Article

On the Eight Uses of Palm Leaf: *ōlai* and *ēṭu* in the Tamil Literature of the First Millennium*

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We are reading and editing Classical Tamil texts that may roughly date back to the beginning of the first millennium of the Common Era. However, the manuscripts that still exist are at the best two to three hundred years old. Still, if we want to find out what manuscripts may have meant in their own cultural context, one possible approach is to trace references to manuscripts and related practices in the literary texts of an earlier period. A cursory survey of sources from the first millennium (in so far as they are available in searchable, digital form) reveals, apart from a number of manuscript-related terms such as *ōlai* and *ēṭu* (for the palm leaf itself), *kāppu* for the string it is tied with and *ūci* for the stylus employed for writing, a whole range of various ways in which manuscripts were used. The verb *eḻututal*, 'to draw', is commonly used in the sense of writing since the *Akanāṉūṟu* (*AN*), which is one of the earliest poetic anthologies of Classical Tamil included in the so-called *Caṅkam* ('academy') corpus datable to approximately the first centuries of the Common Era[1] (where it is used in connection with the stone inscriptions on what is called, in Tamil, a *naṭukal*, 'hero stone', inscribed memorial stones erected in honour of fallen warriors of exceptional prowess)[2]. Also its nominal derivation *eḻuttu*, 'letter', may be found in the same context.

The time frame contemplated in this article can be roughly described as the second half of the first millennium with the exception of part of the *Akanāṉūṟu* material which may even date back several centuries further.[3] The texts belong to five different genres. Apart from the *AN* and the *Kalittokai*, a later addition to the same corpus, we find recurring references in the poetic epic *Cilappatikāram*. Two of the didactic anthologies collected under the title *Kīḻkkaṇakku*, 'minor classics', which follow in the wake of the *Caṅkam*, have to be taken into account as well, namely the *Nālaṭiyār* and the *Paḻamoḻi* (as a continuation of the tradition of court poetry, the *Muttoḻḻāyiram* can be mentioned which followed slightly later). Finally, the *Śaiva* devotional tradition does not remain silent on our topic, even if the event alluded to is to be considered as mythical.

Table: the semantic field[4]

Term	Source
eḻututal 'to write, inscribe, draw' *eḻuttu* 'letter'	hero stones in the *Akanāṉūṟu* ~ 3/4th c. CE
ōlai/ēṭu 'palm leaf'[4]	*Akanāṉūṟu*, *Kalittokai*, *Cilappatikāram*, *Peruṅkatai*, *Tēvāram*, *Nālaṭiyār*, *Paḻamoḻi* ~ 5th–8th c. CE
kāppu 'string'	*Kalittokai* ~ 6th c. CE
ūci 'stylus'	*Muttoḻḻāyiram* ~ 8/9th c. CE

* The material on which this article is based was first presented at a meeting of the then Research Group Manuscript Cultures in Asia and Africa financed by the German Research Foundation (DFG), as well as to the participants of the 9th Classical Tamil Summer Seminar in Pondicherry. Among the colleagues to whom I would like to thank for discussing this topic I just want to mention Jean-Luc Chevillard who brought to my attention the strange verse from the *Intirakāḷiyam* quoted at the end.

[1] The *Caṅkam* corpus comprises the 'Eight Anthologies' *Eṭṭuttokai* – i.e. the six earlier anthologies *Kuṟuntokai*, *Naṟṟiṇai*, *Akanāṉūṟu*, *Puṟanāṉūṟu*, *Aiṅkuṟunūṟu* and *Patiṟṟuppattu* as well as the two later anthologies *Kalittokai* and *Paripāṭal* – and the 'Ten Songs' *Pattuppāṭṭu*. For a model of their anthologization and interrelation, see Wilden 2014.

[2] For a discussion of the literary and archaeological evidence concerning the hero stones, see Rajan 2014; for the Tamil Brahmī material see also Mahadevan 2003.

