

IIAS Reports



Sanskrit – Across Asia and Beyond

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SANSKRIT IS A GLOBAL PHENOMENON – a language that has captured the intellectual imagination of historians and linguists in nineteenth-century Europe, and contemporary students of yoga and *āyurveda*, alike. While Sanskrit is commonly studied as a literary form, its influence has extended to shape rituals, fables, images, performances, and architectural forms that together inspired a shared world of culture linking diverse regions of Asia across the centuries. The aim of the exhibition, *Sanskrit – Across Asia and Beyond* (Leiden, 18 May-5 Sept 2017), is to materialize some of the complexity and cultural dynamism of Sanskrit by featuring materials from the Special Collections of Leiden University Library. The organizers' are also grateful to the *Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen* and the *Vereniging Vrienden van het Instituut Kern* for their generous loans in support of the exhibition.

To tell the story of Sanskrit in its many manifestations and cultural forms requires an equally broad range of materials. Illuminated manuscripts and bronze sculptures, paintings, and photographs are organized thematically in seven showcases curated to highlight important facets of the tradition: Sanskrit as a language of sovereignty, a language of devotion, and a language of rich storyworlds and traditions of embodied practice. The exhibition concludes by reflecting upon the current status of Sanskrit as a highly politicized language in an increasingly globalized world.

Discovering hidden collections

One of the primary aims of the exhibition was to bring attention to Leiden University Library's collection of early South Asian manuscripts – particularly those held in the Kern Collection, named after Hendrik Kern, who initiated the formal study of Sanskrit at Leiden University in 1865. Prior to preparations for the display, many of these important materials were uncatalogued and, as a result, effectively invisible. This situation is changing and data for the manuscripts featured in the exhibition are now available online via the University's Special Collections.

Shedding a new light on Leiden's hidden collections also reveals the diversity of Sanskrit as a written language. While it is most commonly associated with India, Sanskrit spread across South and Southeast Asia, and manuscripts were recorded in a wide variety of scripts and materials, each with their own distinctive regional character. Manuscripts from North India on birch bark, palm leaves and paper are written in sharp, angular characters exemplified by the Bengali alphabet visible in one of the paper manuscripts of the epic *Mahābhārata*. By contrast, Southern palm-leaf manuscripts are engraved in full rounded scripts like the Grantha characters used on the palm leaf *Śivadharmaśāstra* manuscript. Epic traditions that spread to Southeast Asia are also displayed prominently, as in a palm-leaf manuscript of the *Rāmāyaṇa* recorded in the Javanese language and script, a descendent of early South Asian characters.

Expressing devotion in text and image

It is important to note that these manuscripts were not simply texts, but potent ritual objects by virtue of the sacred knowledge they recorded and the devotional contexts in which they were used. The expression of devotion (*bhakti*) to God is the center of many of the religious traditions that have originated in South Asia. In its purest manifestation, loving devotion to a deity is considered the path to final beatitude (*mokṣa* or *nirvāṇa*). *Bhakti* can be deeply personal, reflecting a close personal bond with the divinity. It may also manifest itself in elaborately staged public rituals and seasonal festivals in honor of particular deities. The exhibition includes two small illuminated manuscripts—one of the *Viṣṇusahasranāma* ('Thousand Names of Viṣṇu')—from North India and Kashmir that would have served as personal devotional aides (figs. 1 and 2). Likewise, small early medieval clay amulets recovered from North India would have functioned as part of a personal religious repertoire.

These pocket-sized texts stand in stark contrast to the grand Nepalese palm-leaf *Prajñāpāramitā* ('Perfection of Wisdom') manuscripts that were likely intended for public rites and recitations that involved the Buddhist community. These texts were distributed widely and played a major role in what has been called the 'Cult of the Book' in Mahāyāna Buddhism. The two carefully written manuscripts are dated c.12th century, the oldest Sanskrit manuscripts in the library's collection (fig. 3).

Rituals performed in honor of richly decorated icons are also central to devotional traditions. In addition to showing how Sanskrit was transmitted in literary forms, the exhibition features sculptures, ritual objects and images that reflect a Sanskrit milieu. One of the treasures of the exhibition is a remarkable 9th century four-armed bronze Gaṇeśa from Java that shows the elephant-headed god with a single intact tusk (fig. 4). This unique image reflects the popular tradition that he broke off one of his tusks to use as a stylus to record the text of the entire *Mahābhārata* epic.

Multiple representations of goddesses on display attest to the complexity of the theological concepts that informed their creation and the devotional contexts that animated these images. The exhibition showcases varied traditions of artistic production – from medieval bronze sculpture from Java, contemporary chromolithograph from Bengal, and an abstract 20th century re-imagining by Indian artist Jyoti Bhatt. Like textual accounts of the personality and the exploits of the Goddess – recorded in the gilded *Devīmāhātmya* manuscript on display – these images may be 'read' as well. From them we learn of Durgā's victory over the Buffalo Demon, the benevolence and prosperity afforded by Lakṣmī, and the continued power of the Goddess as an icon for contemporary Indian artists.

