

## Article

# On the Threshold between Legend and History: the Afterlife of a Mackenzie Manuscript

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In nineteenth-century South India, one of the motivating factors for travelling in search of manuscripts and for making manuscripts travel into newly arising collections and libraries was not so much the interest in indigenous texts as the hunt for information that would allow local history to be reconstructed more precisely. This period saw the first attempts at Indian historiography in Western languages, such as Wilson's 'Historical Sketch of the Kingdom of Pandya' from 1836. Some of the main sources that were used for such an undertaking were manuscripts from the extensive collections kept by Colin Mackenzie (1754–1821), the core stock of today's Government Oriental Manuscript Library (GOML) in Madras.<sup>1</sup> These manuscripts testify to the progressive amalgamation of indigenous, traditional and Western modes of presentation and narration.

The present article proposes to deal with one instance of that type, namely the story of Tiruvaḷḷuvar – author of the *Tirukkuraḷ*, the text that is to this day regarded as the crown jewel of Tamil literary production – and how he vanquished the members of the older literary establishment called 'the Academy' (*Caṅkam*). It can be regarded as complementary to a study of the transmission history of the Tamil classical corpus of the *Caṅkam*,<sup>2</sup> a study written at a time when I had not yet managed to locate and photograph a particular manuscript, the source that allows us to reconstitute the progression from a medieval Puranic legend to an established 'fact' of Tamil literary history.

The historical background can be outlined in a few words. The oldest surviving texts of Tamil classical literature, the so-called *Caṅkam* ('Academy') corpus, which may date back to the beginning of the first millennium, had a changeable fate. After the first waves of anthologisation probably between the late fifth and the early seventh centuries, the extensive

poetological commentaries of the eleventh to fifteenth centuries assembled them into the two hyper-anthologies known today as *Eṭṭutokai* ('the Eight Anthologies') and *Pattuppāṭṭu* ('the Ten Songs') and made them the reference texts for what was thought to be outstanding Tamil poetry. By the end of that period, interest in it began to flag, but then it flickered up again in the seventeenth century with a couple of integrative grammatical works that resumed the earlier tradition. Afterwards the texts slowly faded from public consciousness again, while nevertheless the topos of the literary academy at the court of the Pāṇṭiya dynasty in Maturai remained alive and thriving in the form of narrative material used in a variety of literary productions beginning with the Maturai chronicles of the *Tiruvīḷaiyāṭarpurāṇam*.

A second classical corpus followed in the wake of the *Caṅkam* and was modelled on it, partly adopting its literary conventions and, even more poignantly, making up the number eighteen: the Eighteen Minor Classics (*Paṭiṇeṅ Kīlkkāṇakku*) correspond to the eight plus ten works of the major classics (*Paṭiṇeṅ Mērkāṇakku*). Their two most important innovations are a new metre (*Veṅpā*) and the extension of genres from the heroic and erotic to the didactic. Judging by the amount of attention they have received in the theoretical literature, their popularity never matched that of the *Caṅkam* corpus, with two notable exceptions: the *Tirukkuraḷ* and, to a lesser degree, the *Nāḷaiyār*, both of which are didactic anthologies. By the seventeenth century, the *Kuraḷ* had become the most frequently quoted Tamil text of all with the greatest number of commentaries, and by the nineteenth century it was deemed to be the oldest and most venerable, while the better part of the two classical corpora lay forgotten.

