

The well-preserved manuscript is 49.5 cm long and 4.5 cm wide, made of palm-leaf. The leaves of the manuscript, onto which the script is engraved, are protected by blank covers that are also made of palm-leaf.

The single leaves are bound in bundles with a string that apparently is made of plant origin. Two holes are drilled into each leaf, the ends of the string pulled through are tied into a knot. While closed, one can also see the leaves' coloured edges. In the middle of its length, a red strip of colour is applied, approximately as wide as the space between the leaves' holes.

The edges to the red stripe's right and left are coloured in gold. Opening the manuscript, one can see seven lines of writing on each leaf's front and back, except for the leaves covering the manuscript.

Function of the object in the context of its production

It seems likely that the manuscript contains the fifth part of a text called *Silakhanda*, a part from the *digha nikaya*, meaning "long collection". The *digha nikaya* contains 34 suttas – the narrative parts of Buddhist scriptures – and includes dialogues of Buddha.¹ The text is about *dana* and *sila*, therefore tells about generosity and moral behaviour and one can presume that the manuscript was produced for a religious context.²

In general, manuscripts were produced for a variety of purposes in different locations, but also in Buddhist monasteries. The production itself was regarded as an act to gain merit.³ Also, the manuscripts provided teaching material and handbooks for monks and novices, as well as Buddhist literature to read to the lay people during religious ceremonies.⁴ Regarding this particular manuscript's content of generosity and moral behaviour, the manuscript appears to also have a didactic character, instructing people in questions of how to behave appropriately.

Provenance and history of collection in Switzerland

Myanmar; India (?); Colonel Antoine Henri Louis Polier; BCU Lausanne, former Academy of Lausanne.

¹ "Sutta Pitaka," Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed February 27, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sutta-Pitaka#ref166815>.

² Dr. Tilman Frasch, Department of History, Politics and Philosophy, Manchester Metropolitan University, mail to author, January 27, 2019; Anne Peters, mail to author, January 23, 2019.

³ Jana Igunma, "The History of the Book in Southeast Asia (2): The Mainland," in *The Book. A Global History*, ed. Michale F. Suarez, S.J. and H.R. Woudhuysen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 631.

⁴ Igunma, "Book in Southeast Asia (2)," 631.

A note in the manuscript indicates that the script was written around 1760, most likely in Burma, today's Myanmar. At the end of the text, a date is indicated. It is translated to "in the year 120 more" in relation to the Burmese Era. It seems to be likely that this date equals the year 1758 or 1760 AD in today's Gregorian calendar.⁵

In 1788, it presumably came to Europe with Swiss Colonel Antoine Henri Louis Polier (1741-1795), to whom the manuscript is attributed.⁶ Polier came to Europe, along with his collection of manuscripts, after having spent 30 years in India.⁷ He left the manuscript to the Academy of his hometown, Lausanne, before moving to Avignon, France.⁸ The Academy included a *Kunstkabinett*, a cabinet of curiosities, as well as a library that later became part of the BCU Lausanne.⁹ During Polier's time, the cabinet and the library were connected through Alexandre César Chavannes (1731-1800), who was not only the librarian of the Academy, but also in charge of the cabinet of curiosities.¹⁰ Today, the manuscript is still preserved at the BCU Lausanne.

Personal analysis

Polier's activities in collecting manuscripts are well researched and these researches do mostly rely on his interest towards Persian, Arabic, Hindustani and Sanskrit manuscripts. As a Swiss foreigner, Polier was not part of the society of the British colonial authority and not part of the colonized inhabitants in India. Polier tried to insert himself between both parties.¹¹ As a collector, there was the possibility to be accepted in both societies he wanted to associate with, but by nationality was a foreigner to them: the society of British military men in India and Mughal society in India. The habit of collecting granted him access to both societies to a certain degree, since collecting manuscripts was a valued practice in both societies, varying in their reasons.¹²

⁵ Fräsch, mail to author, January 27, 2019; Igunma, "Book in Southeast Asia (2)," 630.

⁶ Claire Brizon, "From collection to use: the artefacts of the cabinet of the Academy of Lausanne in the 18th century," *Colligo* 1, no. 1 (July 2018): 60, <http://revue-colligo.fr/index.php/vol-1-num-1?id=14>.