[3] The *Akanāṉūṟu* is generally considered as counting among the oldest *Caṅkam* anthologies (with core material dating back to the first three centuries CE), however its poems are often difficult to place because, arguably, the collection was compiled late and thus contains not only very early but also fairly late material (as late as the sixth century). In the case of the hero stone poems the considerably high number of formulaic elements as well as conservative morphology and syntax rather seem to point to an earlier date; moreover, one poem has a long formulaic parallel in the *Aiṅkuṟunūṟu*, one of the intermediate anthologies.

[4] As for the semantics of *ōlai* and *ēṭu,* both seem to be special forms of more general terms referring to the leaf or part of the leaf of the Palmyra

Going roughly through the relevant passages in the order of temporal precedence, the *AN* has to be put first. Here, palm leaf as writing material is not yet mentioned, but the so-called hero stones (*nāṭukal*) form a small topos in only two of the *Caṅkam* anthologies, the *AN* and the *Puṟanāṉūṟu*. Since the latter is the core anthology of heroic poetry (*puṟam*), the presence of such a topic is not surprising. In the love poetry (*akam*) of the *AN*, the exclusive context is a subtheme of *pālai* poems (the setting where the male protagonist travels through the desert region), namely of the dangers of travelling due to highway robbery. Being killed in the fight against such bandits was one of the reasons for a man to receive a hero stone.

Akanāṉūṟu 53.10f. [10–11b ~ *Aiṅkuṟunūṟu* 352.1–2b]
(letters on a hero stone)

> விழுதொடை மறவர் வில்லிட வீழ்ந்தோ
> ரெழுத்துடை நடுகல் லின்னிழல் வதியும்
>
> *viḻu toṭai maṟavar vil iṭa vīḻntōr*
> *eḻuttu uṭai naṭukal iṉ niḻal vatiyum*
>
> Abiding in the shade of the hero stone [inscribed] with letters
> for those fallen when the bold [highway] men with excellent arrows had aimed [their] bows.

In the above quotation, letters were engraved on a stone, which was erected to commemorate defenders killed in a fight against robbers (the traditional occupation of the desert folks being to waylay travellers, since their barren country cannot feed them) and was apparently quite big as a person could stay in its shade. What is supposed to be written there follows from the subsequent passage which belongs to the same topical subset in two closely related formulaic versions.

Akanāṉūṟu 67.8–10 [9f. = *AN* 131.10f.]
(writing on hero stones)

Fig. 1: Hero stone from Pakkam, (6th cent. CE).

> நல்லமர் கடந்த நாணுடை மறவர்ப்
> பெயரும் பீடு மெழுதி யதர்தொறும்
> பீலி சூட்டிய பிறங்குநிலை நடுகல்
>
> *nal amar kaṭanta nāṇ uṭai maṟavar*
> *peyarum pīṭum eḻuti atar toṟum*
> *pīli cūṭṭiya piṟaṅku nilai naṭukal*
>
> Hero stones in glittering condition adorned with peacock feathers
> on every way, inscribed with the name and fame
> of honourable[5] warriors overcome in good battle.

Inscribed, or, more precisely, incised in the stone are the 'name and fame', which are presumably the name of the hero and his deed through which he dies. Judging by the actual hero stones of which a considerable number was found even before the beginning of the Common Era and the *Caṅkam* period – i.e. predominantly between the fourth century BCE