This state of affairs is mirrored in three clusters of legends told about those works and the institution that produced them in various traditional sources. The first one is a legend of origin for the *Caṅkam* corpus, attested for the first time in the

<sup>1</sup> For a short survey of the collection's history, see Dirks 2009, 29–47.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Wilden 2014.

eleventh-century (?) preamble to a poetological commentary, Nakkīraṅ on the *Iṟaiyaṅār Akapporul*, the first exclusive treatise on love poetics.<sup>3</sup> This legend tells of how three successive literary academies were founded in the Pāṅṅiya capitals, under the aegis of the Pāṅṅiya kings, and how the seats of the first and second ones, Southern Maturai and Kapāṅapuram, were lost in flooding caused by heavy rainfall. The works of the *Caṅkam* we possess today would have been the fruit of the labours of the third academy in upper – that is, modern – Maturai. This flood legend has apparently lain dormant for centuries, except for a few allusions in the commentary literature and a few stray verses, but it first re-emerges in an anonymous verse account of unclear origin and date (found and quoted by U. V. Cāminātaiyar in the introduction to his edition of the *Cilappaṅikāram*) and then in the introduction to the *Tamiḷ Nāvalar Caritai*, a work that brings together quotations from fifty earlier poets of all periods up to the seventeenth century. However, the flood legend plays a centre-stage role in the nineteenth-century revival process and touches the root of modern Tamil self-understanding.

In short, the second cluster of legends can be called the *Tiruvīḷaiyāṅṅal* materials. Alluded to for the first time in the canonical poetic corpus of the Tamil Śaivas, the *Tēvāram*, and taken up briefly by several later works from the same corpus and by the *Kallāṅgam*, a poetic work possibly from the twelfth century, the first fully fledged narrative is Nampi's *Tiruvīḷaiyāṅṅarpurāṅgam*, possibly from the thirteenth century (?), which was translated into Sanskrit in the fifteenth-century *Hālāsya Māhātmyam* and then immortalised in Parañcōti's immensely popular retelling of the *Tiruvīḷaiyāṅṅarpurāṅgam* in the seventeenth century. From there, partial retellings and elaborations of particular events found their way into virtually every genre of Tamil literature.<sup>4</sup> To be sure, their purpose was not primarily to relate stories connected with the academy in Maturai, but to recount the 'sixty-four sports', or mythic deeds, of Lord Śiva, who in the form of Cuntarar is closely linked to Maturai and the fate of the Pāṅṅiya dynasty (and since the genealogy of Pāṅṅiya kings is part of the narrative frame of the *Purāṅgam*, it has been read as a kind of chronicle interspersed with myths). Among those sixty-four

<sup>3</sup> For a translation and discussion of the legend, see Aravamathan 1930 and Zvelebil 1973a; for a discussion of the dating problems, see Wilden 2009.

<sup>4</sup> For a first survey of related materials, see Aravamathan 1931–32; for a content synopsis of the three major versions, see Dessigane, Pattabiramin and Filliozat 1960.

deeds, there are no less than five events which take place in the academy itself.

In brief, the story relates how Śiva gave the poets – who could not agree among themselves about the quality of their poetry – the famous bench of judgement (*caṅkap palakai*), a plank which extends itself to allow all true poets to sit upon it. It continues with an account of how Śiva gave a poem to the poor and uneducated but devout priest Tarumi in order to make him win a poetic contest set up by the Pāṅṅiya king, the resulting dispute between Śiva and the academy poet Nakkīraṅ about the quality of that poem, the subsequent punishment of Nakkīraṅ, and his being forgiven and finally taught proper Tamil grammar at the hands of the mythical grammarian Akkatiyaṅ. The last academy-related event is the improper treatment suffered by an outsider – a poet by the name of Iṅaiṅkāṅṅaṅ – at the hands of an unjust Pāṅṅiya king, and Śiva's intervention to set matters straight.

With this the stage is set for the third cluster of legends, which concerns the bench of judgement, the poetic contest and jealousy among the poets. The third one tells of how Tiruvaḷḷuvar, the author of the *Tirukkuraḷ*, challenged the academy, how he was allowed to put the manuscript of his work on the bench and how it was approved. At that point, the numerous versions vary considerably: some of them say he took his place among the academy members, while others devise various punishments for the arrogant older academicians, even including the dissolution of the academy itself. What is peculiar about the whole set is that it is never mixed up with any of the other versions mentioned so far. Nothing in the Maturai materials gives any hint on either Tiruvaḷḷuvar or the *Kuraḷ*. Except for a few cryptic verses,<sup>5</sup> what is available is a whole series of nineteenth-century retellings in English, written both by Indian and by European authors. These versions have already been brought together and discussed in Blackburn 2000 (and focus more on the figure of Tiruvaḷḷuvar than on his relation to the academy). Blackburn points out that they seem to be based

