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Giovanni Ciotti

# Strategies for Binding Pothi Manuscripts

**Abstract:** This article offers an overview of the different strategies for binding a particular form of manuscript, namely the pothi. Surveying cases from across Central, South and Southeast Asia, it offers the first comprehensive typology of such strategies, together with an account of the peculiarities and commonalities that can be noticed across these areas. To further contextualize the topic, a few pertinent primary sources are presented to the reader. A short selection of case studies from manuscripts hailing from Tamil Nadu is also included in order to hint at the philological and codicological implications of the ‘loose’ nature of pothi binding.

Nel suo profondo vidi che s’interna,  
legato con amore in un volume,  
ciò che per l’universo si squaderna  
(*Divina Commedia*, Paradiso, XXXIII, 85–87)<sup>1</sup>

## 1 Introduction

The term ‘pothi’ (*pothī*, from Sanskrit *pustaka/pustikā*) can be used for the sake of convenience as an umbrella term for any manuscript that is made of a stack of folios in landscape format that are flipped upward rather than sideward. Historically, this manuscript form was prominently used in South and Southeast Asia (both Mainland and Maritime) as well as in Tibet and Mongolia, but also to a lesser extent – in terms of the sheer number of extant exemplars – in other areas of Central Asia, such as the Tarim Basin (Xinjiang, China) or Merv (Turkmenistan).<sup>2</sup> In Dunhuang, and at times in the Tarim Basin too, we find pothis in portrait format due to the orientation of writing systems such as Chinese and Uyghur.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I saw that in its depth far down is lying | Bound up with love together in one volume, | What through the universe in leaves is scattered (tr. Longfellow 1867, 220).

<sup>2</sup> For references, see Ciotti 2021a.

<sup>3</sup> See, respectively, Galambos 2020, 25–27 (though we also have Chinese written horizontally; Galambos 2020, 143–152) and Kasai 2022.

The folios of pothis can be made of a great variety of materials. The leaves of palm trees (both talipot, *Corypha* sp., and palmyra, *Borassus* sp.) and paper are the most common among them, with the former arguably the first to have been used, in an unfortunately undefinable past.<sup>4</sup> From at least the fifth century onwards (but most probably even before then), birch bark was also used to produce pothis. Later on, the list of materials expands to include several kinds of handmade paper and the bark of the agarwood tree (*Aquilaria* sp.). More rarely, folios were also made of silk, leather, poplar wood, bamboo and sheets of metal or ivory.<sup>5</sup>

As we will see, binding is a relatively simple aspect of the pothi manuscript, particularly compared to the intricacies of quires and ligatures in codices. Even the validity of the term ‘binding’ may be disputed in this context, though it remains effective at least for the sake of convenience.<sup>6</sup> Owing to such relative simplicity, secondary literature tends to rush through the topic, though there are of course laudable exceptions.<sup>7</sup> What contributes to this tendency is also the fact that, on the one hand, indigenous sources concerning the production of manuscripts and matters of binding in particular are relatively rare and, on the other hand, the codicology of the pothi cannot at the moment rely on either quantitative studies or the support of extensive material analyses.

What follows is thus a first attempt at an overarching view on the topic across several manuscript traditions that gathers relevant information from my direct experience, the generosity of several colleagues who have shared their expertise with me in person or via email,<sup>8</sup> and the available secondary literature. A handful of case studies of manuscripts hailing from Tamil Nadu is also included to showcase a minimal set of the possible philological and codicological implications of the ways in which pothis are bound.

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<sup>4</sup> See Baums 2020 and Ciotti 2021a for some considerations on the history of the pothi form. The leaves of the Gebang palm were also used in West Java (Gunawan 2015), though rather rarely.

<sup>5</sup> For references, see Ciotti 2021a.

<sup>6</sup> For a more in-depth reflection on whether the very term ‘binding’ is applicable to pothis, in particular the unstrung ones, see Helman-Ważny 2014, 53–55.

<sup>7</sup> For example, see Isaacs 2014 on Burmese *sasigyos* (see below, § 2.1.2); Helman-Ważny 2014, 53–58 on Tibetan manuscripts; and van der Meij 2017, 156–179 on Indonesian manuscripts.

<sup>8</sup> See acknowledgments below.

## 2 Binding pothis

The folios of a pothi can be strung together by means of a thread (usually made of cotton, but nowadays often replaced with synthetic fibres) that runs through holes pierced on their surface. Alternatively, pothis can remain unstrung, with the folios left unpierced and simply stacked upon one another. Both strung and unstrung pothis can be placed between covers (or boards) generally made of wood – although other materials can also be used – and wrapped with textiles. Different configurations thereof are possible too, as well as more rarely used alternatives (e.g. paper sleeves).

We can see all these different ways of binding pothis as forms of ‘loose’ binding. Once the components of the manuscript are ready, they can be easily assembled, disassembled and reassembled in a matter of seconds by anybody without the need for any special tools.

### 2.1 Strung pothis

#### 2.1.1 Holes and threads

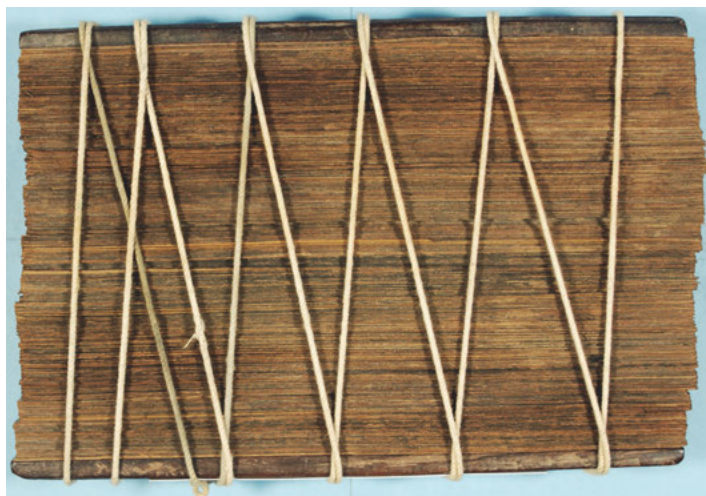
Let us take palm-leaf pothis as our first port of call. Given a stack of regularly sized, oblong leaves, at least one hole is punched through each of them. A thread is then passed through this set of holes in order to keep the leaves in the desired order and prevent them from slipping out of the stack. Often, empty (i.e. unwritten) leaves and covers made of wood (or more rarely bamboo<sup>9</sup> or other materials) are added to both the beginning and end of the manuscripts to offer further protection and stability (Fig. 1). To tie the manuscript, a knot is made at one end of the thread, which is then drawn tight from the other end. The leaves are gently grouped together (against the cover, if present) to form a horizontal stack. The thread is then wrapped multiple times around the manuscript in a more or less neat cross-gartered fashion (Fig. 2), or simply over and over around the same spot (Fig. 3). The loose end of the thread is then tucked under one of the loops that the thread has formed around the stack (Fig. 4). Occasionally, either one or both ends of the thread may bear a small object (a bead, coin, etc.) that is variously attached to it (Fig. 5).

