

Notable Codicological and Textual Features of Tamil Palm-leaf Manuscripts left
Unmentioned in Catalogues — Summary of paper

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In Tamil Nadu, for centuries, manuscripts were made of bundles of palm-tree leaves. After the leaves were prepared and cut, they were incised with a stylus and, for reading purpose, smeared with blacklamp. The leaves were pierced by one or two holes. A string passing through the holes made the bundle a book, sometimes protected by wooden boards. The main setback is that this material cannot survive the Indian climate for more than 100 to 200 hundreds years. Thus the Tamil manuscripts available today in fact reflect scribal practices mostly of the 19th and 20th centuries, even though earlier practices were inherited. We have slightly older preserved MSS in European collections (e.g. BnF). Our window for examining the Tamil MS form—a few centuries only—is thus very short compared to other manuscript cultures. From textual mentions and iconographical representations of MSS, we nonetheless know that, from the early times, the Tamil MS is NOT a codex. The available descriptions in catalogues are normally very short and basic, the focus being on the content not on the container. Such descriptions could be refined, paying attention to features specific to the palm-leaf material support or to the scribal practices in Tamil Nadu. I will mention here features that have attracted my attention—mostly observed in a corpus of 55 MSS of the *Tirumurukārruppatai*, a devotional text, of perhaps the 7th c., praising the god Murukan—whether physical or textual, such as:

- The palm leaf type — The *communis opinio* is that a specific type of palm was used in North India (inked) and another one in South India (engraved, then smeared).
- The hole(s) in the leaf — Tamil MSS normally have two holes per leaf, but there are singled-hole MSS (9 out of the 55 MSS of the *Tirumurukārruppatai*).
- Unsmearred surfaces / Blank spaces in the margins or round the holes.
- Exception to the *scriptio continua*, such as punctuation, separation of verses by dots and hyphens, verse-numbering.
- Use of the auspicious mark *pillaiyār cūli*.
- Foliation.
- Accommodation of paratexts: title, headings, scribal marks such as blessings (*hariḥ om*), satellite stanzas (stanzas added to the root-text, to which are applied various modes of transition *vis-à-vis* the root-text).

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