<sup>5</sup> The most famous of them is found in the *Tiruvāḷḷuvamālai*, a little text transmitted in the wake of the *Kuraḷ* itself that is supposed to contain the praise poems written by the academy poets in honour of Tiruvaḷḷuvar after they had been forced to recognise his superiority. The first verse is generally read as an allusion to that event: *tiru taku teyvam tiruvaḷḷuvarōṅṅi' / uru taku nal palakai okka – irukka / uruttiracaṅṅamar eṅṅa uraittu vāṅṅil / orukkavō eṅṅat' ōr col*, 'Pronouncing: / "Together with holy divine Tiruvaḷḷuvar, / on the beautiful good bench let equally sit / Uruttiracaṅṅamar", from heaven / a voice spoke: "let them be united".' The simplest interpretation of this is that a voice from heaven (i.e. Śiva's voice) prompted a decision to accept Tiruvaḷḷuvar along with the famous 'arbitrator' Uruttiracaṅṅamar alias god Murukaṅ onto the bench of judgement and hence into the academy.

on oral accounts, at least one of which was preserved in the Mackenzie collection. He did not, however, find the Tamil source that brings the separate strands together.<sup>6</sup>

It comes as no surprise that more than one of the sources can still be traced back to that enormous collection, even if some of the actual manuscripts cannot be found there anymore. Wilson's Descriptive Catalogue from 1828 refers to a manuscript containing a chronicle of the Pāñṭiya kings that appears to have many similarities to the *Tiruvīlaiyāṭarpurānam*, only that here Tiruvaḷḷuvar is introduced right into the assembly. Surprisingly, the poet is not depicted as a human being in this case, but as an impersonation by Lord Śiva:

The last five chapters are devoted to marvellous anecdotes of the College of *Madura* founded by *Vamsa Sekhara*, for the cultivation of Tamil: the first professors of which forty-eight in number, it is said, were incarnations of the forty-eight letters of the Sanskrit alphabet and *Sundareśvara* himself was the 49th. The latter presented the College with a diamond bench or desk, which would give place to no heterodox or inferior productions. The professors becoming arrogant, Siva appeared as *Terupurāntaka Kaviviswer*, or according to some accounts, as *Teruvaluvar*, the celebrated moral poet, and produced a work which being laid on the desk with the Books of the forty-eight professors thrust every one of them off, and occupied the whole in solitary dignity. The chief teachers of the *Madura* College were *Narakira*, *Bāna*, and *Kapila*, to whose joint labours this work is ascribed.

(Wilson 1828, 197)

A couple of further versions of Tiruvaḷḷuvar's performance, with partly oral sources, are mentioned in Taylor's *Oriental Historical Manuscripts* of 1835, namely an account brought home by one of Mackenzie's trusted Indian collaborators, Cavelly Venkata Ramaswami, which stipulates that the bench vanished, a second one attributed to 'Madras', according to

<sup>6</sup> The earliest English reference, already brought forth by Blackburn (*ibid.*), is probably Kindersley 1794, 53, with a note on Tiruvaḷḷuvar: 'The author of this work [the *Kuṛal*] was a priest of the lowest order of the Hindoos (the pariar), and this cast have a tradition that the writer having ventured to appear with his moral performance (though at a very respectable distance) before the sacred bench of Bramins at Madura, it happened, while they were perusing it with admiration, that the bench on which they sat miraculously extended itself so as to admit another member, which the Bramins, interpreting as divine indication of the priest's competency to fill the vacant seat, liberally overlooked his exceptionable cast, and placed him on it. The Bramins, however, deny this story.'

