

From South Asia to Europe and Beyond

Sanskrit Manuscript Catalogues as Mirrors of Scholarship

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During the 19th century, manuscript catalogues played a very important role for the birth and rapid development of South Asian studies. Many European scholars travelled to the Indian subcontinent and to Central Asia in search for manuscripts of Sanskrit and Middle Indo-Aryan texts, very often working with the help of local Paṇḍits. In 1868 the Indian Government set out in an ambitious enterprise to compile a catalogue of all Sanskrit manuscripts in Indian and European libraries. Scholars travelled through the whole of the subcontinent collecting and buying manuscripts. The great majority of manuscripts were moved to libraries in India, but a substantial number were sent to European libraries. It is also thanks to the reports written by those scholars and to catalogues of Indian manuscripts kept in European libraries that the knowledge of Sanskrit literature made a huge step forward in Europe. Many texts hitherto unknown—and many others that had been deemed lost—were discovered.

Unfortunately not all collections have been fully catalogued. The collections of South Asian manuscripts kept in the Cambridge University Library comprise Pali, Sinhala, Burmese, Sanskrit and Prakrit manuscripts. Only a small part of them has been catalogued by Cecil Bendall in 1883. In the first part of the paper the origin and growth of the collections will be outlined. The second part will be devoted to an analysis of the composition of the collections, with a twofold aim. At first, an attempt will be made to get a glimpse on the intellectual history of selected South Asian regions (Nepal, Bengal and Northwest India) on account of the origin of the manuscripts. Finally, a few considerations will be presented on manuscript catalogues as reflecting the intellectual interests of European scholars and as a means to shape scholarship.