Mixing Languages and Scripts in Tamil Inscriptions and Manuscripts

Emmanuel Francis

Emmanuel Francis

Mixing Languages and Scripts in Tamil Inscriptions and Manuscripts

Abstract: This chapter focuses on two periods in the history of writing texts in the Tamil language in the present-day Tamil Nadu state of South India. The first period starts around 600 CE, when two different alphabets – the Grantha and the Tamil alphabets – were designed to write texts in Sanskrit and Tamil, respectively. One can observe for several centuries onwards that Sanskrit loanwords are often written in their specific Grantha alphabet in Tamil inscriptions. The second period is attested in Tamil manuscripts, most of which are dated to the eighteenth and nineteenth century CE. These manuscripts evince new practices of script-mixing, the most conspicuous being the creation of conjunct graphemes mixing Grantha and Tamil alphabets.

1 Introduction

The Tamil region in South India, the present-day state of Tamil Nadu, has known a peculiar situation as far as alphabets have been concerned for approximately 1200 years, from the seventh to the nineteenth century CE. A single alphabet has been used to write texts in the regional language and in Sanskrit, the Indian cosmopolitan language, in most parts of India. By contrast, a distinct alphabet, called Grantha, designed around 600 CE, was used to write texts in Sanskrit in the Tamil south, whereas other distinct alphabets (called the Tamil and Vaṭṭeḻuttu alphabets) were used for writing texts in the Tamil language.

Given the multilingual (Sanskrit and Tamil) culture of the learned, it often happened that multilingual texts were produced in the Tamil area, with the use of specific alphabets for the different languages. This has resulted in interesting cases of language and alphabet mixing attested early in Tamil inscriptions and later in the surviving manuscripts.

The present chapter will focus mainly on two different cases of language and alphabet mixing in the Tamil area, separated by approximately a millennium:
– The use of Grantha graphemes for Sanskrit loanwords in otherwise fully Tamil inscriptions, with examples dated between the seventh and the thirteenth century CE.

– The use of the Grantha grapheme *m* as the final element of conjunct graphemes mixing Grantha and Tamil alphabets, in otherwise fully Tamil manuscripts dated mostly to the eighteenth and nineteenth century CE.

2 Scripts and languages in the Tamil region

The earliest attested alphabet for writing Tamil is the Tamil-Brāhmī alphabet (also called the Tamiḻi alphabet). This is an adaptation of the northern Brāhmī alphabet (fourth century BCE, at the latest), initially designed for writing Indo-Aryan languages. This alphabet has been adapted in the Tamil area to write inscriptions in Tamil, a Dravidian language, from the third century BCE. Slightly later, another alphabet called Vaṭṭeḻuttu, also derived from the Brāhmī alphabet, is attested to write down Tamil.[1]

A new alphabet for Tamil appeared around the beginning of the seventh century CE, simply called the Tamil alphabet, from which the modern Tamil alphabet derives. At the same time, a specific alphabet, called Grantha, was designed for writing Sanskrit texts, as this language knows phonemes (e.g. aspirate) unknown in Tamil and as, in writing, Sanskrit consonant clusters are generally dealt with ligature letters rather than using a 'vowel-killer' (see below) on the first consonant.[2] The Vaṭṭeḻuttu alphabet continued to be used, up to the eighth century CE, in countryside areas, for instance, for the specific type of hero stone inscriptions, before later being confined to Kerala and the southern districts of present-day Tamil Nadu.

The Tamil and Grantha alphabets, designed around 600 CE, however, have some graphemes in common, as shown in Table 1, which is only an attempt to describe the configurations of Tamil and Grantha alphabets at the time of their invention in the seventh century CE.[3]

---

1 On these small corpora of Tamil-Brāhmī and early Vaṭṭeḻuttu inscriptions, and on the relations between these alphabets, see Mahadevan 2003 and 2014.
2 Grantha is also called Grantha Tamil (Grünendahl 2001), Tamilian Grantha (Franceschini 2022), to distinguish it from other varieties of Grantha used in regions of South India, contiguous to the Tamil area, e.g. Grantha Malayalam (Grünendahl 2001).
3 Some graphemes listed in lines 2 and 3 might, in fact, be changed from one line to the other. As such, lines 2 and 3 are provisional.

Table 1: Graphemes of the Grantha and Tamil alphabets (seventh century CE).[4]

1	Graphemes	Grantha alphabet	Tamil alphabet
2	Common to both alphabets	ṭa, ṇa, ta, na ya, va	
3	Specific in each alphabet	initial vowels ña ka, ra pa ma la	initial vowels ña ka, ra pa ma la
4	Specific to the Grantha alphabet	kha, ga, gha ca, cha, ja, jha ṭha, ḍa, ḍha tha, da, dha pha, ba, bha ṣa, sa, śa ha ṃ, ḥ	
5	Specific to the Tamil alphabet		ca ḷa, ḷa, ṟa, ṉa ḵ

Line 2 shows the graphemes common to both alphabets. Line 3 shows graphemes for phonemes common to both languages but differentiated in their respective alphabet. The letters *ka* and *ra*, for instance, have a single stroke in the Tamil alphabet and a double stroke in the Grantha alphabet (see Fig. 1d); the Grantha *pa* is larger than the Tamil *pa*. Line 4 shows graphemes found only in the Grantha alphabet for specific Sanskrit phonemes not attested in the Tamil language, for instance, aspirated consonants, and for phonemes not distinguished by script in Tamil language, such as voiced and unvoiced consonants.[5] Conversely, as shown in line 5, the Tamil alphabet also has exclusive graphemes, specifically for Tamil Dravidian phonemes, such as alveolar consonants.