palm (*borassus flabelifer*). The *Marapu-iyal* of the *Tolkāppiyam* (one of the first parts of a literary *thesaurus* in the grammatical tradition) enumerates both among the parts of the species referred to as (soft-cored) *pul*, 'grass', in contrast to (hard-cored) *maram*, 'tree', from which we must conclude that palm trees were not perceived as trees but rather as a variety of grass. *Sūtra* TPi 635 runs: *tōṭē maṭalē ōlai eṉṟā | ēṭē itaḻē pāḷai eṉṟā | īrkkē kulai eṉa nērntaṉa piṟavum | pulloṭu varum eṉac colliṉar pulavar.* 'Learned men say that the following terms are used to denote the different parts of the *pul* genus: *tōṭu* (sheath), *maṭal* (tagged stem), *ōlai* (leaf), *ēṭu* (strip of leaf), *itaḻ* (petal), *pāḷai* (spathe), *īrkku* (rib of a leaf), *kulai* (bunch), etc.' (translation Subrahmanya Sastri 1956, 224f.). Furthermore, the leaf of a tree (*maram*) is called *ilai* (TPi 633), a term once used in the most important of the early Śaiva devotional anthologies, the *Tēvāram*, in the sense of inscribed palm leaf (see note 11). For the early period contemplated herein, the predominant word is clearly *ōlai*; only three examples of the use of *ēṭu* could be established so far.

[5] *nāṇ* is one of the key words referring to the ethical codex of the heroic domain. Its basic meaning is 'shame', which means, in the case of men going to war, their sense of honour which prohibits them to show any weakness such as fear or even cowardice.

and the fifth century CE[6] – the inscriptions were incised either in Tamil *brahmī* or in early *vaṭṭeḻuttu* script.[7] Still in the AN, but perhaps in a slightly later layer we find the first reference to a palm leaf as an item used, although the passage is too elusive to determine whether it was used as a writing support or whether it had a symbolic value as such.

1. Ensign of Peace

Akanāṉūṟu 337.7
(message/ensign of peace?)

தூதொய் பார்ப்பான் மடிவெள் ளோலை

tūtu oy pārppāṉ maṭi veḷ ōlai

The folded white palm leaf of a brahmin sent as a messenger.

In the above quotation, a Brahmin acting as a messenger, holding a palm leaf (*ōlai*) in his hand, is attacked by desert robbers who believed he was carrying gold. The description of the palm leaf as being 'white' (*veḷ*) is quite unclear, since it can either mean that it is bright and plainly visible or that it was intentionally left blank (cf. the *Peruṅkatai* example on p. 57). Further, it may have been folded if we take *maṭi* as a verbal root, which with respect to a palm leaf may rather mean that it was rolled up lengthwise into a sort of ring, which was presumably easier to carry than an easily damaged loose leaf.[8] Or it may have been covered in cloth (*maṭi* as a noun), which might explain the robbers' interest who apparently hoped for a more valuable content of the bundle. Either way no mention is made of script being used on the palm leaf; it could indeed contain a message or be a sign of messenger's legitimation.[9]

The next passage, which is one of the two passages using *ēṭu* instead of *ōlai*, is unambiguous with respect to writing, although the function is far from being obvious. It seems to be of a ritual nature rather than of an informative one.

2. Expiation

Cilappatikāram 15.58
(expiation)

வடமொழி வாசகஞ் செய்த நல்லேடு

vaṭamoḻi vācakam ceyta nal ēṭu

A good palm leaf made with a verse in Northern language.

The above quotation includes one of the elusive sub-episodes in the narrative of the oldest poetic epic in Tamil, the *Cilappatikāram*. Among the good deeds of the hero Kōvalaṉ the following is mentioned: the wife of a *brahmin* inadvertently killed a mongoose. In order to make her expiate her sin, her husband inscribes a Sanskrit verse on a palm leaf and sends her abroad to go from house to house in order to find someone who will take the leaf from her including the sin, an act of kindness duly performed by Kōvalaṉ. The cultural background remains obscure; it is neither clear what the function of writing is in this case, nor what the reason of using Sanskrit rather than Tamil language is.[10] However, the same text testifies to the practice of writing as a somewhat more wide-spread activity, because we also find an episode where the courtesan Mātavi writes a private letter to her absent lover Kōvalaṉ.