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<sup>9</sup> An interesting series of images of bamboo covers used in Maritime Southeast Asia can be found in van der Meij 2017, 169–172.



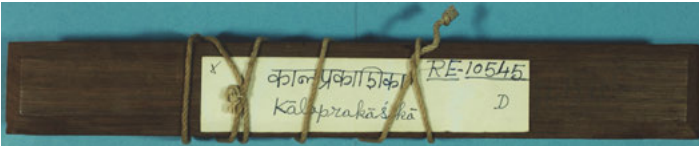
**Fig. 1:** Paris, BnF, indien 74; photo by Emmanuel Francis-Gonze; courtesy of the BnF.



**Fig. 2:** Puducherry, IFP, RE22704; courtesy of the IFP.



**Fig. 3:** Luang Prabang, Vat Maha That Rasabovoravihan, DREAMSEA 0011 00369 (*Sab Kammavācā*); courtesy of the Buddhist Archives of Luang Prabang.



**Fig. 4:** Puducherry, IFP, RE10545; courtesy of the IFP.



**Fig. 5:** Various objects attached to thread: buttons (top left), metal peg (bottom left), beads (top right) and metal ornament in the shape of a bird (bottom right); photos by Dick van der Meij, from Dick van der Meij's private collection.

Intuitively, one might assume that the number of holes depends on the size of the leaf and the regional tradition. Small leaves would have only one hole; larger ones, two (Figs 6 and 7). However, there are many examples that disprove this assumption, and in any case, it would remain unclear where to draw the distinction between ‘small leaves’ and ‘large leaves’ – to my knowledge, no quantitative studies are yet available on this topic. Interestingly, palm-leaf pothis from Indonesia seem to consistently have three holes (Fig. 8), with the exception of Sundanese manuscripts.<sup>10</sup>



**Fig. 6:** Puducherry, IFP, RE11012 [fol. 1<sup>r</sup>]; courtesy of the IFP.



**Fig. 7:** Hamburg, CSMC, MS-1-2018 [fol. 1<sup>r</sup>]; photo by Karsten Helmholz.



**Fig. 8:** Hamburg, CSMC, MS-1-2014 [fol. 124<sup>r</sup>]; photo by Karsten Helmholz.

A further desideratum is a study of the position of the hole(s) with respect to the perimeter of the leaf.<sup>11</sup> That a specific geometric proportion is aimed at is apparent even to an untrained eye, and also emerges clearly, for example, from the following untraced Sanskrit verse:

*āyāmena caturbhāgaṃ tribhāgaṃ punar eva ca |  
ubhayoḥ sūtramadyena tathā kuryāc chidralakṣaṇam* ||<sup>12</sup>

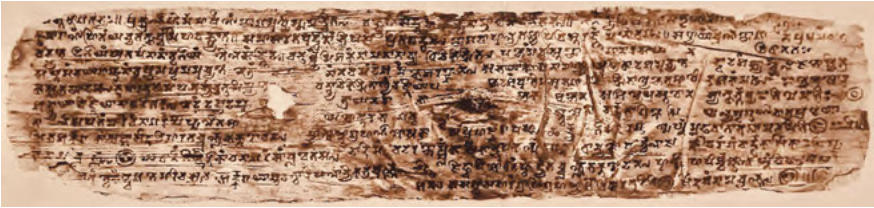
<sup>10</sup> Van der Meij 2017, 153.

<sup>11</sup> A wish expressed also by van der Meij 2017, 153.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Godakumbura 1980, ii; and Sarma 2007, 59.

[The leaf should be folded] lengthwise in four parts, [unfolded,] and folded again in three parts. The marks for the holes should be made in the middle of the two foldings.

All these considerations concerning holes and threads are also valid for pothis whose folios are made of other materials, such as birch bark (Fig. 9), agarwood-tree bark (Fig. 10), poplar wood (Fig. 11)<sup>13</sup> and even paper (Fig. 12). It should be noted, however, that though we can indeed observe holes, we have virtually no direct evidence of threads due to the circumstances through which manuscripts have reached us.<sup>14</sup>



**Fig. 9:** A leaf of the Bower Manuscript, a birch-bark pothi from Kucha (Xinjiang, China), c. fifth to sixth century CE; Wikimedia Commons ([https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Bower\\_Manuscript](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Bower_Manuscript)).

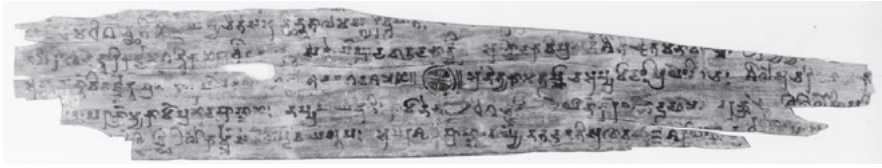


**Fig. 10:** London, BL, EAP 373/36/1 (*Phai Lung*, tentative title); courtesy of the BL (<https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP373-36-1>).

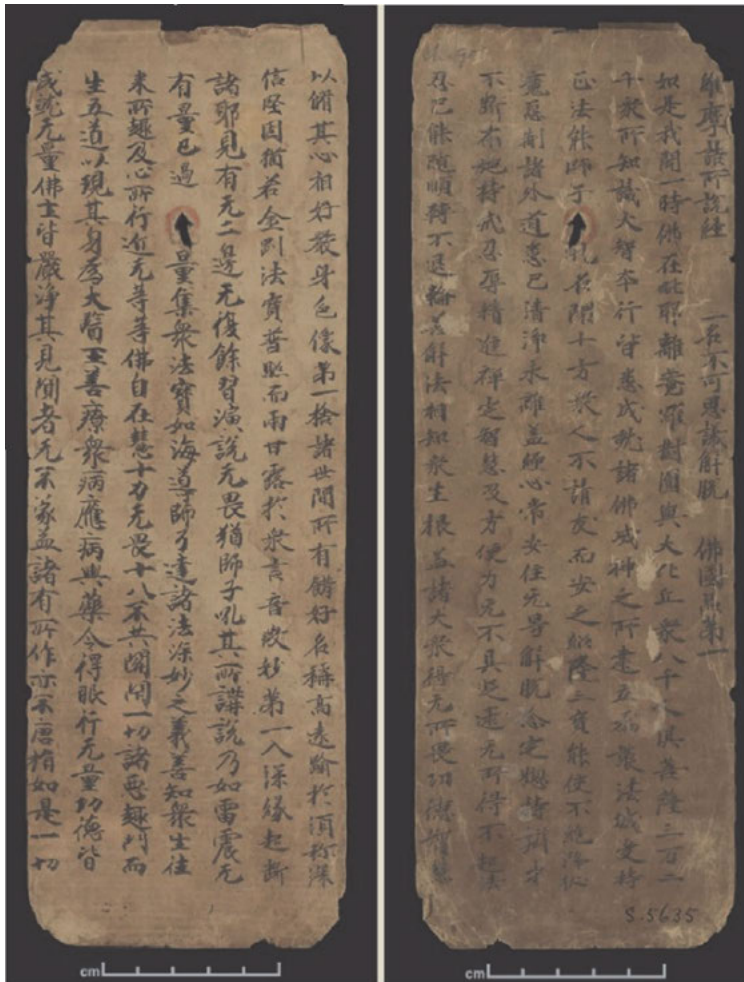
<sup>13</sup> Nakatani 1987, pl. 5.