---

4 For the conventions of visualisation of different scripts and languages, see Conventions, below.

5 The reason why Tamil does not distinguish voiced/unvoiced consonants in its dedicated script is that this quality is indicated by the immediate environment of the consonant: for instance, the Tamil *t*, between two vowels or after *n*, is a voiced dental, but is unvoiced when duplicated or at the beginning of a word (unless, in the latter case, the final grapheme of the preceding word is *n* or *t*).

Furthermore, Grantha also regularly resorts to ligature writing, using conjunct graphemes, i.e. one single grapheme made by merging the graphemes of two or more consonants following each other without being vocalised. Such a feature only occasionally appears in the Tamil alphabet, where it mostly affects graphemes common to both the Tamil and Grantha alphabets, showing the probable influence of the Grantha alphabet upon the Tamil alphabet.

The distribution above of graphemes between the two alphabets is, in fact, tentative and shows the situation in the seventh century CE. In the course of time, Tamil and Grantha scripts came to be more sharply distinguished. Initial vowels might not be well differentiated, at least in the early period, and were clearly differentiated only later. Further differentiation between the two scripts may be observed quite early in some inscriptions:[6]

– In the inscription IP 205 (*c.* 877 CE), the Tamil *ṭa* is longer than the Grantha *ṭa*, which is here found also used in a conjunct grapheme and, as such, marked as Grantha. Compare Eṭṭā*vatu* (Fig. 1a) and bhāṭṭa*nu*kku (Fig. 1b).

– In the same inscription IP 205, in the word Ācāriryya*nē*n· (Fig. 1c), the final *n*, a grapheme common to both scripts, is marked as Grantha by a superscript wavy line, which is a *virāma* (i.e. a vowel-killer, indicating that the consonant is not vocalised).[7]

– In the inscription IP 96 (late ninth century CE), in the word *va*llaṉ āy uktaṉākiy*a* (Fig. 1d), the form of the vowel sign *-u* in *yu* marks this grapheme as Grantha, as it has two strokes (instead of one stroke in the Tamil script). Also note the difference mentioned above between Grantha *k* (two strokes) and Tamil script *k* (a single stroke).

– The inscription IT 4 (*c.* 1048 CE) shows two types of *tu* (Fig. 1e): śrīcoḷentrasiṃhaccatu<r>vvedimaṅkala*t*tu. The first *tu* is in Grantha and the second in Tamil script, as indicated by the alternative ways the vowel sign *-u* is attached to the consonant.

The Tamil script does not normally use conjunct graphemes. But there are also cases of Tamil conjunct graphemes observed in Tamil words. They concern graphemes common to both scripts (e.g. *n* and *t*) but also Tamil graphemes proper (e.g. *k*). Here are a few examples:

---

6 Roman, grey-highlighted roman, and italic, respectively mark graphemes in the Tamil alphabet, graphemes in the Grantha alphabet, and graphemes common to the Tamil and Grantha alphabets.

7 The same wavy line is used in this inscription as a vowel-killer above Tamil graphemes, instead of the usual *puḷḷi* ('dot'). Also see the Centalai inscriptions below.

– n=ti (Fig. 2a) in the phrase svasti śrī *na*n=tippō⟨*t*⟩*ta*raiya*r*kku (IP 144, *c.* 849 CE). This syllable *nti* can be considered to be written here in Tamil script as it represents the Tamil pronunciation and notation of Sanskrit *ndi*.

– k=ku (Fig. 2b) in the word pu*tu*k=ku (IP 120, supplementary inscription, *c.* 852 CE). This is possibly the first example of a common Tamil conjunct grapheme. We see here that the single vertical strokes of both *k* are very close, that both graphemes seem to share a single horizontal stroke, while the vowel sign -*u* surrounds both of them.

– p=pa (Fig. 2c) in the word *ti*rup=pa*ti* (IT 30, *c.* 1241 CE). That this is not a Grantha conjunct grapheme is indicated by the fact that the *p* is not large and the two graphemes are merged horizontally (instead of vertically, as in Grantha).

– pa=ṭ=ṭa (Fig. 2d) in the word *tēva*pa=ṭ=ṭa*ṉ* (IT 30, l. 15, *c.* 1241 CE).

The coexistence of specific alphabets for Tamil and Sanskrit languages implies that both languages might be marked by their alphabets in a text written in the Tamil area. This practice, attested by some of the inscriptional examples above, has been apparently acknowledged by Tamil grammarians, as early as the eleventh century,[8] and comes, in the Tamil area, in different configurations.[9]

On the one hand, there are inscriptions which consist of at least two distinct portions of text, one in Sanskrit and Grantha, the other in the Tamil language and script. These are diglossic inscriptions, as there is a division of labour[10] between the languages: Sanskrit for the eulogy and Tamil for the business part, i.e. what Timothy Lubin calls ceremonial diglossia[11] and Sheldon Pollock, hyperglossia.[12] There are also cases of bilinguals, where the Tamil language, on par with Sanskrit, is also used for the eulogy, which I have suggested calling amphiglossic (ceremonial) bilinguals.

On the other hand, there are numerous inscriptions that I have called Tamil mixed-language inscriptions, where Tamil is the main language of the record whereas Sanskrit loanwords, in a variable quantity, are integrated into the text

---

8 On *viraviyal*, 'that which has the nature of mixing', mentioned in the eleventh-century CE Tamil grammar called *Vīracōḻiyam*, see Francis 2021a, 129.