3. Letters

Cilappatikāram 13.74c-78
(letter)

மலர்க்கையி னெழுதிக்
கண்மணி யனையாற்குக் காட்டுக வென்றே
மண்ணுடை முடங்கல் மாதவி யீத்ததும்
ஈத்த வோலைகொண் டிடைநெறித் திரிந்து

malar kaiyiṉ eḻuti
kaṇ maṇi aṉaiyāṟku kāṭṭuka eṉṟē
maṇ uṭai muṭaṅkal mātavi īttatum
ītta ōlai koṇṭ' iṭai-neṟit tirintu

As soon as Mātavi gave the sealed scroll,
having written [it] with her blossom hand,
[with the words] 'show [it] to him who is like the pupil
of [my] eye',
he took the palm leaf given [by her] and set out on [his] way.

[6] For details on such findings see Rajan, ib., who affirms that the practice continued until the seventeenth century; from the fifth century CE onwards inscriptions can be accompanied by carved images.

[7] Both scripts are generally counted among the derivatives of Aśokan *brahmī*, with Tamil *brahmī* being the earlier of the two, and both predate the actual Tamil script found in the surviving manuscripts which, apart from some modifications, is still used today.

[8] Rolled palm leaves are today found in manuscript collections (one is kept in the Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg Carl von Ossietzky). They seem to be amulets, with a charm or protective verse written on them which, however, cannot be deciphered anymore, since a leaf kept in such a position for so long cannot be unrolled without being destroyed.

[9] Palm leaves handed over by ambassadors is a practice referred to in a famous commentary of approximately the thirteenth century on the most important among the early didactic anthologies, namely *Parimēlaḻakar* on *Tirukkuḷaḷ* 687. However, in this case it is not specified either whether or not something is written on the palm leaf.

[10] A somewhat later parallel for the use of the term *ēṭu* derives from the Vaiṣṇava devotional corpus, i.e. the *Periyatirumoḻi* of Tirumaṅkaiyāḻvār (ninth c.). *Periyatirumoḻi* 4.1.7 includes a description of *brahmins* who are knowledgeable in the *Vedas*: *ēṭ' ēṟu perum celvatt' eḻil maṟaiyōr*, 'graceful *Veda* experts with great wealth that is spread by palm leaves'. I suggest interpreting this as an elaboration of the Tamil designation of the devotional corpus as *Veda*; in contrast to the notoriously unwritten *Veda* of the Northern tradition, the Tamil *Veda* was transmitted and is accessible in manuscript form.

Besides *ōlai* we find a second term in the above quotation which may go back to an idiosyncratic use in the *Cilappatikāram*, namely *muṭaṅkal*, morphologically a verbal noun of the root *muṭaṅkutal*, 'to bend'. Not unlike the attribute *maṭi* included in *AN* 337.7 above, it seems to refer to what is done with the leaf once it has been written on, namely to fold or, as already suggested, rather to roll it, which suggests 'scroll' as a plausible translation for the verbal noun. The further attribute here conveys important information; *maṇ-uṭai* literally means 'possessing clay', which is explained by the commentator as a seal (*illaciṉai*). Thus the palm leaf is written on, rolled and sealed and then sent out as letter. Regarding the delivery of the letter, the text varies between *ōlai* and *muṭaṅkal* without any apparent differentiation; the commentary uses the term *ōlai*.[11]

A differentiation seems to be made between *ōlai* and *ēṭu* in another, perhaps roughly contemporaneous text of the epic tradition, the *Peruṅkatai*, which is a Tamil version of the *Bṛhatkathā*.[12] In this context, an order is given to servants by king Piraccōtaṉaṉ concerning the accommodation of prince Utayaṇaṉ as honoured guest according to his rank.

4. Cheque

Peruṅkatai 1.32.69f.
(cheque)

வெள்ளேட் டங்கண் வித்தக மெழுதிய
கடையெழுத் தோலைக் கணக்கு வரிகாட்டி

veḷ ēṭṭ' aṅkaṇ vittakam eḻutiya
kaṭaiyeḻutt' ōlaik kaṇakku vari kāṭṭi

Showing the lines of an account on a palm leaf with signature
written with skill there on a blank leaf.