which the bench elongated to accommodate Tiruvaḷḷuvar along with the earlier poets, and finally one labelled 'traditional' where the bench dissolves into water. These clearly legendary accounts with their beautiful variability reappear condensed into 'historical fact' only one year later in the first historiography of the Pāñṭiya kingdom, written and published by Wilson:

The reign of Vamsa Sek'hara was also distinguished by an event which led to important consequences to the literature of the Peninsula, and which is one reason for placing his reign in the earlier ages of Christianity. This was the foundation of a College at Madura, for the cultivation, it would appear, of profane literature and the Tamil language. ...

(Wilson 1836, 212)

The professors of the Madura College were at first forty-eight in number, called the *sangattār*, or assembly. **The chief of these were Narakira, Bāna, and Kapila, of whom no works remain.** These received instruction in the *Sūtras*, or rules, of the Dravira language, it is said, from the god Siva himself, who appeared amongst them as the forty-ninth professor, and enabled them to expound and propagate the primitive institutes of the language, which are invariably attributed in the Dekhin to the Muni Agastya...

(Wilson 1836, 213)

The abolition of the *sangattār* is narrated in the usual marvellous manner. A candidate for the honour of a seat on the bench of professors, appeared in the person of Tiruvaluvar, a Pariah priest from Mailapur, and the author of an ethical poem. The learned professors were highly indignant at his presumption, but, as he was patronised by the rājā, they were compelled to give his book at least the trial. For this purpose it was to find a place upon the marvellous bench, which the professors took care to occupy fully. To their astonishment, however, the bench extended itself to receive the work, and the book itself commencing to expand, spread out so as to thrust all other occupants from the bench. The rājā and the people of Madura witnessed the scene, and enjoyed the humiliation of the sages; and the professors were so sensible of their disgrace, that, unable to survive it, they issued forth, and all drowned themselves in a neighbouring pool. In consequence the establishment was abandoned.

(Wilson 1836, 217)

Table 1: Time frame for the materials pertaining to the legend

Century	Grammatical tradition	Śaiva tradition	<i>Kuṛaḷ</i> tradition
21 <sup>st</sup>	BGOMLRC <i>Maturai caṅkappalakai carittiram</i>		
20 <sup>th</sup>	GOML R.997		
19 <sup>th</sup>	Taylor's <i>Oriental Manuscripts</i> – Wilson's <i>Historical Sketch of the Pāṇṭiyas</i> GOML D.458 <i>Caṅkattār Carittiram</i>		
18 <sup>th</sup>	[ <i>Tamiḷnāvalar Caritai</i> ]		
17 <sup>th</sup>		Parañcōti's <i>Tiruvilaiyāṭarpurāṇam</i>	
16 <sup>th</sup>			
15 <sup>th</sup>		<i>Hālāsya Māhātmyam</i>	
13 <sup>th</sup>		Nampi's <i>Tiruvilaiyāṭarpurāṇam</i>	
12 <sup>th</sup>		Śaiva canon, eleventh <i>Tirumuṛai</i>	<i>Tiruvalluvamālai</i>
11 <sup>th</sup>	Nakkīraṅ's flood legend		

Here, it seems easy to separate the strands. All the information contained in the first paragraph can be abstracted from the academy stories of the *Tiruvilaiyāṭarpurāṇam*, known in colonial circles at the very least from the extensive English summary given in Taylor 1835, based on Parañcōti. It is fairly obvious that more was not known, firstly because the names of the three chief poets (Nakkīraṅ, Paraṇar and Kapilar) are misspelled in a way that is not explained by the spelling conventions of the period,<sup>7</sup> and secondly because their works are believed to be lost: the actual *Caṅkam* poetry was no longer available. Remarkable is also the absence of any reference to the sequence of three academies, based on the flood legend, which is told in detail, as already mentioned, in the *Tamiḷ Nāvalar Caritai*, and which is alluded to at least in passing by almost any other account of Tamil literary history of the period, such as Casie Chitty's Tamil Plutarch of 1859, to name just one.