9 The following three paragraphs summarise what is described at length in Francis 2021a.

10 Pollock 2006, 117.

11 Lubin 2013, 411.

12 Such inscriptions are false or non-strict bilinguals, i.e. the two texts in different languages are not translations one of the other, but differ in content, as opposed to strict bilinguals, where the two texts in different languages are (almost exact) translations one of the other. The latter type is virtually inexistent in the Tamil region until the nineteenth century CE.

and marked as such by the use of Grantha. This is another type of diglossia, legal[13] or technical.

Finally, there is also the language called Maṇippiravāḷam – applied to texts, especially in Vaiṣṇava commentarial tradition, from the twelfth century CE onwards – transmitted in manuscripts, where Tamil and Sanskrit are mixed, without hierarchy. The label Maṇippiravāḷam has also been applied to inscriptions from the Tamil area. I would restrict this label only to inscriptions where Sanskrit and Tamil are both languages of eulogy, mixed in the same text, i.e. in cases of amphiglossic (ceremonial) mixed-language inscriptions, but not in cases of legal or technical diglossia in Tamil mixed-language inscriptions, where Sanskrit is a term of higher register, i.e. hyperglossic.

3 Tamil inscriptions (600–1300 CE)

We are concerned with the period, starting around 600 CE, when the Grantha alphabet, specifically designed for writing Sanskrit, appeared and coexisted with alphabets designed for writing Tamil: an already existing Vaṭṭeḻuttu alphabet and a newly-designed Tamil alphabet. This period lasted for several centuries and also witnessed the progressive assimilation of Sanskrit loanwords to Tamil phonetics and script, with only a few residual Grantha graphemes still used.[14]

3.1 Trichy royal epithets

The first examples of these two new alphabets are possibly to be found, around 600 CE, in the rock-cut cave at Trichy.[15]

Among the inscriptions of this cave are a series of royal epithets (*biruda*s, 'glorifying soubriquets') of the Pallava king Mahendravarman I, distributed on

---

13 Following Lubin 2013.
14 These Grantha graphemes, i.e. *ja*, *śa*, *ṣa*, *sa*, *ha*, *kṣa* and *śrī*, eventually came to be considered as Grantha elements of the modern Tamil alphabet, but are found only in Sanskrit loanwords.
15 Lockwood 2008.

different parts of the monument. This list is multilingual and multiscriptual, as we find:[16]

- Sanskrit royal epithets in Grantha script.
- Tamil royal epithets in Tamil script.
- Tamil royal epithets, exceptionally, in Grantha script.
- Telugu royal epithets in Grantha script, with a specific grapheme for the Dravidian alveolar *ṟa*.

3.2 Auspicious beginnings

Similar to any Indian text, an inscription usually starts with an auspicious beginning. Inscriptions in the Tamil region, from the eighth century CE onwards, whether in Sanskrit or in Tamil, start with the Sanskrit blessing *svasti śrī* ('Prosperity! Fortune!') in Grantha (Fig. 3).[17] This almost compulsory initial blessing *svasti śrī* appears to be typical of South Indian Tamil inscriptions and only occasionally occurs in North Indian inscriptions.

Alternative blessings of the same purport in Tamil script are attested at an early time. (Āyu)ḷ cīr (IP 262; ninth century CE), for instance, which, in fact, is made of two Sanskrit loanwords, *āyus* and *śrī*, assimilated to Tamil phonetics and script.

Another pan-Indian Sanskrit blessing formula, *śubham astu*, became ubiquitous in the Tamil region and practically displaced *svasti śrī* subsequently, from the fifteenth century CE onwards.

3.3 Sanskrit loanwords

Tamil inscriptions contain loanwords from Prakrit, and later from Sanskrit, from the early beginnings. These words are usually assimilated into the Tamil phonetics and morphology in the early Tamil-Brāhmī inscriptions.[18]

However, from the time the Grantha alphabet was invented to write down Sanskrit texts, we regularly find Sanskrit loanwords written, fully or partially, in Grantha script in a Tamil inscription, denoting, similar to our modern use of the

---

16 For details, illustrations, and translations, see Francis 2013a, 363–368; Francis 2021a, 112–115. For another list of royal epithets, bilingual only, and multiscriptual, see the Centalai inscriptions below.

17 Also see IP 144 above (Fig. 2a).

18 See Mahadevan 2003, 109; Mahadevan 2014, 146.

italics, the awareness of the writer that the word is a loanword. Here are a few examples of selected Sanskrit loanwords found in such Tamil mixed-language inscriptions:

– brahmā*ṇiyā*r (IP 78, l. 2; *c.* 755 CE).
– brahma*tēyan* (IP 171, l. 3; *c.* 890 CE).
– branma*tēyattu*kku (IP 119, l. 11; *c.* 852 CE).

In the last two cases, note that the dental in *tē* is already assimilated into Tamil script, but there are instances where this is not the case, such as:

– brahmade*ya*m (SII 19, no. 357, ll. 15–16; late tenth century CE).

3.3.1 Allographs

Various allographs are found in Tamil inscriptions, across places at the same time or across time in the same place, because, as just seen above, the same Sanskrit loanword can be instantiated using a variable amount of Grantha graphemes. Allographs are also attested in the same record by the same hand. Compare brahmade*ya*m (l. 50; Fig. 4a) and brahma*tēya*m (l. 73; Fig. 4b) in the Bāhūr plates (IP 155, *c.* 877 CE). Similarly, we find [mahā]de*va*rkku (l. 1), mā*tēvaṭi*kaḷārāna (l. 2), Idde*va*rkku (l. 2) and Ide*va*ruṭaiya (l. 2) in SII 19, no. 292 (late tenth century CE), all instances of various ways of actualising the Sanskrit word *deva* in a Tamil inscription.

3.3.2 Mixing morphology

The examples above additionally show that mixing alphabets and languages also implies mixing morphology. The root of Sanskrit loanword is normally in Grantha, whereas the Tamil morphological suffix is in Tamil letters. Thus, the transition of one script to another is often at the morpheme boundary.