So the king's servants are supposed to show the document produced to the treasurer in order to be able to draw on the amount required for entertaining the guest in proper style. The document in question is a palm leaf (*ōlai*) representing an account (*kaṇakku*) – presumably a calculation of the amounts to be spent for different purposes (e.g. housing, food etc.) – authenticated by the king's signature (*kaṭaiyeḻuttu*)[13], with the whole text having been written on a piece of white or blank[14] palm leaf (*ēṭu*), which obviously refers to the material support. The modern designation that comes closest to such item would be a cheque, with the extended function being to record the exact use of the king's gold.

If we now examine *AN* 337.7 once again in the light of the last two passages, we are rather confused. On the one hand, the use of *muṭaṅkal* ('scroll') in the *Cilappatikāram* may serve to interpret the 'rolled' (*maṭi*) leaf mentioned there rather as a written message. On the other hand, the *Peruṅkatai* mentions a second 'white palm leaf' (*veḷ ōlai*), interpreted by the commentator as a blank leaf. How are we to understand a blank palm leaf in letter format carried by a messenger or ambassador? It is impossible to answer this question without examining further parallels.

5. Accounts

A different use of palm leaves, which however belongs to a similar sphere of human activity, is shown in the *Nālaṭiyār*, one of the didactic *Kīḻkkaṇakku* anthologies dating back to approximately the seventh century. One of the distinct characteristics of almost all the poetry of this period is a consciousness of the heavy load of tradition. Classical Tamil poetry is subjected to a very strict and complex set of conventions, and poetic originality often consists in the attempt to find new, surprising similes and metaphors to express the inherited range of situations and emotions. The following verse reflects the sadness of the evening, a time when separated lovers, after the day's work has been done, take their time to think of their absent dear ones, which seems to be a playful variant on the topos of human activities coming to an end.

Nālaṭiyār 40.7.1
(account)

ஓலைக் கணக்க ரொலியடங்கு

ōlaik kaṇakkar oli aṭaṅku

(In the evening,)
when the noise of those making accounts on palm leaves subsides.

The idea is that in the evening work stops, including the hustle and bustle of talking and, presumably, dictating on the part of the accountants who keep their accounts on palm leaves – a practice to which tons of badly assorted decaying material in various temples and libraries still bear testimony.

[11] The phrase referring to a sealed scroll (*maṇṇuṭai muṭaṅkal*) is used once more in the *Cilappatikāram*, in 26.171, referring to an official letter written by the royal scribes and sent off by the king. The commentary gloss mentioned above is found in connection with said passage.

[12] For a comparative study of the various versions and possible sources for the Tamil *Peruṅkatai* and a synopsis of the events referred to see Vijalalakshmy 1981.

[13] *kaṭaiyeḻuttu* is literally the 'end-writing', glossed by the commentary as 'hand likeness' (*kaiyoppam*).

[14] *veḷ ēṭu* is explained by Cāmināṭaiyar as a palm leaf that has not been written on (*eḻutāta ōlai*) for which he finds a quotation from the inventory of anonymous poetry (*tāṉippāṭaṟ ṟiraṭṭu*) that is quite impossible to date.

A parallel for *kaṇakku* meaning 'account',[15] although in a metaphorical sense, can be found in the *Tēvāram*, the core text of the Śaivite bhakti corpus, dating back to approximately the seventh cent.

Tēvāram 5.21.8
(account)

பொழுது போக்கிப் புறக்கணிப் பாரையும் |
இன்னம்ப ரீசன் கீழ்க்கணக் கெழுதும்,

poḻutu pōkkip puṟakkaṇippāraiyum |
iṉṉampar īcaṉ kīḻkkaṇakku eḻutum,

Those who waste [their] time, neglecting [religious service]
Śiva in Iṉṉampar (the temple) will write down in [his]
account [book].

