

An Analytical Study of the Calligraphic Features of Tripiṭaka Manuscripts

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Introduction

The art of scribing Tripiṭaka manuscripts embodies a unique literary tradition distinguished by the independent and distinctive stylistic practices of its scribes. Methodical study of the manuscript requires an understanding the scribal style and compositional practices of its original scribe. The research problem primarily emerged from the difficulty of finding systematic studies analysing and illustrating the calligraphy of Tripiṭaka manuscripts. The objective of this research is to provide researchers with a comprehensive understanding of scribal practices through examples of writing styles in Tripiṭaka manuscripts.

Methodology

For this research, qualitative research methodology was used. As primary sources, ten digitised Tripiṭaka manuscripts from the Sri Lanka Bhiksu University Library were examined. As secondary sources, academic treatises were reviewed, and relevant information was gathered through textual analysis.

Result and Discussion

Tripiṭaka palm-leaf tradition uses a single character to represent multiple letters, which poses a challenge for the researcher. Even when the context is considered, selecting the correct reading is often highly complex. In such

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instances, cross-referencing with translations in other languages becomes necessary to determine the accurate word.

Table 1: Examples of the Tripiṭaka palm-leaf tradition use a single character to represent multiple letters

 ndhā / ddhā	anubañdhā / anubaddhā	
 ṭṭa / ddha	pariyādinnavatṭe pariyādinnavaddhe	
 ṭṭha / ḍḍha 	kevatṭha / kevaḍḍha saṃvatṭhivivatṭhaṃ saṃvaḍḍhivivaḍḍha ṃ	 

Spacing between Letters and Words

During the binding process, for the convenience of the scribe, approximately four lines in the centre of each folio are left blank in a uniform manner. Additionally, gaps are left to account for illegible, damaged, or eroded portions of the folios where letters cannot be written. Since spacing between letters or words occurs irregularly, some parts of a letter may appear on one side of the folio while the remaining part is continued on the other side.

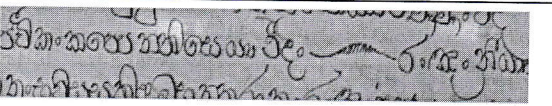
Table 2: Spacing between Letters and Words of the Tipiṭaka Palm-Leaf Tradition

ime dasadhammā hānabhāgiyā	
Itivā	
ababhanatarānaṃ	
ulāraṃso labhati	

kuṇḍalī Punctuation in Manuscripts

The kuṇḍalī serves as a distinctive punctuation mark, which is also called Sarpagaṭa (*Lagamuwa, 2006:140*). In Pāli, kuṇḍalai denotes kuṇḍalābharāṇi (*Davids, (ed) 2004:220*). The kuṇḍali indicates various textual situations, often appearing at the end of a paragraph sometimes preceded by another to emphasize clarifications. The 'pe' mark is occasionally accompanied by two kuṇḍalīs mid-passage, while three kuṇḍalī are placed before and after a sutta name to indicate a distinctive scribal convention.

Table 3: kuṇḍalī Punctuation in Tipiṭaka Palm-Leaf Manuscripts

so setṭho devamānuseṭṭi	
jīvikaṃ kappenti, seyyaṭhīdaṃ, raññaṃ nīyyānaṃ	

'pe'	
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Omissions of Erroneously Written Letters

Manuscript writing is a manually transmitted tradition. Copyists reproduce texts from the autograph, naturally introducing errors, which are corrected using methods such as striking out letters, overwriting, marking removed words and indicating deletions with lines.

Table 4: Omissions of Erroneously Written Letters of the Manuscripts

Omissions letter or word	Examples
Brā	
Nu	
Pahāya	
Ssa	

Indeterminate Sections

During the correction of errors in copied manuscripts, certain passages may remain unclear. Therefore, the editor must act as an intermediary to accurately interpret the correct words, ensuring fidelity both to the copyist and the manuscript.

Table 5: Remaining unclear passages during the correction of errors in copied manuscripts

ettha(-hosi?) vocha	
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bhiyyō(bhim?)aññataro	
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Confusion of similar letters and syllables

The identification of graphically similar letters in palm-leaf manuscripts presents a considerable challenge. Characters such as va-ca, ha-bha, ta-na, pha-tha, ja-cha, and sa-gha are frequently confused, which may result in erroneous interpretations. Hence, accurate reading requires reliance upon the contextual and semantic framework.

Table 6: Confusion of similar letters and syllables in the Tipiṭaka Palm-Leaf Manuscripts

	<i>lahusam / lahugham</i>
	<i>mogha / mosa</i>

Haplography and lipography

In the process of transcription, scribes commonly made errors such as omissions or additions of letters. These mistakes could arise either from the scribe himself or from the source manuscript, resulting in variant readings. Such errors are a characteristic feature of manuscripts.

Table 7: Omissions or additions of letters in the Palm-Leaf Manuscripts

Example	Wrong way	Correct way
	bhagato	bhagavato
	Sammāsabuddho	sammāsambuddho

Transposition of letters (anagrammatism)

The transposition of letters or words is an unnatural error made by the scribe. At times, such instances may escape the editor's notice during research.

Table 8: Transposition of letters in the Tipiṭaka Palm-Leaf Manuscripts

Example	Wrong way	Correct way
	pācākaṃ	cāpālaṃ

To resolve these issues, the researcher must examine manuscript families to determine the earliest and most reliable textual form. In the absence of an original manuscript, the reconstruction of the text depends on identifying common features across the surviving copies. Since multiple manuscripts may belong to the same lineage, genealogical analysis becomes an essential task in textual editing. Considering these facts, a sound knowledge of textual criticism enables the researcher to conduct precise editing in accordance with established scholarly principles. Moreover, a comprehensive grasp of the stylistic and scribal conventions of Tripitaka manuscripts is essential, allowing the researcher to conduct an accurate study while preserving the authenticity of the text.

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