<sup>14</sup> It may be the case that Assamese pothis made with agarwood-tree bark still have a thread, since they are relatively recent. However, at present I cannot find any confirmation of this.



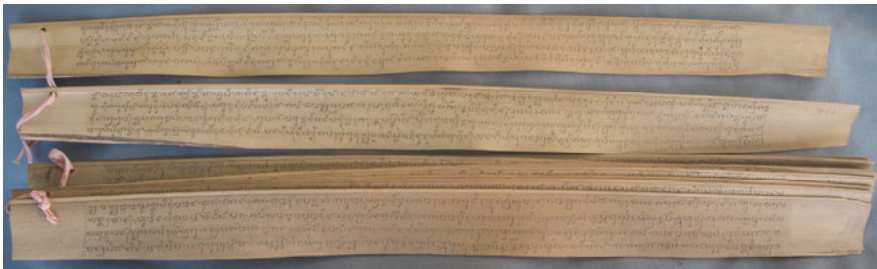


**Fig. 11:** Paris, BnF, R 46243 (*Udānavarga*), c. third century CE; courtesy of the BnF (<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b100700571/f3.item.zoom>).



**Fig. 12:** London, BL, Or. 8210/S.5635 (*Vimalakīrtinirdeśasūtra*); courtesy of the BL (<http://idp.bl.uk/database/institute.a4d?id=24>).

A special case of leaves sporting a single hole pierced in the right-hand side is that of a type of Indonesian manuscript called *ĕmbat-ĕmbatan* in Balinese. This manuscript has no covers and its folios are made using an entire segment of a palm frond, including its midrib. The two sides of the segment are thus kept together and folded upon each other. As a consequence, writing takes place only on the outside of each segment side. These manuscripts are usually strung with a thread to which a hook is added to be able to hang the whole manuscript on a vertical support (Fig. 13).<sup>15</sup>



**Fig. 13:** Leiden, UBL, REM 16–569 (*Kakawin Bhāratayuddha*) from Bali; photo by Dick van der Meij, courtesy of the UBL.

### 2.1.2 More on threads

In case of two holes, it is unclear if and when they were both used. For example, currently it is usually only the hole on the left-hand side that is used in South Indian palm-leaf pothis (Fig. 14). However, European libraries do hold such manuscripts in which the thread runs through both sets of holes (Fig 15).

A rather unique case is that of Burmese *Kammavācā* manuscripts. Prepared on the occasion of the ordination of Buddhist monks, these pothis have folios that can be made of a variety of materials, such as palm leaves and cloth that is gilded and lacquered, metal and ivory sheets or plain palm leaves.<sup>16</sup> *Kammavācā* manuscripts are tied with bands of colourful cotton fabric, called

<sup>15</sup> Van der Meij 2017, 193–194. For a similar way of working the leaves, see below, § 2.1.4.

<sup>16</sup> See Isaacs 2014, 34 and Ward 2015, 72. For an image of a plain palm-leaf *Kammavācā*, see London, BL, Or. 16673, discussed by Jana Igunma in a 2019 blog post at <https://southeastasianlibrarygroup.wordpress.com/2019/12/20/buddhist-manuscript-textiles-southeast-asia/> (accessed on 2 January 2023).

*sasigyos* ('manuscript tying thread', also spelled *sarsekyo*). They are composed of three sections: a loop and a cord – both thickly woven – at the two extremities that can be used to tie the band after it has been wrapped around the manuscript, and a much longer, flat central section that is woven so as to form religious symbols and sentences, such as invocations, scribal (or rather weaver's) colophons, donor's colophons etc. (Fig. 16).<sup>17</sup>



**Fig. 14:** Hamburg, CSMC, MS-1-2018; photo by Giovanni Ciotti.

<sup>17</sup> Isaacs 2014. Similarly, flat cloth belts – sometimes fastened with brass buckles – can be used in Tibet to secure the loose leaves of paper pothis (see Helman-Ważny and Kapstein forthcoming).



**Fig. 15:** Paris, BnF, indien 102; photo by Emmanuel Francis-Gonze; courtesy of the BnF (<https://tst.hypotheses.org/2776>).



**Fig. 16:** Hamburg, CSMC, Teijgeler 30 (manuscript) and Hamburg, CSMC, Teijgeler 24 (band); note that the two items do not originally belong together; photo by Giovanni Ciotti.

In Thailand and Laos, threads can also be used to divide discrete sections of the stack of leaves. The basic unit is called *phuk* (Thai ฟัก, Lao ຜັກ), i.e. a fascicle of leaves fastened together with a thread. If several fascicles are needed for copying lengthy texts (which, for whatever reason, the scribe decides not to split across physically separate *phuks*), these can be fastened together with a cotton thread in a *sum* (Lao ສຸມ).<sup>18</sup> This can be done in a way that maintains the distinction among *phuks* (Figs 17 and 18).<sup>19</sup>



**Fig. 17:** Luang Prabang, Vat Xiang Thong, 06.01.02.02.020.00; courtesy of the Buddhist Archives of Luang Prabang.

<sup>18</sup> The term *sum* seems to be in use only in Laos, not in Thailand. I thank Volker Grabowsky for pointing this out to me in an email exchange dated 12 December 2022.

<sup>19</sup> Grabowsky 2022, 232 and Schnake 2022, 215–216.



**Fig. 18:** Luang Prabang, Vat Xiang Thong, 06.01.02.02.043.00; courtesy of the Buddhist Archives of Luang Prabang.

In Indonesia, where, as noted above, palm leaves usually have three holes, the one on the left-hand side can at times be used to tie in small threads that take up the function of bookmarks. In a particular case described by Dick van der Meij, four threads of different materials and colours are used to mark specific sections of a particular text (Fig. 19). It seems clear that the owner of the manuscript could easily single out the desired section thanks to this device.<sup>20</sup>



**Fig. 19:** Manuscript of the *Kakawin Bhomāntaka* from Lombok; photo by Dick van der Meij, collection Toenggoel Siagian.

<sup>20</sup> Van der Meij 2017, 193.

### 2.1.3 Pins and pegs

Sometimes, when the stack of pierced folios is particularly high, a wooden peg (more rarely a metal pin) is inserted through one set of holes in order to provide further stability, whereas the other set of holes is run through by a cotton thread, as usual (Fig. 20). This precaution is by no means taken regularly, though at times even small manuscripts are preserved with such a peg. This may be due to the fact that, as per my personal experience in South Indian manuscript libraries, the peg also comes in handy when binding a manuscript. It can in fact be used to push the thread through the holes of a manuscript, in particular through those of a few leaves at a time, instead of inserting the thread through each leaf individually, thus saving quite some time in the process.<sup>21</sup>



**Fig. 20:** Paris, BnF, indien 963; Photos by Emmanuel Francis-Gonze; courtesy of the BnF ([https://didomena.ehess.fr/concern/data\\_sets/76537534n?locale=fr](https://didomena.ehess.fr/concern/data_sets/76537534n?locale=fr)).