6. Literary/Learned Texts

The first reference to palm-leaf as a material support for literary texts appears late, i.e. in one of the late additions to the classical corpus, the *Kalittokai*. This is interesting in two ways, because the passage in question might be considered as an indication of the transition from oral to written transmission. None of the six anthologies in today's *Eṭṭuttokai* that probably formed the original collection (and are still transmitted as a series in some of the surviving manuscripts) contain any reference to a written tradition, although they certainly derive from a literary tradition with a set of highly sophisticated conventions (described in a roughly contemporaneous poetological treatise, the *Tolkāppiyam*). Thus they are representing a tradition which is quite conscious of itself, as is attested by a variety of meta-poetic games such as playing with homophones, ironical intertextual references, and the like.[16]

Kalittokai 94.42f.
(poetic/learned text?)

துகடபு காட்சி யவையத்தா ரோலை
முகடு காப்பு யாத்துவிட் டாங்கு

tukaḷ tapu kāṭci avaiyattār ōlai
mukaṭu kāppu yāttuviṭṭāṅku

as if the strings were tied on top
of the palm leaf by those of the assembly whose sight fails
with dust.

In fact the *Kalittokai* does not contain a direct statement but provides a variant on another famous topos in the form of a simile for the closeness of lovers in an embrace, thereby recalling the famous *Kuṟuntokai* 370 where the encounter between lover and beloved is compared to fingers gripping a bow in aiming, an image that has given the poet his pen name, Villakaviraliṉār ('He [who sung] the fingers on the bow'). In this example the lovers are as tightly linked as a palm leaf is tied with strings, which here undoubtedly means a manuscript. As a poetic aside we are getting a glimpse of the poet-scholars who handle the object in question, who are (ironically?) very far from being lovers and whose vision is clouded by the proverbial dust from the palm leaves, thus suggesting an ancient tradition.

A written tradition, though a devotional one in the present case, is also a prerequisite for the next passage from the Śaivite *Tēvāram*. It has to be read as an allusion to a well-known episode from the life of Tiruñāṉacampantar, one of the three poet-sages who composed the *Tēvāram*, which is told *in extenso* in the twelfth-century hagiographic *Periyapurāṇam*.

Tēvāram 3.54.11.2c–3c

கரைக்கு ஓலை தெண்ணீர்
பற்று இன்றிப் பாங்கு எதிர்வின் ஊரவும்

karaikku ōlai teḷ nīr
paṟṟu iṉṟi pāṅku etirviṉ ūravum

when the palm leaves moved against nature (= upstream),
without being seized by the clear water, to the shore.

The episode alluded to is part of the poet's conflict with the Jains. As part of a discussion with the exponents of the (from the Śaivite perspective) heterodox sect, both parties threw bundles of palm leaves containing their respective holy scriptures into the water of a river. While those of the Jains were carried away by the flood, then submerged and were destroyed, those of the *Tēvāram*, thrown by Tiruñāṉacampantar, moved upstream back to the shore.[17]

Returning to the learned tradition, we will analyse another verse from the already quoted *Nālaṭiyār*, although here we can raise the question whether we are still dealing with an exclusively poetic tradition or whether by now the theoretical domain – presumably in the form of grammar – has to be included, for it already seems to be a major effort to deal with the existing tasks.

[15] The prefix *kīḻ* ('under'), in a compound *kīḻkkaṇakku* that is better known as the designation of the minor classics ('lower order') is quite surprising, but in this context is to be understood in its literal meaning.

[16] For a brief foray into the *Caṅkam* meta-poetic realm see Wilden 2011.

[17] The same episode is probably alluded to in *Tēvāram* 3.113.12.1 where palm leaves are described, with a more general term for 'leaf' (*ilai*), as *patikam atu eḻutu ilai avai*: 'those leaves on which that decade [of poems] was written'.

Nālaṭiyār 26.3
(symbol of a learned tradition)

கல்லென்று தந்தை கழற யதனையோர்
சொல்லென்று கொள்ளா திகழ்ந்தவன் மெல்ல
வெழுத்தோலை பல்லார் முன்னீட்ட விளியா
வழுக்கோலைக் கொண்டு விடும்.