<sup>7</sup> They had to be read from palm leaf (the *Tiruvilaiyāṭarpurāṇam* manuscripts) where, in the case of Nakkīraṅ, often written Naṅkīraṅ, the *pulli* on the *r* was not marked, thus allowing for a decipherment of Narakira (with deletion of the honorific *r* at the end). In the case of Paraṇar, the palm leaf does not distinguish the grapheme for long *ā* and for intervocalic *r*, hence the decipherment of 'Bana'.

Luckily, Wilson names his source for the second paragraph in a footnote, namely a manuscript entitled '*Madura Sangattār*'. Contents and timing now make it highly likely that this is a manuscript which passed from the Mackenzie collection to the GOML and was entered and catalogued under the shelf mark D.458 *Caṅkattār Carittiram*, 'the Life Story of the Academy Poets'.<sup>8</sup> The original palm-leaf manuscript appears to be lost now, or at least it has been entered in the list of missing manuscripts. What remains, however, is a paper copy entered as R.977, in a typical pre-lined industrial-paper exercise book such as were used for copying in many South-Indian libraries from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards. By a stroke of luck the little text had recently been published, in the Bulletin of the Government Oriental Manuscript Library and Research Centre in 2009, under the title '*Maturai caṅkappalakai carittiram*', which is why I was allowed to digitise the manuscript. This brings

<sup>8</sup> Shelf marks beginning with a capital D are generally used for the palm leaves that form the oldest part of the new collection, described in the early volumes of the Raṅgācāryā, Kuppuswami Sastri and Subramanya Sastri catalogue; this one is found in vol. 2 from 1916. Many of those manuscripts were subsequently copied on paper and shelf-marked with a capital R in order to preserve their content. Some texts accordingly exist today both on palm leaf and on paper, while the palm leaves of others have not survived the course of time.



us back to the origin of the first conflation of sources, because GOML D.458 = R.997 gives a digest of the *Caṅkam* legends from the *Tiruvīlaiyāṭal* tradition entangled with the life story of Tiruvalluvar.

The time frame for the development outlined so far can be summarised in table 1.

How old might the original manuscript have been? Early nineteenth century if it was made for the Mackenzie collection or possibly older if it was a palm leaf that happened to be of interest to the collectors. It is not clear whether the original simply disintegrated while or after being copied on paper, the alarming condition of the palm leaf being the usual reason for ‘emergency copying’ undertaken at the GOML. The editor of 2009 claims to have used the original D.458, but since there is a pencil note on the flyleaf of the paper copy, stating that the text has been published by the GOML Bulletin, that seems doubtful. Also the date of the paper copy itself is not clear. There is a Tamil writer’s colophon with an addition in English from the library that states the manuscript was ‘Restored from a Ms. of this Library. Restored in 1930–31. From D.458’. However, there is another date given both on the fly- and the title leaves, 9.5.88 (presumably 1888), and the manuscript is written in three hands. One possible explanation is that the paper copy was made in 1888, got damaged and had to be partially restored from the palm leaf in 1930.

The scribal colophon (fig. 1) gives brief information about the content of the text:

*itu caṅkattār carittiram muṟṟum. tiruvalluvanāyinaṟ  
vekukālam mayilāppūriliruntu aṇēkamakimaiyuṭaṇē iruntu  
appāl paralōkattai aṭaintār. avar camāti vaitta iṭattil kōviluṅ  
kaṭṭi nālatu varaikkum nittiyapūcai naṭantukoṇṭu varukiratu.  
itu tiruvalluvanāyinaṟ carittiram.  
maturaiccaṅkattār carittiram muṟṟum.*

Here ends the life story of the Academy scholars. At another time, Lord Tiruvalluvar, being from Māyilapūr and with

