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Conservation of a Palm Leaf Manuscript

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Palm leaves used to be a popular writing support in most parts of East Asia long before Christ. While their use is no longer common today, thousands of manuscripts, books or single pieces made of palm leaves are preserved in libraries throughout the world.

This paper focuses on the conservation of nine palm leaf manuscripts originally bound together, hidden amongst pieces of papyrus at a local French museum, the Musée savoisien in Chambéry. This was a fantastic opportunity to discover this form of book and look for information about their manufacturing process and the ways in which they were used.

The conservation treatment included dealing with dusty surfaces, severe distortions, fragile edges and broken pieces (Fig 1). For mounting the individual palm leaves, we needed to keep in mind its original book-form. The mounting system therefore had to refrain from causing further damage to the item while still allowing it to be read and exhibited (Fig 2).

This project benefitted from various enriching encounters ranging from a traditional Malaysian writer (met at the last IADA congress in Berlin!) to several scholars in France and India who helped us better understand these pieces. We were fortunate as well to receive the help of several specialists in Indian languages and texts who discovered on the palm leaves, a rare text from the 19th century written within a Tamil Catholic community.

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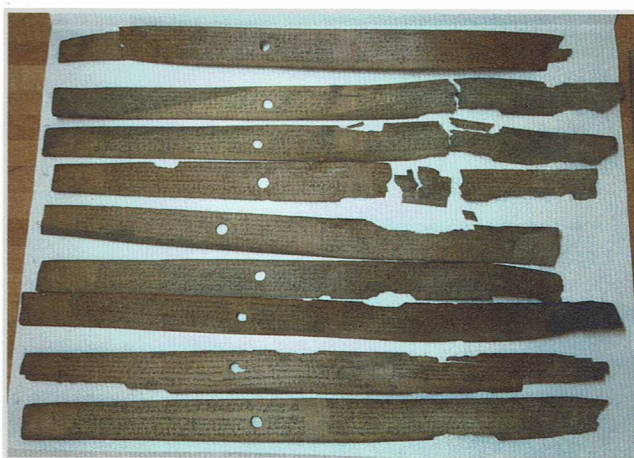


Fig 1: Bunch of palm leaves before treatment (© E. Menei)

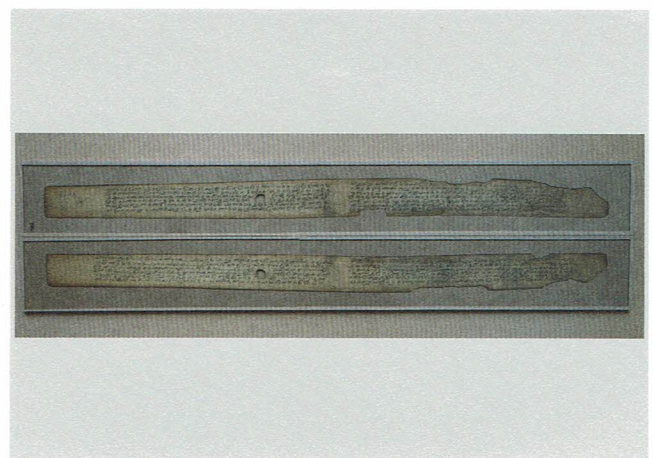


Fig 2: Final mounting for two pieces (© E. Menei)