'kal' enṟu tantai kaḻaṟa, 'ataṉai ōr
col' enṟu koḷḷātu ikaḻntavaṉ, mella
eḻuttu ōlai pallār muṉ nīṭṭa, viḷiyā
vaḻuk kōlaik koṇṭu-viṭum.

He who, when [his] father nagged 'learn',
was negligent, not taking that to be a word, when gently
he is offered a lettered palm leaf in front of many,
disgracefully
he will receive the stick for [his] fault.

As is often the case, syntax is undermarked and semantics are elusive, but the message appears to be unequivocal. The young man who does not heed his father's advice to pursue his studies fervently and refuses to accept that assignment (*ataṉai*, anaphoric pronoun) as an appropriate rule of behaviour (*col*, literally 'word'), will receive his just punishment (*kōl*, 'stick') at a later time when he exposes his ignorance in front of the assembly by not being able to understand the text written on the palm leaf presented to him. This little verse reveals a number of things: we have to conclude that it was customary to read and discuss literary and/or theoretical texts in convivial gatherings and that being unable to participate in such a discourse was regarded as disgraceful in case of a man belonging to a corresponding social class (whatever that may have been). The scenario that comes to mind, as described in Ebeling 2010 for the nineteenth century, is that of public recitation of newly composed poetry, read from the freshly accomplished palm leaf by the author or one of his students, followed by an oral commentary to elucidate the details and discuss questions from the appreciative audience. Learning as recommended by the father in that particular case must have comprised the practice of reading and writing as well as learning literary texts, *thesauri* and grammatical treatises by heart, as was the premodern standard for higher education. In other words, this verse substantiates and confirms the playful simile from the *Kalittokai* concerning manuscripts tied with string. Palm leaf was the material support of the learned tradition.

7. Book of Fate

A further didactic anthology from the *Kīḻkkaṇakku*, the *Paḻamoḻi* (seventh/eighth century) contains a stanza which in a metaphorical way refers to what may be named a book of fate.

Paḻamoḻi 29
(the 'book' of fate?)

முழுதுடன் முன்னே வகுத்தவ னென்று
தொழுதிருந் தக்கண்ணே யொழியுமோ வல்ல
லிழுகினா னாகாப்ப தில்லையே முன்ன
மெழுதினா னோலை பழுது.

'muḻut' uṭaṉ muṉṉē vakuttavaṉ' enṟu
toḻut' iruntak-kaṇṇē oḻiyumō allal.
iḻukiṉāṉ ā kāppatu illaiyē. muṉṉam
eḻutiṉāṉ ōlai paḻutu.

'He who of old allotted the whole',
when thus worshipping, will misery cease?
When [someone] procrastinates, there is no protecting
[him].
Of old he has written [his] faults on a palm leaf.

Again, the syntax is slightly dubious but I suggest reading the masculine *vakuttavaṉ* in the first line as referring to God in his position as overseer of the world he has created and maintains. Then the question of the first two lines pertains to the possibility of attaining salvation by devotion, as is the attitude of the Tamil devotional movement (*bhakti*). The answer is partly definite and partly inconclusive. Taking the two masculine verbs in lines 3 and 4 as referring to a human subject, line 3 affirms that for someone who is remiss in worshipping (*iḻikiṉāṉ*) God's protection is definitely out of reach. The fourth line then seems to cast doubt on the capacity of human beings to change their ways: what evil deeds they may do is already noted down. Since in this case the object of writing is the human being itself, the implication may be that what is going to happen is predestined by the influence of old *karma*. Again, the object to be written on is simply called palm leaf. The context, however, also reminds us of the *Tēvāram* stanza quoted above on page 72 where Śiva records human misbehaviour in his account book (*kīḻkkaṇakku*).

8. Inscription

The very last stanza can be found in the *Muttoḷḷāyiram*, a partially transmitted collection of royal panegyrics for the three great houses Cōḻa, Cēra and Pāṇṭiya which also dates back to the later first millennium. Here the urge to find fresh images within the old framework is in its prime, which is why we find there a fully-fledged image of the production of royal panegyrics, incidentally including the first attestation of the term *ūci* as a stylus used for incising the leaf.