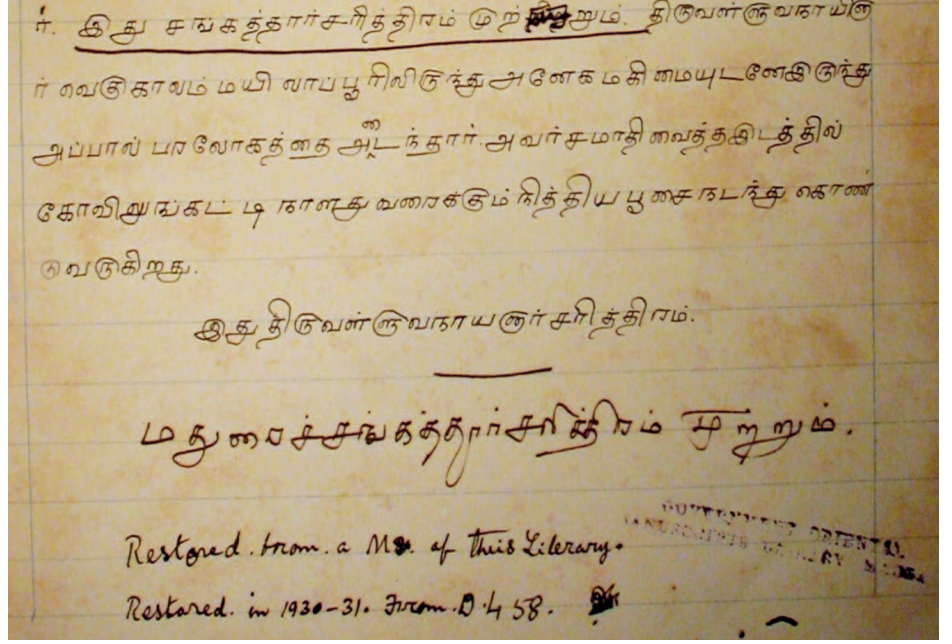


Figure 1: The colophon of R.997.

unequalled greatness, joined the other world there. In the place where he concentrated, a temple has also been built and a permanent service is held there.

This is the life story of Lord Tiruvalluvar.

Here ends the life story of the Maturai Academy scholars.

There still seems to be an awareness of the fact that two stories have been joined here, namely the story of the Maturai Academy scholars and the life story of Tiruvalluvar (who was involved in bringing it to an end). A reference to Tiruvalluvar’s birth place has been added, namely Māyilapūr, Madras, and a temple in the same place, possibly the origin of the manuscript, but that is not stated clearly. This is not the place to translate the full text, but to summarise briefly, the manuscript starts with the *Tiruvīlaiyāṭal* stories, beginning with the creation of the academy and the gift of the *Caṅkappalakai*, the bench, giving, however another rationale for that step, namely the arrogance of forty-nine heavenly poets assembled around Śiva, who are sent to Earth to be taught a lesson in humility. This is followed by the poem that Tarumi (or ‘Tarmi’ here) presented to the academy, the dispute between Śiva and Nakkīraṅ, and the latter’s punishment, but skipping the episode about Śiva interceding on behalf of the poet Iṭaikkāṭaṅ. It continues by recounting the birth of Tiruvalluvar, culminating in his challenge of the academy, which results in the bench’s accommodating the *Kuraḷ*, but throwing the established scholars into the

academy pond as a punishment for their arrogance, which had already manifested itself in their treatment of ‘Tarmi’.