An interesting case comes from Maritime Southeast Asia, where two pegs are attached to the board so that they can pass through the side holes of the palm leaves, which, as mentioned above, usually have three holes in this particular region (Fig. 21).<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Burmese pegs made of bamboo, called *palindaing*, are mentioned in May and Igunma 2018, 16.

<sup>22</sup> Van der Meij 2017, 299.



Fig. 21: Photo by Dick van der Meij, from Dick van der Meij's private collection.

#### 2.1.4 More on covers

Covers can be extremely simple (Fig. 22) or engraved (Fig. 23). Further, they can be dyed, gilded, lacquered and inlaid with conch shells or gems, in particular in Mainland Southeast Asia (Fig. 24).<sup>23</sup> If painted, the covers are usually illuminated on the inside for better preservation of the images (Fig. 25).<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> For a short yet informative series of examples, see May and Igunma 2018, 14–25.

<sup>24</sup> For a richly illustrated series of examples from Nepal, see Pradhananga and Rimal 2016.





Fig. 22: Puducherry, IFP, RE37121; courtesy of the IFP.



Fig. 23: Hamburg, CSMC, MS-1-2017; photo by Giovanni Ciotti.

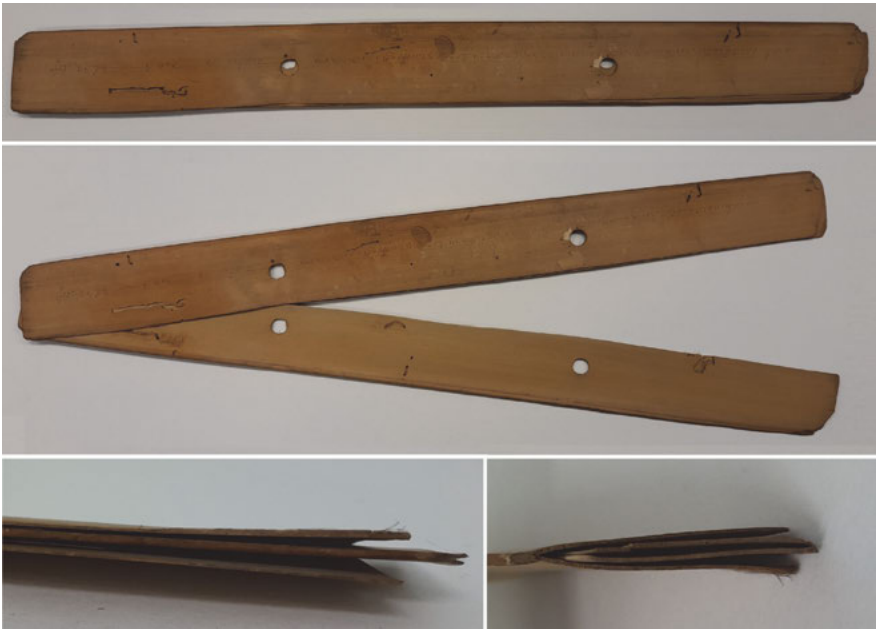


Fig. 24: London, BL, Or. 16114; courtesy of the BL (<https://blogs.bl.uk/asian-and-african/2015/01/the-beauty-of-palm-leaf-manuscripts-2-northern-thai-lao-and-shan-traditions.html>).



Fig. 25: Cambridge, CUL, Add. 1464, outer and inner (painted) sides of the cover (*Prajñāpāramitāstotra* and *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*), c. eleventh century; reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of CUL (<https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-ADD-01464>).

In a case that, to my knowledge, has not yet been recorded in the literature and that I could observe only in South Indian palm-leaf pothis, a thick leaf seems – at a first glance – to be used as a cover. Upon closer examination, these covers are in fact produced with the same method used in the case of the *ěmbat-ěmbatan* discussed above.<sup>25</sup> Two sides of a palm-frond segment are kept intact and folded along their midrib. These are then worked together (e.g. boiled and polished) so that the end product appears like a single thick palm-leaf folio. At times, a folded segment can contain another leaf or even a whole other segment to make the cover extra strong (Fig. 26).



**Fig. 26:** Hamburg, SUB, 35.3009; photo by Giovanni Ciotti; courtesy of the SUB.

Finally, it must be kept in mind that many pothis have reached us without covers. This may be due to the accidents of history, but it may well be the case that some never had covers. We lack the statistics and evidence to project the current state of affairs backwards in time, but we can at least look at artistic renditions of pothis and observe that both manuscripts with and without covers seem to be

<sup>25</sup> See § 2.1.1.

represented. Just to give two relatively clear examples, on the one hand, we can observe the statue of Śiva in his Dakṣiṇāmūrti form at Aṭṭahāseśvara Temple in Thiruttani/Tiruttani (Tamil Nadu, India), dated to the ninth century: the folios of the manuscript he holds in his left hand are sagging at both ends, thus suggesting the absence of a cover (Fig. 27).



**Fig. 27:** Śiva Dakṣiṇāmūrti (Aṭṭahāseśvara Temple, Tiruttani) and detail; photo by Dominic Goodall.

On the other hand, we have the case of a sculpture of Sarasvatī (the goddess of learning) from Mathura/Mathurā (Uttar Pradesh, India), dated to around the second century, where, even though the manuscript is represented in a vertical orientation, it maintains a proper upright position, most probably because it is equipped with covers – on which, incidentally, the loops of the thread seem to have been carved, too (Fig. 28).<sup>26</sup>



**Fig. 28:** Squatting Sarasvatī and detail (Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, State Museum of Lucknow, Acc. No. J. 24); uncredited photo.

<sup>26</sup> The statue of Dakṣiṇāmūrti at Aṭṭahāseśvara Temple is also discussed in Goodall 2017. The statue of Sarasvatī at Mathurā is reproduced at <https://www.herenow4u.net/index.php?id=83001> (accessed on 2 January 2023). For more references to representations of manuscripts, see also Goswamy 2006, 13–69.