Muttoḷḷāyiram 3.47
(royal panegyric = inscription)

மருப்பூசி யாக மறங்கனல் வேன்மன்ன

ருருத்தகு மார்போலை யாக திருத்தக்க
வையக மெல்லா மெமதென் றெழுதுமே
மொய்யிலை வேன்மாறன் களிறு.

maruppu ūci āka maṟam kaṉal vēl maṉṉar
urut taku mārpu ōlai āka 'tiru takka
vaiyakam ellām ematu eṉṟu' eḻutumē
moy ilai vēl māṟaṉ kaḷiṟu.

With [his] tusk as the stylus [and] with the beautiful chest of kings
[carrying] brave angry spears as palm leaves he writes:
'the whole world fitted with wealth is ours',
the elephant bull of the Pāṇṭiya with a battle-bladed spear.

So the wounds which the king's war elephant caused to the chests of the enemy kings they killed in the battle can be interpreted as an announcement of victory in the form of writing, a practice familiar from the eulogy part (*meykkīrtti*) of inscriptions, even if the material metaphorically alluded to in this case is again palm leaf. Whether simple war poetry in manuscript form or epigraphy, such imagery presupposes a well-established tradition of writing. As a mere curiosity we may add here one further passage from a lost treatise on poetic genres, the *Intirakāḷiyam*, which may or may not pertain to the period under consideration, with the text being dated between the ninth and thirteenth centuries. In one of its verses surviving as quotation it states the measurements to be used for palm leaf manuscripts depending on the social class for whose use they are destined.

Intirakāḷiyam
(quoted in *Tamiḻ Ilakkaṇa Nūlkaḷ*, p. 186)

ஓலைய திலக்கணம் உரைக்குங் காலை
நாலாறு விரற்றானம் நான்மறை யோர்க்குப்
பார்த்திபர் தமக்குப் பதிற்றிரட்டி விரலே
வணிகர்க் கெண்ணிரு விரலே
சூத்திரர்க் கீராறு விரலே
இப்பரி சேபாட் டெழுதவும் படுமே

ōlaiyat' ilakkaṇam uraikkum kālai
nāl āṟu viral-tāṉam nāṉ maṟaiyōrkku
pārttipar tamakku patiṟṟ' iraṭṭi viralē
vaṇikarkk' eṇṇ' iru viralē
cūttirarkk' īr-āṟu viralē
ipparicē pāṭṭ' eḻutavum paṭumē.

At the time one states the characteristics of palm leaves,
four [times] six finger-breadth for those of the four Vedas,
for earth rulers doubling ten fingers,
for merchants eight [times] two fingers,
for Śudras two times six fingers,
composed in this manner they are written [down].

There is no indication whatsoever that such rules have ever been implemented, but still one may conclude that palm leaf was used for writing by the whole range of people representing the Tamil society, which seems to be proven by the material compiled here.

No less than eight uses of palm leaves testify to the practice of writing in four different domains of human activity, which can be roughly described as communication, religion, administration, and literature. Allusions to letters of both official and private nature are quite frequent. There is evidence of an ensign of peace, whether with or without written message. Administration, whether royal or mercantile, appears to use palm leaves as cheques or accounts. The idea of keeping records is, however, not limited to business but can also be found in the field of religion where God can be said to keep book of human deeds or where we discover the more abstract idea of a book of fate. The use of manuscripts as an implement in an expiation rite is even more metaphorical. Finally, there is evidence of manuscripts as a medium for a poetic and/or learned tradition in the hand of scholars. Its scope includes royal panegyrics. Also, the use of manuscripts in the instruction of the younger generation is attested where the ability to understand a text written on a manuscript becomes the standard for a young man's education. This fact in turn suggests the existence of both academic and lay literary expertise, reminding us of the possible double-provenance of manuscripts as we perceive it today still, both professional and non-professional.

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