⁷ Maya Jasanoff, "Collectors of Empire: Objects, Conquests and Imperial Self-Fashioning," *Past & Present*, no. 184 (August 2004): 117, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3600699>, Brizon, "From collection to use," 59.

⁸ Brizon, "From collection to use," 60.

⁹ Urs B. Leu, Hanspeter Marti and Jean-Luc Rouiller, "Bibliothèque cantonale et universitaire, Lausanne," in *Handbuch der historischen Buchbestände der Schweiz, Band 3*, ed. Zentralbibliothek Zürich (Hildesheim: Olms-Weidmann, 2011), 46.

¹⁰ Brizon, "From collection to use," 58.

¹¹ Shalini Randeria, "Colonial Complicities and Imperial Entanglements. An Afterword," in *Colonial Switzerland. Rethinking Colonialism From the Margins*, ed. Patricia Puschert and Harald Fischer-Tiné (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), Basingstoke, 304.

¹² Jasanoff, *Edge of Empire*, 71-76.

Collecting Manuscripts in Late 18th Century India

For some time it was believed that the language of the written text is another Indian language, Malabar, according to a short inventory entry at the Cantonal and University Library Lausanne (BCU Lausanne). During my research on the manuscript's provenance, I was able to discover that the script and language actually are not Malabar. Rather the script is Burmese, and the writing's language is bilingual: Burmese Pali, the canonical language of *Theravada* Buddhism. The manuscript is written in the so-called *nissaya*-style, meaning that short passages in Pali alternate with the Burmese translation.¹³

So interestingly, the Burmese manuscript with its Buddhist text does not seem to have any significance or relation to the societies Polier hoped to gain access through his collecting activities. One wonders, if it would have been useful to Polier at the Muslim Mughal courts, where people were speaking and reading Persian or Arabic.¹⁴ And British collectors, especially military men like Warren Hastings, were most interested in texts concerning Hinduism and Indian culture, mostly written in Sanskrit.¹⁵ Therefore, I would like to argue, that collecting manuscripts in India could also have an additional motivation: a general personal and extensive interest in religion.

Like Polier, many of his male ancestors have been militaries or mercenaries – but there is also a religious and intellectual heritage. His great-uncle, Georges Polier (1675 – 1759), was Professor of Hebrew at the Lausanne Academy, and author of religious works. Polier's paternal uncle, Jean-Antoine-Noe Polier (1713 – 1783), was noted as a Protestant pastor.¹⁶

Polier, therefore coming from a Protestant family, himself began to learn Persian, Arabic as the language of the Koran, as well as Sanskrit, and was introduced to Hindu mythology, due to his effort of gaining access to various societies in India.¹⁷ Having brought a Buddhist manuscript with him to Switzerland, he could have had a similar interest in Buddhism – a religion Polier was not yet associated with.

Conclusion

¹³ Frasc, mail to author, January 27, 2019.

¹⁴ Lisa Balabanlilar, *Imperial Identity in the Mughal Empire. Memory and Dynastic Politics in Early Moderns South and Central Asia*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 16.

¹⁵ Jasanoff, *Edge of Empire*, 65.

¹⁶ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "The Career of Colonel Polier and Late Eighteenth-Century Orientalism," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 10, no. 1 (April 2000): 44, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25187930>.

¹⁷ Subrahmanyam, "Career of Colonel Polier," 57.

While the social aspects of Polier's collecting activities are well known, further research on the manuscript written in Burmese and Pali, containing a religious Buddhist text, could lead to a new approach that allows to see Polier's life and his time in India in an additional point of view.

Moreover, it also points to the question of how the manuscript became Polier's possession in India and the trade of manuscripts within the regions of South-Asia. Through the manuscript of Polier, Switzerland, Great Britain, India and Myanmar become connected. This example of Polier's activities in collecting manuscripts displays the entwinement of Switzerland, Swiss people and Colonialism even beyond the borders of contemporary British colonial territory.¹⁸

¹⁸ Anna Allott, Patricia Herbert, John Okell, "Burma," in *South-East Asia. Language and Literatures: A Selected Guide*, ed. Patricia Herbert and Anthony Milner (Arran: Kiscadale Publications, 1990), 2.