. The original building of the manuscript library was and is still today located in the third enclosure, at times called the exterior enclosure, beside the monumental west gate, slightly to the north of this gate.[41] More specifically, it is found to the north (that is, to the right) of a small sanctuary that lies against the monumental west gate (see Fig. 4a) and of which it is separated by a modern building. This tiny sanctuary could be that which inscription no. 1 refers to as being a temple to the god Subrahmaṇyappiḷḷaiyār. Today the deity is identified as Śrīmuttukkumārasvāmi, in other words, a form of the god Subrahmaṇya.[42] The two inscriptions name the manuscript library the

**36** I will follow the transcription (here modernized), and mostly the interpretation of K.G. Krishnan (1988); see also the brief analysis in Sankaranarayanan 1993, 27–31. The two inscriptions have many gaps.

**37** See Krishnan 1988, 219 (inscription no. 2 is separated from no. 1 'by not more than about twenty-five years') and 223 ('thirty years may be considered to be a reasonable interval between the two records'). In this article, I assume that the library is located in the same building where these inscriptions are engraved (see Krishnan 1988, 202: 'the *maṇḍapa* [pavilion] on the tiers of which this inscription [no. 1] is engraved, situated on the north of the Subrahmaṇya temple was perhaps the place where the library was located'). It makes sense that the inscriptions are engraved on the main monument that they mention. Moreover, inscription no. 1, while significantly damaged, puts the location of the library in the northern portion of the west gallery of the third enclosure, near (to the north of?) a sanctuary of Subrahmaṇya (regarding which see n. 42 below). This location seems to correspond to that of the current building on which the two epigraphs are engraved. Inscription no. 2 mentions an extension to the original building, which seems to be the left wing of the current architectural unit (see below).

**38** The extent of these missing elements makes it difficult or even impossible to translate with certainty.

**39** *tirukkai-ōṭṭi*, for which see Krishnan 1988, 221.

**40** Called *vikkiramacōḻantirumāḷikai* in inscription no. 1. See Krishnan 1988, 221.

**41** See Krishnan 1988, 220 and footnote 37 above.

**42** The date of this small, simply decorated sanctuary remains to be determined, along with

'storehouse of Sarasvatī', after the goddess of knowledge, hereinafter 'Sarasvatī Library' in this article.

Sarasvatī Library may have been built during the twelfth century.[43] The main room[44] is placed within the gallery that runs along the entirety of the wall of the enclosure.[45] In front of this room, in other words, projecting from the gallery, there is a pavilion that was originally open and which was accessed via a staircase located on the north side (to the right of this pavilion in Fig. 4b). Yet another room was later added to the south (that is, to the left of the main room within the gallery and set back from the pavilion), as mentioned in inscription no. 2 (see Fig. 5a); this extension appears to date back to the thirteenth century.

At an unknown date subsequent to the thirteenth century,[46] a new staircase was built against the moulded base on the east side (in other words, on the front part) of the pavilion, partially blocking inscription no. 1 (see Figs 3b and 5a), and the formerly open intercolumniations of the pavilion were walled in (except for the fifth, which is located the furthest to the left of the pavilion, behind the new staircase). As a result, the ancient north entrance was blocked off and the staircase leading to that entrance naturally fell into disuse. At the same time or later, a garden was created, formed of flowerbeds separated by strips of paving stones

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that of the monumental west gate. In 1932, V.G.R. Ayyar summarized the hypothetical dates for the other monumental gates, but not this one (32–33). Be it as it may, inscription no. 1 could not be alluding to the other Subrahmaṇya Temple (which is found in the north-west corner of the third enclosure, beyond the Civakāmi-ammaṇ Temple), for the construction of this chariot-shaped building was subsequent to inscription no. 1, in all likelihood. Local tradition places this construction during the reign of King Sundara Pāṇḍya I (from 1251 to 1268), and therefore after inscription no. 1 in any event (see Krishnan 1988, 219). This Subrahmaṇya Temple is clearly subsequent to Sundara Pāṇḍya I according to Fergusson 1910, 379: 'we cannot feel sure of its date. From its position, however, and the character of its ornamentation, there seems little doubt that it belongs to the end of the 17th and first half of the 18th century. From the style, however, I would be inclined to ascribe it to the earlier date'.