As a concluding remark, a few words should be said about the copying procedure followed by this paper manuscript, which deserves to be termed out of the ordinary. The language of the text is a fair mixture of spoken and formal Tamil, with many Sanskrit loanwords, often written with Grantha letters (used in South India to write Sanskrit up until the twentieth century) in addition to the Tamil alphabet. The copyist, presumably when disagreeing with the palm leaf, put the original reading into square brackets and added his own suggestion in round brackets. A great number of his corrections are normalisations of spoken Tamil forms. This procedure is in marked contrast to that of the 2009 edition, with re-tamilisation of Grantha letters and normalisation of the syntax. The first few sentences of the manuscript read as follows, with Grantha letters put in bold:

*ātiyil caṅkattār nārpattonpatupērum kailācattil cuvāmiyiṭattil  
tami[cāstiraṅka] cakalamum vācittu, [yī](i)ṅimēl taṅkaḷukkuc  
camāṅa[mo]m(r) āṅavar oruvarum illai enru mikunta [keru]  
(keru)vattuṅṅē oruvaraiyum ilaṭciyampaṅṅāmal irukkīratu.  
cuvāmikkut terintu ‘[yī](i)varkaḷaik karuvapaṅkam  
paṅṅa vē[n](nt)um’ enru tiruvu[l](l)attilē niṅaintu, ‘[ṅ]  
(n)ṅkaḷ pūḷōkattil maṅṅuṅṅarām piṅṅantu akattiyariṭattil  
tamiḷilakkaṅamam mutalākiya cāstiraṅkaḷellām vācittu  
maturaiyil vaṅku[s](c)a cēkarapāṅṅiyaṅṅiṭattil vittuvāṅkaḷāy  
iruṅkaḷ. antat talam tuvātacāntamākac [cē](ceyṅē) namakku  
mukkiyamāṅa talamākac [cē](ceyṅē) atil nām arup(p. 1)  
pattu nāṅku tiruḷaiyāḷal(kaḷ) ceykīraṅṅālē atil (tami)  
ḷkku atikāri[y](k)aḷāka [yī](i)ruṅkaḷ. antak kōyilil [corṅṅa]  
(cuvārṅa) puṅka[r](r)aṅi enru orumakāpuṅṅiya tī(r)ttam  
iruk(kī)ratu. atil snāṅam paṅṅiṅṅāl cakala pāpaṅkaḷum  
vimōcaṅamāy anta mīṅṅāci cuntarecucararai orumaṅṅalam  
taricaṅam paṅṅiṅṅāl nammuṅṅaiya [kayī](kai)lāca patavi  
kiṅṅaikkum. antac [cor](cuvār)ṅa puṅka(ra)ṅiyil orupalakai  
mēḷē eḷumpi mitakkum. antap palakaik[ki](ku) nāmatē[ṅ](y)  
am ‘caṅkappalakai’ enru collappaṅum.*

In the beginning, there were forty-nine people learning all Tamil *śāstras* with the Lord on [Mount] Kailās, priding themselves that from now on nobody would be equal to them [and] without paying respect to anybody. [That] becoming known to the Lord, he thought in his sacred mind ‘it is necessary to defeat their arrogance’ – let you be born on Earth as humans, learn all *śāstras*, beginning with the Tamil

grammatical works from Akkatiyar, and stay as scholars with the Pāṅṅiya [king] Vaṅkuṅcēkarar. Because, making that place into the twelfth, making it the place that is the foremost to us, we perform sixty-four sacred sports there, let you be Tamil experts there. In that temple there is a bathing *ghat* of great merit with the name ‘golden lotus pond’. If one bathes there, all evil deeds are dissolved, [and] if one obtains sight of Mīṅṅāci [and] Cuntarecucarar, it joins the rank of our Kailās. In that golden lotus-tank a plank rises [and] floats. That plank is called by the name of ‘academy plank’.

The main corrections to be seen here concern morphology: correcting spoken *vēṅum* into formal *vēṅṅum*, replacing *-kki* as a dative suffix by *-kku* and *-yaḷ* as a plural suffix by *-kaḷ*. Others simplify *sandhi* by replacing a gliding consonant for a word-initial vowel. Phonemic normalisation is also found, such as *ḷ* for *ḷ*, not to forget simple corrections of mistakes. Sad as it is that the original palm leaf appears to have been lost, the paper copy in our hands is the manuscript of a philologist who tried to preserve his source text as closely as possible while at the same time trying to make it more readable.

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