An interesting case is that of Sanskrit personal names of the *a*-stem declension. In the following examples, the stem of the Sanskrit loanword in Grantha is suffixed with the purely Tamil morphological ending of the third person masculine -*aṉ*, in Tamil letters:

– pākaśāca*naṉ* = Sanskrit *pākaśāsana-* ('punisher of Pāka', a name of the god Indra) + Tamil *aṉ* (SII 3, no. 206, l. 89; tenth century CE). The letter *na*, at the transition between Grantha and Tamil scripts, is considered here as a grapheme common to both alphabets.

– madhyastaṉ (IP 152, pl. 7v, l. 4 = l. 125; *c.* 875 CE) = Sanskrit *madhyastha* (with aspirated *tha* changed to non-aspirated *ta*) + Tamil *aṉ*.

The first example comes from the Tamil portion of a bilingual ceremonial amphiglossic copperplate charter, the second one from the Tamil portion, evincing technical diglossia, of a bilingual ceremonial diglossic copperplate charter.

Interestingly, we also have, although rarely, examples where the Sanskrit personal name is fully written in Grantha, including the purely Tamil morphological suffix of the third person masculine, 'Granthaised' as *n*, a grapheme, in fact, common to Tamil and Grantha scripts, but marked here as Grantha in contrast with the Tamil grapheme *ṉ*:

– śrīvaran· śrīmanoharan· ciṉac·colaṉ· puṉap·pūḻiyaṉ· vītakan·maṣan· vinaya-viśrutan· vikramapārakan· vīrapurokan· (Vēḷvikkuṭi plates, EI 17, no. 16, ll. 98–99; *c.* ninth century CE). This is a long string of royal epithets of King Neṭuñcaṭaiyaṉ, where Tamil ones, written in Vaṭṭeḻuttu script[19] and ending with the Tamil ending of the third person masculine *-aṉ*, alternate with Grantha ones, written in Grantha and ending with Tamil suffix of the third person masculine, 'Granthaised' as *n* and followed by a *virāma* vowel-killer. This text portion is an example of epigraphical Maṇippiravāḷam from the Tamil portion of a bilingual amphiglossic copperplate charter.

– bhāṭ=ṭa*nu*kku (see IP 205 above and Fig. 1b). The letter *nu*, at the transition between Grantha and Tamil scripts, is considered here as a grapheme common to both alphabets.

In the same Vēḷvikkuṭi plates (EI 17, no. 16, *c.* ninth century CE) we also find personal names mixing Tamil and Sanskrit, fully in Grantha, in portions of texts otherwise fully in Tamil script:

– māravarmman· (plate 4ᵛ, l. 2 = l. 48) = Tamil *māṟaṉ* + Sanskrit *varman*.

– śrīmāravarmman· (plate 5ʳ, l. 6 = l. 62).

There is an interesting case in Centalai of two mixed-language amphiglossic inscriptions found each inscribed twice on four pillars. Each inscription is a list of four royal epithets of a Muttaraiyar chief (eighth century CE; EI 13, no. 10).[20]

---

19 This is, thus, a case of Vaṭṭeḻuttu and Grantha scripts being mixed, examples of which are found in the southern parts of the Tamil region, where Vaṭṭeḻuttu subsides. Also see, for instance, a cave inscription at Āṉaimalai (EI 8, no. 33.II).

20 For further details, translations and illustrations, see Francis 2013a, 376–382; Francis 2021a, 114–115.

The first series reads [śrīmāraṉ·] śrīśatrukesarī śrīkaḷvarakaḷvan· śrīAtisāhasan·, whereas the second series reads śrītamarālayaṉ· śrīAbhimānadhīran· śrīkaḷ·varakaḷ·vaṉ· śrīśatrukesarī. The following traits are noticeable here:

– The *virāma* on the final Grantha *n* of the Grantha royal epithets and the *puḷḷi* on the final Tamil letter *ṉ* of the Tamil royal epithets, which are both a similar wavy line.
– The two royal epithets in the Sanskrit language and Grantha script śrīAtisāhasan· and śrīAbhimānadhīran·, which both end with the Tamil personal suffix of the third personal singular (-*aṉ*), 'Granthaised' as *n*.
– The Tamil royal epithet *kaḷvarakaḷvaṉ* found in Tamil script except for the honorific prefix *śrī* in Grantha (śrīkaḷ·*va*rakaḷ·*vaṉ*·), but also written entirely in Grantha (śrīkaḷvarakaḷvan·), with the alveolar final *ṉ* of the third person singular 'Granthaised' as *n*.

3.3.3 Sociolinguistic aspects

Several factors, not mutually exclusive, might explain the choice of the Grantha alphabet for the Sanskrit loanwords:

– An almost 'mechanical' writing of words in their appropriate script – like we, today, use quotation marks or italics for foreign words – by a copyist knowledgeable in both scripts and languages.
– A pedantic writing reflected in the script.
– An identity statement by a Brahmin writer, as Sanskrit is the Brahmins' preserve.
– A reference to a pan-Indian concept otherwise theorised in Sanskrit texts. This is a diglossic situation (legal, technical) at the level of a Tamil mixed-language inscription.
– An identity statement of a Tamil writer, in the case of amphiglossic Tamil mixed-language inscriptions or Maṇippiravāḷam, such as the multilingual lists of royal epithets, where both Sanskrit and Tamil are used as both fit to proclaim the grandeur of kings.