**43** According to Sankaranarayanan 1993, 28.

**44** The length of this early main room and of the pavilion placed in front of it is five intercolumniations, a modular distance that is a typical unit of measurement in Sanskrit architectural treatises. The gallery that runs along the enclosure is itself dotted with pillars separated by the same modular distance. Regarding the concept of intercolumniation (and the similar concept of centre-to-centre distance between columns), which translates the Sanskrit term *paṅkti*, see Dagens 1984, 15–16.

**45** For material and administrative reasons, I could not enter the Library building, the entrance to which was locked during my study, and my interpretation of the architectural layout therefore remains general and partially hypothetical.

**46** In any event, a certain lapse of time following the two inscriptions.

placed perpendicularly in front and on the right side of the library complex, with a passage paved with stones leading to the new staircase (see Figs 5a and 5b).

The first of the two inscriptions is an oral order that appears first to have been transcribed onto palm-leaf before being engraved on the base of the pavilion part of the library. This order came from a committee of eight people: three senior officials responsible for managing the temple, and five representatives from different groups, appearing to include priest and accountant groups.[47] The inscription relates and makes applicable an operation to rescue, restore and conserve ancient texts of the Sarasvatī Library (*sarasvatipaṇ*[*ṭāram*]). The donation from an erudite patron named Uṭaiyār Svāmitēvar allowed eight or nine people to be hired[48] to unfasten and tie again[49] the manuscript bundles (see Fig. 1) and to rewrite damaged leaves.[50] Two or three other people were hired to place boards[51] enclosing manuscript bundles and to thread their palm leaves.[52] This made for a total of ten to twelve positions. The employees are referred to by their names. The inscription mentions their daily payment in cash (*kācu*) and in kind (fabric, unhusked rice).[53] All of the expenses generated by these payments are financed by income from lands, the dimensions and location of which are provided by the inscription. In the second inscription, we will see that the same employees (or their descendants if they died?) appear to have kept their position for at least two decades.

Inscription no. 1 mentions a second aspect of the rescuing operation, which concerns the archive (situated in another building, see above). As we have seen, this kind of storing space was supposed to conserve mainly the legal and administrative documentation of the temple on palm leaves.[54] However, the inscription tells us

**47** According to Krishnan, a person with the title of Tirumantiravōlaināyakam, in other words, 'the head of the section which drafts or commits to writing the oral orders of the king while he is in counsel', was among the signatories to this order (Krishnan 1988, 221). However, it appears to be a presumed name in the inscription.

**48** Including two or three ascetics. The missing parts in the inscription make it impossible to estimate with any certainty the number of people hired for the different tasks.

**49** *aviḻttuk-kaṭṭavum*. Krishnan 1988, 220: 'unfolding, binding'. See above and the illustration on Fig. 1. Regarding the meaning of these Tamil terms, see *Tamil Lexicon* 1982, vol. 1, 158, col. B (meaning no. 1) and vol. 2/2, 650, col. B (meaning no. 1).

**50** *jīrṇṇittavai* +…+ *eḻutavum*.

**51** *pala*[*kai*] (meaning no. 1 in the *Tamil Lexicon* 1982, vol. 4/1, s.v.).

**52** Tentative interpretation of *kōkkavum*. Here, the rethreading includes freshly rewritten palm leaves. See the illustration on Fig. 1. Krishnan (1988, 220) explains: 'in placing the planks (*palagai*) and tagging on all the leaves (*kōkka*)'.

**53** See lines 3 and 4 of the inscription, as well as Krishnan's interpretation (1988, 220); Sankaranarayanan 1993, 29.