A language of power and sovereignty

In addition to serving as a vehicle for religious ideologies and practices, Sanskrit has also served as a rich symbolic language through which political ideals and aspirations were transmitted. As a language of sovereignty, Sanskrit cultural forms were adapted strategically by rulers and others seeking political prestige. For rulers in South and Southeast Asia, political legitimacy was intimately tied to lineage. Extensive

Fig. 1 (above left): Illuminated manuscript with a collection of devotional hymns, paper, Śāradā script [Kashmir, 19th century].

Fig. 2 (above right): Illuminated manuscript of the *Viṣṇusahasranāma*, paper, Devanāgarī Script [North India, 19th century].

genealogical records were composed in Sanskrit for rulers and recited publicly by bards and court poets or engraved on stone for all to see. While genealogical accounts could be elaborate works of Sanskrit *belle-lettres*, like Kālidāsa's *Raghuvamśa* ('The Lineage of Raghu'), they could also appear in a more abridged format, as does the royal genealogy from Nepal featured in the exhibition. The lineage is painted on a lacquered board topped with a hook to allow for its public display.

Sanskrit inscriptions served as another medium for the expression of political power and prestige. One of the highlights of the exhibition are the massive copperplate charters of the Cōla rulers Rājārāja I [985-1012 CE] and Rājendra I [1012-1042 CE] held by a ring stamped with the royal insignia (see pp. 44-45 of this issue). Inscribed with Sanskrit and Tamil in the Southern Grantha script, these inscribed plates celebrate the virtues of the ruling dynasty and commemorate a royal donation in support of a Buddhist monastery. Such acts of piety were important manifestations of kingly virtue and generosity.

Tales of gods, kings, and epic battles are the focus of the voluminous Sanskrit narratives of the epics and *purāṇas*. Both the epic *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* traditions grapple with issues of power, duty, and the justification of violence. One of the illustrated pages of a *Bhagavadgītā* manuscript on display depicts a critical moment in the *Mahābhārata* epic when the Lord Kṛṣṇa instructs the hero Arjuna in the warrior ethos while the opposing forces align on the battlefield. This section of the epic culminates in a divine vision represented on another illuminated page: here Kṛṣṇa reveals himself to be the transcendent God Viṣṇu. Often depicted astride his eagle mount, Viṣṇu was emblematic of kingship and his image was used to adorn royal monuments across Asia. The exhibit includes one such elaborately carved and painted wooden icon from Bali showing the deity riding the eagle Garuḍa. In addition to text and icon, in Southeast Asia, epic constructions of power and duty were explored in elaborate traditions of puppet and theatrical performance. The beautifully illustrated volume of *Wayang Purwa* records the narratives used in these performances.

Sanskrit matters

The story of Sanskrit is not confined to centuries past, but continues in the 21st-century. The exhibition's final display illustrates the unique and often contested position of Sanskrit: a classical language in dialogue with cultural and political developments on a global scale. The massive rubbing of a 4th-century Sanskrit inscription by the Dutch scholar J. Ph. Vogel is a symbol and an instance of the preservation of South Asian material heritage. The inscription was one of many from the Buddhist site of Nagarjunakonda located in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. Early 20th century photographs from the Kern Collection show the site being excavated before the area was flooded to build a dam in 1950. Although the original *stūpa* is now submerged, the reconstructed archeological landscape has become a powerful emblem of India's ancient heritage. As such, monumental sites like Nagarjunakonda function both as symbols of a national identity as well as sites for a renewal of Buddhist identity, particularly by pilgrims from Japan and Tibet who seek the origins of their religion in the Indian subcontinent. The role of ancient Indian material and literary culture in processes of heritage making aptly illustrates the continued relevance of Sanskrit, and exemplifies the need for continued study and dialogue across Asia and beyond.

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References

- 1 The exhibition *Sanskrit – Across Asia and Beyond* was conceived and curated by Peter Bisschop, Elizabeth Cecil, and Daniele Cuneo with the cooperation of Jef Schaepe and Liesbeth Ouwehand. Thanks to Devaki Sapkota, the Sanskrit manuscripts at Leiden University Library are now online and searchable via the Special Collections (i.kern.skr). The exhibition was festively opened on 18 May 2017. Elizabeth Cecil's opening speech can be found alongside the online version of this article: tinyurl.com/sanskritbeyond



Fig. 3 (far left): Palm leaf Manuscript of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, palm leaf [Nepal, c. 12th century].

Fig. 4 (near left): Bronze sculpture of Gaṇeśa [Java, 9th century].