Sanskrit loanwords are progressively assimilated into the phonetics and script of the Tamil receiving language. The Sanskrit word *brahmadeya*, that we have seen written as brahmade*ya*m or brahma*tēya*m above, could also be and was indeed written pirama*tēya*m. This spelling spread and became the norm in Tamil inscriptions, but for reasons sometimes unclear, the older spellings brahmade*ya*m or brahma*tēya*m could, across time and place, subside longer or resurface.

4 Sanskrit inscriptions from the Tamil region

Regarding Sanskrit inscriptions in Grantha script produced in the Tamil region, they sometimes evince other instances of mixing, but not that of alphabets and languages.

The spelling of Sanskrit words written in Grantha in a Sanskrit inscription might evince the influence of the Tamil language and phonetics as they were composed by a Tamil speaker. This would be a case of mixing phonetics.

The spelling, for example, in a list of royal epithets in Mahābalipuram (IP 39; seventh century CE), betrays that the mother tongue of the composer is Tamil, as he writes bācha*na* for the Sanskrit *bhājana* and pridhi*vi* for the Sanskrit *pṛthivi*.[21]

A current Tamil alteration of Sanskrit pronunciation is reflected in writing *tṣa* instead of *kṣa*. An instance of this is the Bāhūr plates (IP 155; *c.* 877 CE), where the writer is, however, not consistent as he writes the Sanskrit phoneme *kṣa*, sometimes *kṣa* and sometimes *tṣa*.

The substitution of an unvoiced consonant for a voiced consonant (e.g. *t* for *d* before a consonant) is also common:

– kulotbha*va* instead of kulodbha*va* (IP 91, l. 5; *c.* 793 CE and IP 181, l. 11; *c.* 893 CE).
– sakara instead of sagara (IP 91, l. 15; *c.* 793 CE).

There are also cases of biscript monolingual Sanskrit inscriptions, where the same text is found twice in two different alphabets, the local Grantha and a North Indian alphabet, in a statement of cosmopolitism and claim to universality.[22]

5 Tamil manuscripts

Let us now jump to a time approximately five hundred years later than the end of the inscriptional period concerned above[23] and deal with practices observed in Tamil manuscripts, which usually date to the eighteenth century at the earli-

---

21 See EI 10, no. 7, n. 1. For other examples, see the Bāhūr plates (IP 155; *c.* 877 CE, see EI 18, no. 2, p. 6).

22 See Francis 2013b; Francis 2021b, 157–160.

23 The period between the fourteenth and the seventeenth century CE is not the area of expertise of the present contributor and certainly deserves a closer study.

est and, most of the time, to the nineteenth century CE.[24] This period was also marked by polyglossy: Sanskrit, the pan-Indian cosmopolitan language, and regional languages coexisted and were used and read by the same people. One often finds, for instance, complete Sanskrit sentences, blessings or colophons, i.e. scribal paratexts attesting the copyist's knowledge of these two languages and their respective scripts, in Tamil manuscripts.

However, cases of legal or technical diglossia comparable to those discussed above from Tamil mixed-language inscriptions are only rarely found: Sanskrit loanwords appear to have been fully assimilated into Tamil phonetics and script; their Sanskrit origin is now unrecognisable from their script. Grantha and Tamil scripts are also more differentiated than at their origins.

One novelty that can be observed is the creeping of the Grantha grapheme *m*, so far not observed in earlier inscriptions, but possibly in inscriptions contemporary to the manuscripts, into the writing of Tamil texts, in the form of conjunct graphemes.

5.1 Final *m*

The main phenomenon observed concerns the grapheme for the final *m* in words, which are mostly Sanskrit loanwords, but also, by extension, in Tamil words. Basically, there are three options for writing the ending *m* in a Sanskrit loanword for a copyist:
–   Tamil letter *m*, as an independent grapheme.
–   Grantha letter *m*, as an independent grapheme.
–   Grantha letter *m*, as the final element of a conjunct grapheme, the first element being a Tamil grapheme.

The final *m* in Tamil manuscripts can, thus, be variously instantiated, besides the expected standard Tamil letter *m*.

5.1.1 Independent final Grantha *m*

Here are a few instances of the use of a final Grantha *m*, not in a conjunct but as an independent final grapheme, with or without an ascending stroke, that could

---

24 The manuscripts considered here are mostly on palm leaves, but there are also some paper manuscripts.

be considered a *virāma* (vowel-killer), meaning that the consonant is plain, without vocalisation:

– śrīrā=maceyam· (BnF Indien 1039, U2b, fol. 167ʳ, left margin; Fig. 5a).
– virut=tam (BnF Indien 303, U2c, fol. 77ᵛ, l. 2; Fig. 5b).
– tirucciṟṟampalam· (BnF Indien 303, U2c, fol. 77ᵛ, l. 2; Fig. 5c).

Note that this final Grantha *m* is used mostly, if not exclusively, in paratexts, such as scribal blessings (in the margins or at junctures of the root text, such as ends of chapters or colophons) or total verses (at junctures of the root text), but rarely in the root text itself.

5.1.2 Tamil-Grantha conjuncts with a final Grantha *m*

Another option is to use a Tamil-Grantha conjunct grapheme, where the final *m* is appended below the base of the first (Tamil) grapheme of the conjunct. This appended final *m*, noted here as =m, appears, from its physical aspect, to be, in fact, a Grantha *ma*. It should, as pointed out to me by Charles Li, be read as *m*, i.e. even in the absence of an explicit vowel-killer.

There are also cases where, similar to the independent final Grantha *m* (Section 5.1.1 above), the final *m* bears what could be interpreted as a vowel-killer in the form of an ascending stroke. In the absence of an explicit vowel-killer, it is, however, sometimes to be read *ma* and not *m*, as we will see below (Section 5.2).