**54** Sometimes also on copper plates.

that it was also used to conserve manuscripts of works in Sanskrit and Tamil. One may suppose that the purpose was to keep reference and back-up copies of these works. The inscription states that these reference books kept in the archive room are to be copied and edited by comparing them to those of the Sarasvatī Library, and that after that, the originals and copies are to be stored at the two libraries. We may assume that the staff responsible for this work on the manuscripts of the archive was that which had been hired to partially or totally copy the manuscripts of Sarasvatī Library.

Inscription no. 2 at Sarasvatī Library (also on the base of the pavilion part) mentions two operations with regard to that library. The responsible for the first operation apparently is Tēvar Ñānasamutratēvar, literally 'Tēvār (named) Tēvār-Ocean of Knowledge'. This is not sure however, for the inscription is damaged around this name. This Tēvar Ñānasamutratēvar could be the Uṭaiyār Svāmitēvar of Inscription no. 1. The first operation consisted in a new rescuing operation with the provision of manuscripts to readers. It required hiring twenty new employees, the names of which are given. Six were hired to thread in right order (?) and read (aloud)[55] the manuscript of the *Divyāgamam*, a text or collection of texts that may have formed the temple's ritual corpus of reference. Four others were responsible for unfastening manuscripts and tying them once again, probably to help scholarly readers handling them, as bundles could be very thick. Eight other employees were responsible for preparing new copies of old manuscripts. Another was specifically appointed to astrological manuscripts, and another to mythological texts (*purāṇa-s*).[56] However, the inscription does not present the amount paid to these twenty or so new employees.

As for the second operation mentioned in this inscription, it is clearly attributed to Tēvar Svāmitēvar, which tends to confirm that it was the same patron, Svāmitēvar, who directed and likely financed all of the operations mentioned by the two inscriptions. In this case, the operation in question was a physical extension of the library. This extension was constructed alongside the former building of the Sarasvatī manuscript library.[57] In the layout of the current architectural complex, it is the left wing (the southern extension mentioned above) that one can see today in the gallery (see Figs 5 A and 6). Manuscripts from the former room were moved

**55** *ārppikkavum vācippikkavum*. Krishnan (1988, 123) apparently interprets *ārppikkavum* as 'arrange'. Even though Indians were familiar with silent ('mental') reading, reading aloud was the common practice in the editing process: see Colas 2001, 313; Colas 2011, 496 and 505.

**56** Here, we are merely following the interpretation of Krishnan 1988, 222.

**57** *muṉpattai-sarasvati-paṇṭarām*.

to this new space, and employees that had been there for twenty-five or thirty years (or their descendants?) were to continue performing their tasks.[58]

The audience of this order engraved into the stone consisted, in addition to seven (or more) dignitaries, of two new library employees, most likely ranked as senior administrative officials: the librarian – literally 'the master responsible for the books of the library'[59] – and the accountant.[60]

## 5 The teachings of the Sarasvatī Library inscriptions

The archive, in addition to its specific role of filing administrative and legal documents, was thus used to conserve certain manuscripts. However, it did so passively, one could say, probably as an almost administrative reference. In the absence of frequent consultation, the mere conservation of such manuscripts – which were as a matter of fact neglected, because they were rarely or never consulted by scholars – implied their rapid disappearance, considering their exposure to insects, rodents, and the climate. They did however sometimes have a chance of being replaced by fresh copies. This is what happened at Naṭarāja temple in Chidambaram when an open-minded patron overcame the institutional division between these two types of library and financed the restoration and copying of manuscripts conserved in the archives as well as in Sarasvatī Library, with the backing of the temple authorities.