## 2.2 Unstrung pothis

To my knowledge, the vast majority of pothis from South Asia and Tibet that are made of paper are unpierced and unstrung (Fig. 29).<sup>27</sup> A placeholder where the hole could be pierced is sometimes marked (Fig. 30) – a convention, clearly inspired by palm-leaf pothis – but there are also cases in which there is no trace of such a convention (Fig. 31). Unstrung pothis may be equipped with covers (also left unpierced) and are usually wrapped in textiles. The latter aspect will however be discussed separately, given that strung pothis may be wrapped, too.<sup>28</sup>



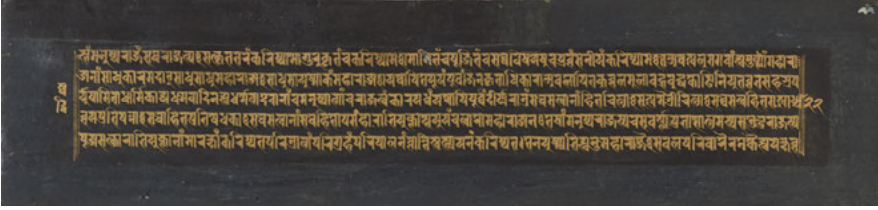
Fig. 29: Kathmandu, ĀS, DPN 07252 (*Skandapurāṇa*), stack of paper folios; photo by Bidur Bhattarai.



Fig. 30: Cambridge, CUL, Add. 1766 [fol. 2<sup>v</sup>] (*Suvarṇaprabhāsottamasūtra*), 1790 CE; reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of CUL (<https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-ADD-01766/5>).

<sup>27</sup> Paper pothis from other areas of Central Asia do not conform to this pattern, e.g. some Tibetan and Chinese manuscripts from Dunhuang (see below) and some Tocharian manuscripts from Kucha and adjacent areas (examples of Tocharian pothis, both with and without holes, can be seen in ‘Pelliot Koutchéen ancienne Série 1–10, 12, 19’, available at <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b6000197b>, accessed on 23 January 2023).

<sup>28</sup> See § 3.



**Fig. 31:** Cambridge, CUL, Add. 875 (fol. 22<sup>r</sup>) (*Laghukṣetrasamāsa*), 1580 CE; reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of CUL (<https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-ADD-00875/46>).

Unstrung paper pothis from North India may also be kept together inside paper sleeves (or envelopes). The CUL has a few such examples. Although these sleeves clearly come from India, in my opinion it remains unclear if the practice was precolonial or began only later on. For example, the sleeve of Cambridge, CUL, Add. 1766, reads ‘16–13–1637’, meaning that the manuscript has 16 folios, 13 lines per page and is dated 1637 of the Vikrama era, which converts to 1580 CE (Fig. 32). One may be tempted to take this as evidence that the sleeve is as old as the manuscript, when in fact the hand that wrote those data was that of Bhagvāndās Kevaldās, the agent whom Georg Bühler employed to retrieve copies when working in India for the British and that he eventually sent to Cambridge in 1878.<sup>29</sup>

Notable exceptions to the unpierced-and-unstrung pattern among paper pothis containing Tibetan texts are those found in the caves of Dunhuang, which in many instances sport one or two holes,<sup>30</sup> and, as also already seen above, some Chinese paper pothis from the same place.<sup>31</sup> However, despite such a conspicuous feature, one should note that no threads have been found and that at times the holes are in pristine condition, not worn out by the friction of a potential thread.<sup>32</sup> We thus cannot exclude the possibility that some of these pothis were also left unstrung and perhaps bound with wrappers. Alternatively, some paper pothis may have been rolled up, in particular those of large dimen-

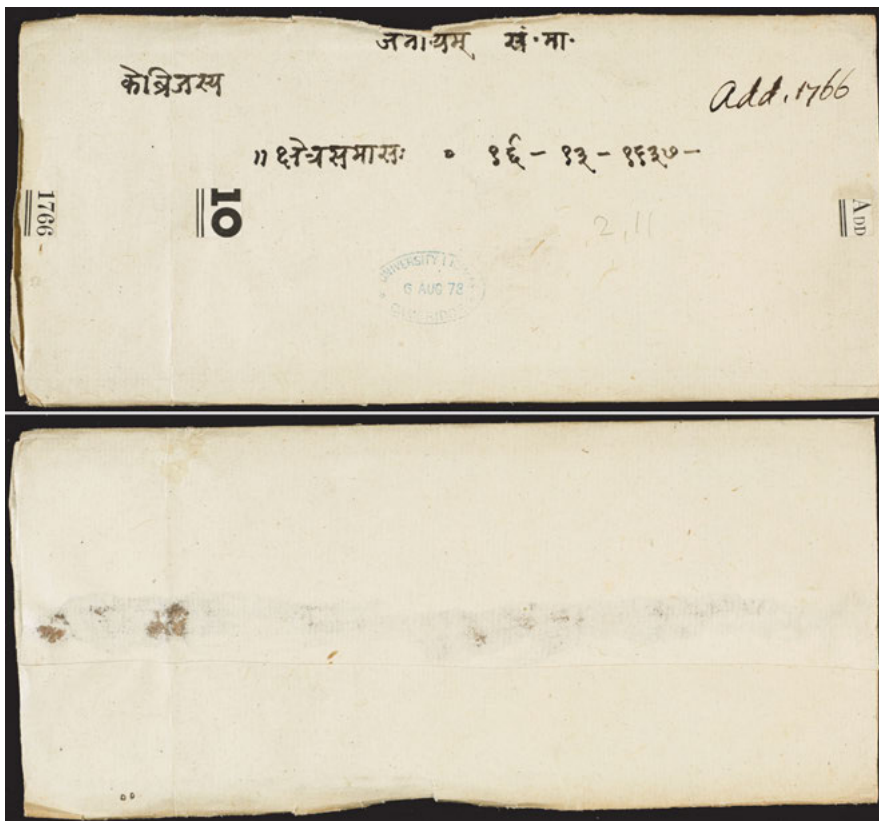
<sup>29</sup> Balbir 2017, 48. I thank Nalini Balbir for further discussing this case in an email exchange dated 16 November 2022. The CUL collection contains other examples of such paper sleeves, such as those of Add. 1812, Add. 2406 and Add. 2286. I would like to thank Camillo A. Formigati for directing my attention to these manuscripts.

<sup>30</sup> See e.g. Vallée Poussin 1962, xv.

<sup>31</sup> Galambos 2020, 25–27 and above § 2.1.1, Fig. 12.

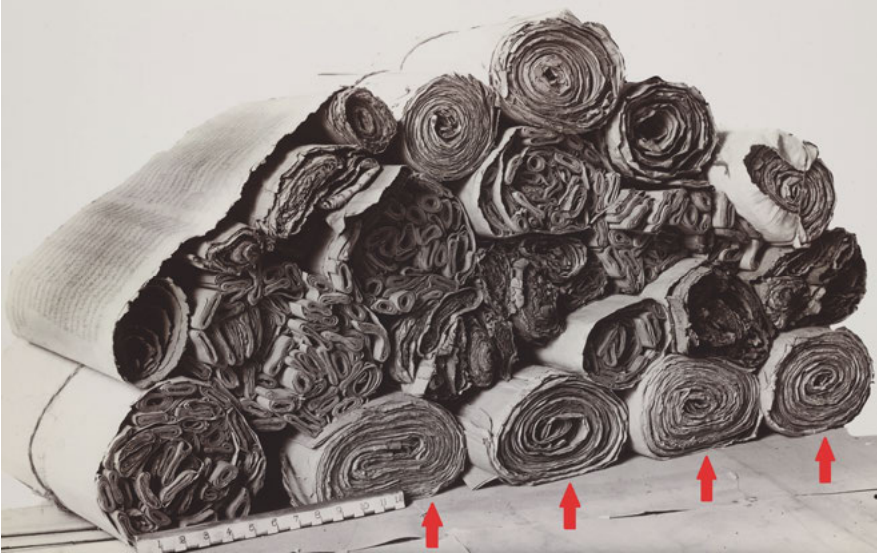
<sup>32</sup> Examples of both worn and unworn holes in Tibetan pothis from Dunhuang can be seen in Dotson and Helman-Ważny 2016, 35

sions. This is suggested, for example, by photographs of piles of manuscripts taken by Aurel Stein during his expeditions to Central Asia (Fig. 33).<sup>33</sup>



**Fig. 32:** Cambridge, CUL, Add. 1766, front and back of its paper sleeve (*Laghukṣetrasamāsa*); reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of CUL (<https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-ADD-01766/33>).