Here are some commonly found examples of Tamil-Grantha conjunct graphemes ending with a below-base Grantha letter *m*, as compared to the standard Tamil script graphemes:

– ṇam *vs* ṇa=m (Fig. 6a and Fig. 6b).
– ṉam *vs* ṉa=m (Fig. 6c and Fig. 6d).
– yum *vs* yu=m (Fig. 6e and Fig. 6f).
– yam *vs* ya=m (Fig. 6g and Fig. 6h).

Note that yu=m and ya=m are basically the same grapheme that can be read yum (in pure Tamil words, e.g. aṟiyu=m) or yam (in Sanskrit loanwords, e.g. ceya=m). Other Tamil-Grantha conjunct graphemes attested are, for instance, ka=m, k=ka=m, ta=m, t=ta=m, tu=m, mu=m, ra=m, la=m, vu=m and ḷa=m. There might be more, not yet observed.[25]

---

25 See growing list of examples on <https://tst-project.github.io/palaeography/below-base-ligatures> (accessed on 20 July 2023).

5.1.3 Allographs

As such variant spellings coexist with standard Tamil spellings, there are several allographs for certain words. The syllable *ṇam*, for instance, could be written:
– ṇam (two graphemes, fully in Tamil script).
– ṇa=m (Tamil-Grantha conjunct grapheme).
– ṇam (one Tamil grapheme + Grantha *m* without *virāma*).
– ṇam· (one Tamil grapheme + Grantha *m* with *virāma*).

The Tamil word *caraṇam*, from Sanskrit *śaraṇa*, 'shelter, refuge, protection', for instance, encountered frequently in the blessing formula *X caraṇam*, is found variously spelled, with further spelling options, such as *ṟa* for *ra*, as follows:
– caraṇam (BnF Indien 246, U2, fol. 77ᵛ, l. 7 and BnF Indien 362, U3, fol. 17ʳ, col. 3, l. 3; Fig. 7a and Fig. 7b).
– caṟaṇam (BnF Indien 362, U3, fol. 17ʳ, col. 2, l. 2; Fig. 7c). Note that this is by the same hand as that of the second of the two examples above, in other words, an inconsistent hand.
– caṟaṇa=m (BnF Indien 89, U2a, fol. 1ʳ, l. 3; Fig. 7d).
– caraṇam=ഉ (BnF Indien 247, U2, fol. 1ᵛ, l. 5; Fig. 7e), with *piḷḷaiyār cuḷi* merged with the final Grantha *m*.

The same could be shown for other Sanskrit loanwords, in blessings adapted from Sanskrit. Sanskrit *sakāya* ('support') in the *X-cakāyam* blessing formula, or Sanskrit *kaṭākṣa* ('glance, side look', i.e. 'grace') in the *X-kaṭākṣam* blessing formula (see examples below) are instances.

5.2 *rā=m / rā=ma* conjunct grapheme

The grapheme rā=ma is a case of a Tamil-Grantha conjunct grapheme where the appended *m* should be read vocalised, that is *ma* and not *m*. We read this grapheme, which looks like two merged Tamil *kāls*[26] + Grantha *ma* attached below its base, as *rāma*. This could alternatively be read *rām*, but in all its occurrences, it makes more sense to read *rāma* rather than *rām*, except when it is followed by a medial *ā*, so as to note *rāmā* (see below).

---

26 The *kāl* is an ambiguous Tamil grapheme, which represents either the medial vowel *ā* or the consonant *r*. Only the context indicates the relevant reading.

In practice, this conjunct grapheme rā=ma has been found so far almost ex-
clusively for the word *rāma*, as in the blessing śrīrāmaceyam (from Sanskrit *śrī* +
rāma + *jaya*), for which there are numerous variant spellings.[27] Several factors
explain why this blessing is found spelt with so many possible variants, as the
copyist could use:

– The conjunct rā=ma.
– A final independent Grantha *m*, with or without *virāma*, to write *yam*.
– The final below-base Grantha *m* in a conjunct grapheme, with or without
  virāma, to write the same *yam*.
– Several variant Tamil spellings for Sanskrit *jaya*.
– The allograph *ṟ* for *r*.
– The double *kāl* merged for *rā*.

What follows is just a sample of the various possible spellings:[28]

– śrīrāmaceyam (BnF Indien 390, U2c, fol. 2ᵛ, l. 2; Fig. 8a), an example of full
  assimilation to the Tamil script except for the Grantha *śrī*.
– śrīrā=maceyam (BnF Indien 265, U2b, fol. 601ʳ, l. 2; Fig. 8b), where the con-
  junct grapheme rā=ma is used.
– śrīrā=maceya=m= හ (BnF Indien 3, U2c, fol. 14ᵛ, l. 5; Fig. 8c), where the
  conjunct graphemes rā=ma and ya=m are used, the latter being merged
  with the punctuation in the form of a *piḷḷaiyār cuḷi*.
– śrīrā=maceyam (BnF Indien 1037, fol. 1ᵛ, left margin; Fig. 8d), where the
  conjunct grapheme rā=ma and the final Grantha *m* are used.
– śrīrā=maceyam· (BnF Indien 1039, U3, fol. 167ʳ, left margin; Fig. 8e), where
  the conjunct grapheme rā=ma and the final independent Grantha *m* with a
  vertical stroke, possibly functioning as a vowel-killer, are used.
– śrīṟāmaceyam (BnF Indien 143, fol. 1ʳ, l. 1; Fig. 8f), where the Tamil graph-
  eme *ṟā* is used instead of the Tamil grapheme *rā*.
– śrīṟāmajayam (BnF Indien 431, U2a, fol. 1r, col. 1, l. 1; Fig. 8g), where the
  Tamil grapheme *ṟā* is used instead of the Tamil grapheme *rā*, whereas the
  Grantha *ja* is kept.
– śrīṟāmajeyam (BnF Indien 143, fol. 271ʳ, l. 1; Fig. 8h), where the Tamil
  grapheme *ṟā* is used instead of the Tamil grapheme *rā*, the Grantha *j* is kept,
  but vocalised *-e* instead of *-a*.