Sarasvatī Library's manuscripts were intended to be read and consulted by scholars. The fragility of palm-leaf meant that a workshop of regular copying and restoration of texts had to be closely associated with conservation. Making new copies of manuscripts leaves, whether some of them or their entirety, was probably done with the assistance of people reading out loud.[61] In principle, this was followed by a new reading to check the copying and make corrections.[62] It was thus an editorial process in which the editor's mnemonic library played the role of the authoritative reference, resulting in corrections and updates that were partially planned (under the influence of readings contemporary with the editor,

**58** See Krishnan 1988, 222.
**59** *paṇṭārap-pottakam-uṭaiyār*.
**60** *kaṇakkar*.
**61** As in the case of paper manuscripts. See references to Colas 2001 and 2011 in n. 55 above.
**62** Colas 2011, 500 and 505.

considered to be the valid ones), or even deliberate (in other words, aimed at transforming passages, terms, or syllables deemed to be faulty).[63]

The Sarasvatī Library also offered a service to scholars: it was most likely there and not at the archives that scholars came to consult texts – with the assistance of employees who unfastened the bunches of palm leaves and tied them once again – and copied or ordered the copying of the texts that they needed.

Over a span of twenty-five or thirty years, the space and activities of Sarasvatī Library grew significantly thanks to the generosity of the same patron, Svāmi Tēvar, it seems, who was also a scholar personally involved in the collection. The number of employees whose salaries he financed went from ten or twelve to thirty or thirty-one, in addition to the hiring of a librarian and an accountant. His actions were supervised and legitimized by temple dignitaries. The separate hiring of a librarian, who seems to have partially taken over the reins from the erudite administrator Svāmi Tēvar, confirms the importance and scholarly component of this profession during the thirteenth century.

The activities of Sarasvatī Library therefore depended heavily on private donations, which were most likely sporadic. Such spectacular increase in staff over twenty-five or thirty years must not be over-interpreted: the financing of salaries, despite being engraved into the temple's stones and having the formal approval of the senior officials of the temples, did not guarantee the permanence of the jobs or that of the services provided by the employees.[64]

The creation of a flower bed garden around the building could be an indication that Sarasvatī Library existed for a certain time following the thirteenth century. According to the present temple's management,[65] today the building that was the Sarasvatī Library holds materials used during an annual temple celebration; the manuscripts of the temple were supposedly moved to the library of the Mahārāja of Tanjore at an unknown date. This library of manuscripts and printed texts, originally founded in the sixteenth century, and which is today lively and renowned – as Saraswati Mahal Library or Tanjore Maharaja Serfoji's Mahal Library – developed mainly during the eighteenth century, partly based on the European model.[66] As an institution of a different type to that of the library of Chidambaram temple, the Tanjore Maharaja Serfoji's Mahal Library raises the

**63** Regarding this process, see Colas 1994, 117 and 118; Colas 2001.

**64** The epigraphic donations by no means had the eternal application they often sought to establish, one reason being that they could no longer easily be read after a certain period, due to changes in epigraphic engraving style and language conventions.

**65** Interviewed on this topic on 31 August 2017.

**66** See Wujastyk 2007.

question of the dispersal and disappearance of Indian manuscript collections, their merging with other collections, and their further transmission during different periods, which are other subjects for reflection.

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**Fig. 1:** Manuscripts on palm leaves, some with wooden covers.

**Fig. 2:** Part of an inscription on a wall of Naṭarāja temple.

**Fig. 3a:** Base of the library's pavilion.

**Fig. 3b:** Beginnings of lines 2 to 6 of inscription no. 1 on the library's pavilion base with the new staircase on the right side.

**Fig. 4a:** The western monumental gate with the Śrīmuttukkumārasvāmi temple on its right side.

**Fig. 4b:** View from the north-east: the gallery where the library is located and adjoined with its projecting pavilion (old staircase on the right (north) side) and the garden around.

**Fig. 5a:** View from the east: from the foreground, the garden, the five-intercolumniated long library's pavilion with the new staircase and (to the left and rear in the gallery) the extension of the library.

**Fig. 5b:** View from the north-west: from the foreground, the garden, a corner of the library's pavilion, the modern building and in the background the monumental southern gate of the enclosure.

**Fig. 6:** View from the south-east. The library's pavilion with the new staircase and (to the left) the extension of the library in the gallery.