

Sub-project A04

The Paratextual Field of Old Tamil Poetic and Learned Traditions:

Ways to Lord Murukaṅ – Verses, Glosses and Commentaries around an Old-Tamil Hymn

The Words a Poet looks for – Tamil Glosses to a Sanskrit Poetic Thesaurus

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Sources

The *Tirumurukāruppaṭai* (Showing the Way to Murukaṅ) is a short devotional hymn in old Tamil, dedicated to the Dravidian god Murukaṅ, identified with the North-Indian Skanda, Śiva's son. The text has found entry not only into the literary corpus of Classical Tamil (beginning of the Common Era), but also into the Tamil sacred canon of Śaiva scriptures (compiled in the 12th century). Moreover, it is up to this day a popular text of Murukaṅ devotion. Correspondingly complex is its history of transmission.



The god Murukaṅ mounted on his elephant, Viḷuppuram, Tamil Nadu, c. 11th/12th century.

One of the devices used by poets as well as by students of poetic language from a remarkable number of Indian literary traditions is the *Amarakośa*, a (quasi-)synonym dictionary arranged in semantic fields. It is transmitted with eighty commentaries in many languages, and in a number of translations, only a minority of them published. Eight of its 60 manuscripts found in the Pondicherry collections are endowed with more or less extensive Tamil or Maṅḍipravāḷam glosses.

Objectives

The primary goal of the project will be a study of the development from ancillary and often cursory material as is in general transmitted with manuscripts into actual paratextual genres such as the commentary that gains, in a standardised form, a fixed space for itself in learned and often even popular editions. The first part of the project proceeds from a small poetic text that is particularly rich in diverse paratextual materials and transmitted in a larger number of manuscripts than most of its kind. The second part of the project is focussed on a text from the grammatical tradition in the wider sense that described the poetic norms according to which poetic texts were produced. On the basis of upon the whole older material it will help test the first tentative conclusions drawn in the first part concerned with the development of glosses and the anonymous commentary. What both parts have in common is the emphasis on "non-academic"/non-professional material, for the Tirumuruku in the form of private manuscripts from the hand of lay devotees, in the case of the *Amarakośa* presumably from the hand of students of language and/or poetry. The study of

manuscripts thus allows to trace the formation of commentaries on micro-level, that is, not by its scholastic triumphs in the form of author commentaries from the hand of recognised scholars, but as a process accumulating and condensing the work of generations of readers and users.

Manuscript culture in Tamil Nadu

The overall number of manuscripts transmitted in Tamilnadu can only be roughly estimated. According to the catalogue of Tamil Palm-leaf Manuscripts (Chellamuthu 1989) the number of manuscripts in Tamil language would be around 25 000. However, this catalogue comprises only the larger libraries. If one takes into consideration the smaller collections of innumerable temples and private households, the figure ought to be far higher. Moreover, this figure does not at all take into account the numerous paper manuscripts. The catalogisation is insufficient. What is worse, printed catalogues are full of misleading or even simply false information. The state of preservation in general is not good, partly due to the problems arising with a climate as hot and humid as that of Tamilnadu, partly due to lack of awareness and ensuing neglect. For the better part conservation is not ensured. Various institutions have been involved with projects of microfilming or photographing part of the heritage, at least as far as the palm-leaf manuscripts are concerned (such as the IGNCA). A small part of the manuscripts for the literary tradition of the first millennium has by now at least been digitised (EFEO Pondicherry; now also Cemmoḷi, the Centre of Excellence for Classical Tamil in Chennai). In recent years, newspaper articles appear regularly that report spectacular new finds with figures such as 30 000 manuscripts collected in a single month, but so far such reports have never been substantiated by more detailed information.



Samples of Tirumurukāruppaṭai manuscripts:

- a-- The poem verse by verse.
- b-- The poem interspersed with commentary and marginal title (left).
- c-- First a blessing, work title, additional stanzas, and metrical information with subject-heading, then the poem verse by verse in three columns.
- d-- Final leaf ending with scribal information.