---

27 BnF Indien 143, Ariel papers, made of papers by various hands bound in one volume, used
here, provides a good sample of various possible spellings.
28 Furthermore, the final grapheme can be merged with the following punctuation.

– śrīrāmaceyam (BnF Indien 143, fol. 464ʳ, l. 1; Fig. 8i), where the allograph *rā* (double *kāl* fused instead of two discrete successive *kāl*s) is used.

As in the case of epigraphical allographs, such allographs can be found in the same manuscript by the same hand. This might be due to the inconsistency of the copyist, but one can wonder if sometimes allographs were not used on purpose. We find this blessing *śrīrāmaceyam* three times in succession, each with a different spelling, for instance, in BnF Indien 947, U4, fol. 112ʳ, l. 3: śrīrāma-ceya=m śrīrā=maceyam śrīrā=maceya=m. Perhaps the copyist used three different spellings here on purpose, so that the blessing would be more operative by being repeated three times in three variant spellings.

There are other instances where the very same grapheme is not to be read rā=ma but rā=m instead, that is, when it is followed by a medial -*ā*. We have found this so far only for the name Rāmānuja and for the name Rāma in its vocative form rā=mā, as in the following example: śrīrā=m=ā (BnF Indien 335, U5, fol. 476ʳ, left margin; Fig. 9), where the medial -*ā* looks like a part of the whole conjunct (thus, preceded here by '=').

5.3 Grantha-Tamil conjunct graphemes

The examples above can be considered as regular Tamil-Grantha conjunct graphemes. As it happens, there are further, rare or unusual, examples of conjunct graphemes where these two distinct alphabets are also mixed, but in the reverse order, i.e. the first element of the conjunct is a Grantha grapheme and the below-base element is a Tamil grapheme. This practice concerns, unexpectedly, Sanskrit loanwords. Note that the Grantha graphemes involved in the examples observed so far are among those to become Grantha elements of the modern Tamil alphabet. This is as if the copyist, unfamiliar with the full-fledged Grantha script, was aware of the Sanskrit origin and reflected this awareness in the script, using a Grantha grapheme still commonly used in Tamil writing, even considered as a Tamil grapheme (a kind of loan grapheme), to create a Grantha-Tamil conjunct grapheme. Here are two examples:

– ṣ=ca for Grantha *kṣa*, usually noted *ṭca* in Tamil script. Compare kaṭāṣ=cam (BnF Indien 294, U2, fol. 1ʳ, col. 2, l. 3; Fig. 10a) and kaṭāṣcam, with two successive graphemes instead of a Grantha-Tamil conjunct grapheme (BnF Indien 237, U3, fol. 211ʳ, l. 5; Fig. 10b).
– s=cu for Grantha *su*: s=cuvāmi (BnF Indien 28, U3, fol. 181ʳ, l. 2; Fig. 10c).

The existence of these further Grantha-Tamil conjuncts imply further cases of allography, involving, besides the final *m*, the spelling of *kṣa*, as in the *X-kaṭākṣam* blessing formula, where the Sanskrit *kaṭākṣa* is found variously spelled, for example, kaṭāṭcam, kaṭāṭcam, kaṭāṣcam, kiṭāṣcam, kiṭāṣsam, kaṭāṣsam or kaṭāṣ=cam.

5.4 Vowel-killer *virāma*

Another interesting phenomenon is the use of a *t*-like *virāma* (Fig. 11) with the Grantha grapheme *s* (one of those that had become integrated in the modern Tamil alphabet). This specific type of *virāma* (vowel-killer) looks like a below-base *t*, but some examples indicate it could indeed be a *virāma*.

In a first example, this grapheme looks exactly like a *t*, and the reading is uncertain:

- pos·takattukku or posttakattukku (BnF Indien 339, U1, fol. 1ʳ, l. 3; Fig. 11a).

In other examples, it does not look so much like a *t*, and we are inclined to read it as a *virāma*, as reading a *t* would amount to read three *t*s successively, which is improbable:

- namas· ttu NOT namas tttu (BnF Indien 449, U1, fol. 1ʳ, l. 3; Fig. 11b).
- Akas·t=tiyar NOT Akastt=tiyar (BnF Indien 112, U2, fol. 1ʳ, col. 1; Fig. 11c).

The reading as *t*, given the environment, does not make much sense in two further examples, although it might not be precluded:

- Aḻakēs·paraṉ rather than Aḻakēstparaṉ (BnF Indien 417, U2, fol. 1ʳ, l. 1; Fig. 11d).
- tecamas·kkantam rather than tecamastkkantam (BnF Indien 256, U2, fol. 276ᵛ, l. 4; Fig. 11e).

5.5 Sanskrit phrases in the Tamil alphabet

As has been mentioned above, given the polyglossic milieu of copyists, Sanskrit phrases occasionally appear in otherwise fully Tamil manuscripts.