<sup>33</sup> This observation belongs to Imre Galambos; for example, see his online lecture ‘Dunhuang at the Crossroads: The Manuscript Evidence’, delivered for the Dunhuang Foundation on 6 October 2022 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zOyulOfbmMU&feature=shares&t=978>, accessed on 2 January 2023). I also thank him for discussing this issue with me in an email exchange dated 19 December 2022, and for directing my attention to a similar case described by Sam van Schaik in *IDP News*, issue no. 17 ([http://idp.bl.uk/archives/news17/idpnews\\_17.a4d](http://idp.bl.uk/archives/news17/idpnews_17.a4d), accessed on 2 January 2023).



**Fig. 33:** London, BL, Photo 392/27(587) (1906–1908), manuscripts from the walled-up library found in the Thousand Buddha Caves of Dunhuang; courtesy of BL.

### 3 Wrappers, bags, satchels

Both strung and unstrung pothis can be wrapped in one or more purpose-made textiles of cotton or silk (Fig. 34). This practice is quite common in North India, Tibet and Mainland Southeast Asia.



**Fig. 34:** Kathmandu, ĀS, DPN 07252 (*Skandapurāṇa*), stack of paper folios; photo by Bidur Bhattarai.



Also common, particularly in Mainland Southeast Asia, is the case of recycled wrapping that was originally used for a different purpose, such as clothing. In 1924, George Coëdès, then director of the National Library of Thailand, wrote about this:

It was an old custom in Siam for fine cloths formerly used as garments but worn out, or belonging to deceased persons, to be presented to the priests for use as wrappings for their manuscripts. A considerable number of the manuscripts in the National Library are wrapped in old and beautiful cloths of every description; some delicately embroidered, some made of Indian or Siamese brocade, and others of a special kind of cotton, printed in India with Siamese designs.<sup>34</sup>

An interesting example of this kind of repurposed clothing is a Lao tube skirt in three parts, used to keep together a small collection of fascicles (Fig. 35). Such a wrapped ensemble of either independent *phuks* or *sums* is called *mat* (Thai มัด, Lao ມັດ).<sup>35</sup>

A striking feature of Tibetan paper pothis is that they are first wrapped in textiles and then placed between two wooden covers (Fig. 36).<sup>36</sup> This practice is motivated by the fact that some monastic libraries are made of beams only, without shelves providing a horizontal surface. Therefore, the wooden cover takes up the function of the shelf. Other times, large numbers of manuscripts are piled one upon the other, and external covers provide much-needed stability.<sup>37</sup>

In Mainland Southeast Asia, it is also possible to come across other solutions for wrapping pothis. One can use custom-made bags of cotton or silk, which sport colourful decorative patterns (Fig. 37).<sup>38</sup>

Furthermore, one can also use satchels made of bamboo strips and woven with textiles (Fig. 38).<sup>39</sup> Alternatively, a probably rarer option is also that of a

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**34** Coëdès 1924, 17, already discussed in Jana Igunma's 2019 blog post at <https://southeastasianlibrarygroup.wordpress.com/2019/12/20/buddhist-manuscript-textiles-southeast-asia/> (last accessed 2 January 2023). The same blog post offers a very informative overview of repurposed textiles used in Mainland Southeast Asia (Thailand, Laos and Burma, in particular) used to wrap manuscripts, including the one reproduced in Fig. 35 here.

**35** Grabowsky 2022, 232; and Schnake 2022, 215–216.

**36** Helman-Ważny 2014, 53.

**37** I would like to thank Agnieszka Helman-Ważny for kindly pointing this out to me in personal communication.

**38** An informative overview of such kinds of items can be found in Jana Igunma's 2019 blog post at <https://southeastasianlibrarygroup.wordpress.com/2019/12/20/buddhist-manuscript-textiles-southeast-asia/> (accessed on 2 January 2023).

**39** Already discussed in Jana Igunma's 2019 blog post at <https://southeastasianlibrarygroup.wordpress.com/2019/12/20/buddhist-manuscript-textiles-southeast-asia/> (accessed on 2 January 2023).

wrapper made of evenly distanced bamboo (or other wooden) strips connected with textile bands (Fig. 39).<sup>40</sup>



**Fig. 35:** London, BL, Or. 16886; courtesy of the BL.

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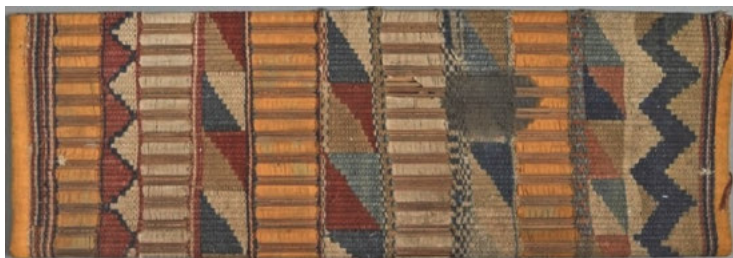
<sup>40</sup> I would like to thank Jana Igunma for kindly pointing out to me the existence of this object and generously sharing its image. Personally, I would tentatively not exclude the possibility that this is an early stage of a satchel that was not completed.



**Fig. 36:** Monastic library in western Tibet; photo by Agnieszka Helman-Ważny.



**Fig. 37:** London, BL, Or. 15885 (bag); photo by Jana Igunma; courtesy of BL.



**Fig. 38:** London, BL, Or. 12010 (satchel); courtesy of BL.



**Fig. 39:** London, BL, Add. MS 11552 (wrapper); photo by Jana Igunma; courtesy of BL.

I am inclined to draw a line here between binding and storing; hence we are not going to discuss the practice of placing manuscripts in boxes of various sizes and manufactures, either alone or in groups. Such a distinction remains artificial, of course, and its purpose is solely that of facilitating comparisons between different cultures that made use of pothis as well as across manuscript cultures at large as per the theme of the present volume.

## 4 A few premodern sources on binding pothis

Premodern indigenous sources that describe the appearance of pothis in detail and, in particular, the way in which they are bound are relatively scarce, though not non-existent. As far as Sanskrit sources are concerned, Florinda De Simini has collected the most important passages that describe the production of manuscripts and the copying of texts.<sup>41</sup> The following two passages are particularly informative: one from the *Devīpurāṇa* (late second half of the first millennium), the other from an available fragment of the lost *Nandipurāṇa* quoted in the chapter entitled ‘Dānakāṇḍa’ in Lakṣmīdhara’s *Kṛtyakalpataru* (twelfth century).

*śrītāḍipatrake saṃce same tatra susaṃcite |*  
*vicitraṇṭṭikāpārśve carmaṇā saṃpuṭikṛte || 37*  
*raktena vātha kṛṣṇena mṛdunā raṅgitenā vā |*  
*ḍṛghasūtranibaddhena evaṃ vidhikṛtena ca || 38*

<sup>41</sup> De Simini 2016.

The person who, having available a uniform and well assembled stack (*saṃce*) of *śrītāḍi* [= talipot] leaves, on whose side are variegated [wooden] tablets [and] that is covered with red or black leather, (37) Either soft or embossed, strongly tied with a thread, and [therefore] made in the proper manner (38).<sup>42</sup>

*tatra vidyāṃ vinihitāṃ kuryāt pustakasamsthītāṃ |*  
*kuryāc ca pustakaṃ [...] || 112*  
*karpāsasūtragrathitāṃ nānāgandhādhivāsītāṃ || 113*  
*pitaraktakaṣāyair vā sunibaddhaṃ sucitritam |*  
*ramyaṃ laghu suvistīraṇaṃ nirgranthi granthisaṃyutam || 116*

[One] should give knowledge laid there (scil. on the ‘knowledge-holder’, *vidyādhāra*) the shape of a manuscript and should assemble the manuscript. [...] (112) [...] held together by a cotton thread, perfumed with various fragrances. (113) Or it [= the manuscript] should be well wrapped in yellow, red, or ochre, nicely embellished, beautiful, light but of imposing size, with or without knots [on its cord]. (116)<sup>43</sup>

To this we can add a brief description that comes from belletristic literature, namely Dhanapāla’s Sanskrit prose poem (*gadyakāvya*) entitled *Tilakamañjarī* (eleventh century):

*ubhayato veṅṅukarparāvaraṇakṛtaraḥṣeṣv asaṃkīrṇakharatāḍaparṇakotkīrṇakamañjātīdīlipiṣu*  
*pustakeṣu [...] prabandhāni*

Texts [...] in manuscripts (*pustakeṣu*) whose protection was ensured by covering them on both sides with bamboo boards (*karpara*) and in which scripts such as Karṇāṭa (i.e. Kanāda) were scratched on well-ordered (*asaṃkīrṇa*) and durable (*khara*) leaves of palmyra (*tāḍa*).<sup>44</sup>

Aditia Gunawan has discussed some textual sources in Old Sundanese and Old Javanese that also present pertinent terminology.<sup>45</sup> Among them, a particularly pleasing passage is from the West Javanese version of the *Bhīmaswarga* (a prose poem in Old Javanese), where the components of the manuscript are associated with four of the five Pāṇḍava (Pāṇḍava in Sanskrit) brothers, i.e. the heroes of the *Mahabharata* (*Mahābhārata* in Sanskrit) epos:

<sup>42</sup> *Devīpurāṇa* 91.37–38, edited and translated by De Simini 2016, 90.

<sup>43</sup> *Nandīpurāṇa* = *Dānakāṇḍa* 12.112ab, 113cd, 116, edited and translated by De Simini 2016, 91.

<sup>44</sup> Note that in his modern commentary, Sūri 1953, 286 glosses *asaṃkīrṇa* with *vistrta* (‘strewn’), an interpretation that diverges from mine, and *khara* with *tīkṣṇa* or *kaṭhina* (‘harsh’, ‘hard’), which I am inclined to interpret as a positive quality attributed to the leaves, hence my translation. I would like to thank Csaba Dezső for drawing my attention to this passage and discussing its interpretation with me in an email exchange dated 19 December 2022.

<sup>45</sup> Gunawan 2015, 259–266.

*manih bima, yudistira pinakagədbaṅ, arjuna pinakatali, sakula sadewa pinakapapan, tulis in pustaka, saṅ hyaṅ darmaraja, kaṅ asəḍahan pustaka, hyaṅ bagawan citragotra*

And further, o Bhima, Yudhiṣṭhira serves as the Gebang leaf, Arjuna as the cord, [the twins] Sakula [i.e. Nakula] and Sahadewa as the cover boards, the writing in the book [is] Saṅ Hyaṅ Dharmarāja [that is Yama, the god of death], the one responsible for writing the book is Bhagawān Citragotra [i.e. Citragupta, Yama’s assistant].<sup>46</sup>

Further investigations will most probably bring to light pertinent descriptions in texts composed in the various other languages of the many cultures that have made use of pothis.

A premodern and self-proclaimed outsider’s look into the way manuscripts are bound in South Asia is offered by Al-Bīrūnī (973–c.1052). His *Tārīkh al-Hind* (‘History of India’), which collects the observations Al-Bīrūnī made during his travels to India in 1007, includes a succinct report on the ‘writing of the Hindus’. In two short passages, he first describes palm-leaf manuscripts as follows:

The Hindus have in the south of their country a slender tree like the date and cocoa-nut palms, bearing edible fruits and leaves of the length of one yard, and as broad as three fingers one put beside the other. They call these leaves *tārī*, and write on them. They bind a book of these leaves together by a cord on which they are arranged, the cord going through all the leaves by a hole in the middle of each.<sup>47</sup>

Then he describes birch-bark manuscripts in brief by saying:

In Central and Northern India people use the bark of the *tūz* tree, one kind of which is used as a cover for bows. It is called *bhūrja*. [...] The whole book is wrapped up in a piece of cloth and fastened between two tablets of the same size. Such a book is called *pūthī*.<sup>48</sup>

More rarely, the artefacts themselves contain terminology relevant to binding. Just to give one example related to wrappers, while describing a group of manuscripts that were originally kept together in a box, Nalini Balbir resolves the abbreviations found on them, stating that “Po” is the usual abbreviation for *poṭali* “bundle” and “pra” for *prati* “manuscript”. “Po” normally refers to the larger container (cotton envelope) in which several “pra” could be put together.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Edited and translated by Gunawan 2015, 261. I have slightly modified the translation to make it more understandable without further explanations.

<sup>47</sup> Translated by Sachau 1910, 171.

<sup>48</sup> Translated by Sachau 1910, 171.

<sup>49</sup> Balbir 2017, 70–71.

## 5 Consequences of the ‘loose’ nature of pothi binding: A few cases from Tamil Nadu

Whether strung or unstrung, pothis are characterized by bindings that can be easily and speedily undone. As a consequence, folios can be intentionally or mistakenly rearranged within the same manuscript at any time, or they can be temporarily or permanently removed from the manuscript with no effort, for example in order to copy their content somewhere else.

Furthermore, additional folios can be conveniently added. On the one hand, this implies that damaged and lost folios or folios whose texts were copied with too many mistakes can quickly be replaced by the scribe as well as by later users.<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, it is quite common to come across composite manuscripts, i.e. manuscripts made of folios that belong to two or more different manuscripts that were presumably not supposed to be assembled together when produced. In this respect, let us take two rather straightforward examples from the collection of palm-leaf manuscripts held at the Institut français de Pondichéry (Puducherry, India), namely Puducherry, IFP, RE10859 (Fig. 40) and RE10900 (Fig. 41). In both cases, the profile of the two stacks clearly reveals that leaves of different lengths that were not – at least originally – supposed to belong together are now part of the same object. This is further confirmed by the fact that each section has its own pagination and bears the ductus of a different scribe. Furthermore, some sections are made of leaves with one hole and others of leaves with two.<sup>51</sup>



**Fig. 40:** Puducherry, IFP, RE10859; courtesy of the IFP.

<sup>50</sup> This represents quite an obstacle for approaches to textual criticism that are sensitive to the material aspects of manuscripts (‘material evidence’; see, for example, Reeve 1989).

<sup>51</sup> See also descriptions in Varadachari 1987, 205–207 and 285–299, respectively. According to Varadachari, Puducherry, IFP, RE10859 contains (fragments of) five texts, and Puducherry, IFP, RE10900 of thirty-seven texts.



Fig. 41: Puducherry, IFP, RE10900; courtesy of the IFP.

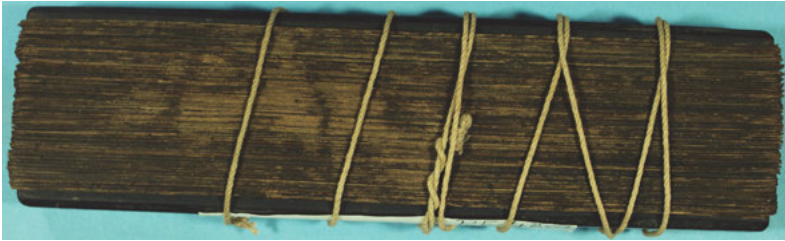
A further implication concerning manuscript production is shown by the case of Puducherry, IFP, RE04209, which – though incomplete – contains eighteen texts copied by the same scribe, one Citamparavattiyāṇ, grandson of Rāmaṇātavattiyār (Fig. 42). Two of these texts include colophons that indicate the end of copying: the *Pratiṣṭhānukramaṇī* (also referred to as *Pratiṣṭhai Aṭṭavaṇai* in the manuscript itself) on 1 March 1827,<sup>52</sup> and the *Dikṣā[dividhi]paddhati* on 15 March 1827.<sup>53</sup> Given that the foliation in the manuscript is continuous, one would expect the *Pratiṣṭhānukramaṇī* to precede the *Dikṣāpaddhati*. However, they respectively occupy the third and second position in the sequence of texts: the *Pratiṣṭhānukramaṇī* occupies fols 151<sup>r</sup>–181<sup>v</sup>, and the *Dikṣā[dividhi]paddhati* fols 132<sup>r</sup>–150<sup>r</sup>. It can be argued that the most plausible explanation is that the foliation was added only after the various texts had been separately copied and the leaves assembled in the stack.<sup>54</sup>

52 [fol. 181<sup>v</sup>4, column 2] 1002 (symbol for Kollam year) *māci m°m* 20 (symbol for day) *eḷuti mukintitu* | ('It is fully copied in Kollam year 1002, month of Māci, 20th day'). Date conversion courtesy of Marco Franceschini.

53 [fol. 150<sup>r</sup>3–5] 1002 (symbol for Kollam year) *paṅkuṇi m°m* 4 (symbol for day) *viyālakīlamai aṅṅu hastanakṣatrattil eḷuti mukintitu* || – *itu āru kaippaṭṭa akṣaram eṅṅāl rāmaṇātavattiyār perañ citamparavattiyāṇ eḷuttu* | ('Kollam year 1002, month of Paṅkuṇi, 4th day, Thursday – on that day, it is fully copied under the constellation of Hasta. If one asks whose (*āru*) handwritten characters (*akṣaram*) are these, [the answer is that it is] the script (*eḷuttu*) of Citamparavattiyāṇ, grandson of Rāmaṇātavattiyār'). Date conversion courtesy of Marco Franceschini.

54 The same is proposed in the catalogue of the IFP collection (Varadachari 1986, 116).





**Fig. 42:** Puducherry, IFP, RE04209; courtesy of the IFP.

A further case is that of a pothi that was split into several different independent manuscripts. For example, Chennai, GOML, 5549 to 5552 were originally one manuscript made of a single codicological unit (same leaves, same hand, continuous foliation). At an undefinable point in time, however, they were split into four different manuscripts, each of which is preserved today with its own set of covers. We could say that this is the case of a multiple-text manuscript turned into a multi-volume manuscript.<sup>55</sup>

## 6 Conclusions and desiderata

This succinct survey has hopefully shown the extent to which it is possible and meaningful to look at the pothi form across the various regions and traditions that made use of it, beyond the usual disciplinary boundaries. This is the case not simply because the pothi is one of the most widespread forms of manuscript to exist, but also because the features that characterize pothis in one culture can definitely be better appreciated when we look at what other cultures made of it – how they adopted and adapted this specific manuscript form to different artisanal, scribal and archival customs.<sup>56</sup>

Much remains to be done, however, to go beyond impressionistic reports that are based on personal observations and unsystematic descriptions. A sound quantitative approach is a clear desideratum. The outcome of such an approach would of course need to be carefully contextualized given that, in many cases, we do not have evidence to prove that what we can now observe also reflects past practices. In this respect, the fact that in the Indian subconti-

<sup>55</sup> For a more detailed codicological description, see Ciotti 2021b, 338.

<sup>56</sup> For a recent attempt at pursuing this agenda in relation to colophons, see Balbir and Ciotti 2022.

ment, for example, most pothis are kept in libraries that were founded during or after the colonial period may have had a significant impact on the way these artefacts appear to us today, an impact yet to be investigated.

A further desideratum would be that of systematically collecting indigenous terminology in the several dozen languages of the cultures that used pothis, which in turn would give us a fresh and sounder angle from which to look at these written artefacts and how they were perceived in the past.

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While writing this article, the news reached me of the demise of Erberto Lo Bue, who first introduced me to everything beautiful that is in the Himalayas and Tibet. I dedicate it to his knowledge and wisdom.

## Abbreviations

- ĀS = Āśā Saphūkuthi / Āśā Archives (Kathmandu)
- BL = British Library (London)
- BnF = Bibliothèque nationale de France (Paris)
- CSMC = Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures (Hamburg)
- CUL = Cambridge University Library (Cambridge)
- GOML = Government Oriental Manuscript Library (Chennai)
- IFP = Institut français de Pondichéry (Puducherry)
- SUB = Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek (Hamburg)
- UBL = Universiteitsbibliotheek Leiden (Leiden)

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