The blessing *hariḥ Om* is a telling example as it has many spelling variants which show different mixings of Grantha and Tamil graphemes. From the original standard Sanskrit formula *hariḥ Om* (with typical Grantha *r* and final *m*) to the standard Tamil adaptation *hari Ōm* (where only the Grantha grapheme *ha* subsists, now integrated into the Tamil script), there are, in between intermediary allographs, with or without *visarga* (the final Sanskrit phoneme *ḥ*), or with *hariḥ* in Grantha and *Ōm* in Tamil, as shown in the following examples:

- hariḥ Om (BnF Indien 291, U2, fol. 1ʳ, left margin; Fig. 12a).
- hariḥ Ōm (BnF Indien 433, U2, fol. 1ʳ, left margin; Fig. 12b), where *r* is Grantha (as it has a middle dot) and *Ōm* alone is in the Tamil alphabet.
- hari Om (BnF Indien 294, U4a, fol. 1ʳ, left margin; Fig. 12c), where *r* appears to be in Tamil script and *ḥ* is dropped.

Sanskrit *namaskāra* ('homage') formulae are also found entirely or almost entirely (with a few Grantha graphemes only) written in Tamil script, as in the following examples:

- viṉāyakāya namam, with Grantha *ma* (BnF Indien 983, U2, fol. 1ʳ, left margin; Fig. 13a), i.e. Sanskrit *vināyakāya namaḥ*.
- śrīmatē ramāṉucāya nama namaṣ ttu, with a Grantha *śrī* and *ṣ* (whereas a Grantha *s* would have been more faithful to the original Sanskrit word) (BnF Indien 381, U3c, fol. 26ᵛ, col. 1, l. 1; Fig. 13b), i.e. Sanskrit *śrīmate rāmānujāya namas tu*.
- Ōm catācivāya nama (BnF Indien 516, U2, fol. 2ᵛ, col. 2; Fig. 13c), i.e. Sanskrit *Oṃ sadāśivāya namaḥ*.
- kuruppiyō nama (BnF Indien 307, U2a, fol. 1ᵛ, l. 4; Fig. 13d), i.e. Sanskrit *gurubhyo namaḥ*.

Was this due to copyists not having the command of the Grantha script and using the Tamil script to write down a Sanskrit phrase as they heard it pronounced? Or was it an early statement of Tamil regionalism of a copyist assimilating Sanskrit phrases to Tamil script?

6 Sanskrit manuscripts from the Tamil region

Finally, mention must be made of a phenomenon comparable to the conjunct grapheme rā=ma discussed above, i.e. the use of the Grantha conjunct grapheme n=ma for writing the Sanskrit word *namas*. This is regularly found in Sanskrit manuscripts from the Tamil region (and possibly from other parts of South India) and, occasionally, in Tamil manuscripts which include Sanskrit blessings. Compare the following two allographs examples:

- śrīvedavyāsāya namaḥ ௰ (BnF Sanscrit 290, U4, fol. 342ʳ, l. 5; Fig. 14a) without the conjunct grapheme.
- śrīmahāsarasvatyai n=maḥ ௰ (BnF Sanscrit 290, U3, fol. 1ʳ, l. 25; Fig. 14b) with the conjunct.

7 Conclusion

Various phenomena of mixing have been observed from the provisional survey of two periods in the history of writing Tamil texts containing Sanskrit loanwords above. The mixing of languages and alphabets, as well as the mixing of morphology, occur in bilingual diglossic/amphiglossic inscriptions, in diglossic mixed-language inscriptions and in amphiglossic mixed-language inscriptions. The mixing of alphabets, but not of languages, occurs in biscript monolingual inscriptions, for Tamil conjuncts in Tamil inscriptions (influenced by Grantha practices) and for Tamil-Grantha conjuncts in manuscripts. The existence of many allographs, variant spellings of the same word, are attested in inscriptions, for several centuries, before the progressive assimilation of Sanskrit loanwords to Tamil phonetics was achieved (with the conservation of a set of specific Grantha graphemes for Sanskrit loanwords, up to, let us say provisionally, circa 1300 CE, but inscriptional practices after this date still have to be explored in depth). Manuscripts of the eighteenth and nineteenth century CE also show a great variety of allographs. In both cases, inconsistencies by the same hand have been observed: the same inscriptional writer may use various spellings for the same Sanskrit loanword in the same record, whereas a manuscript copyist may use different spellings of the same word or syllable in the very same manuscript.

Regarding our present editorial practices for inscriptions and manuscripts in the era of digital humanities, it seems important not only to record such phenomena in the metadata but also to encode these in our edited texts, so as to be able to make quantitative and qualitative studies. Such an effort is currently being made in the framework of two research projects.

The project 'The Domestication of "Hindu" Asceticism and the Religious Making of South and Southeast Asia' (DHARMA) has developed transliteration and encoding conventions that reflect the script peculiarities in the editions of inscriptions. Marking up Grantha graphemes in Tamil mixed-language inscriptions will hopefully one day make it possible to study the progressive assimilation of Sanskrit loanwords to Tamil phonetics and script across time and place.

The project 'Texts Surrounding Texts: Satellite Stanzas, Prefaces and Colophons in South-Indian Manuscripts' (TST) similarly not only developed transliteration and encoding conventions for Tamil script phenomena in Tamil manuscripts, but also started to provide, thanks to Charles Li, specifically designed

Tamil font graphemes for script phenomena, such as Tamil-Grantha conjuncts with a final Grantha *m*.[29]

The road is still long, but, at least, the path and direction are taken.

Acknowledgements

Conventions

The original texts are provided in transliteration – so as to clearly demarcate them and use the distinction between roman, grey-highlighted roman, and italic – according to the following transliteration conventions:

Roman	for graphemes in the Tamil alphabet
Roman (grey-scale highlighted)	for graphemes in the Grantha alphabet
Italic	for graphemes common to the Tamil and Grantha alphabets
Upper-case (vowel)	initial vowel
C=C	Tamil conjunct consonant ('C' for consonant, '=' to demarcate the consonants fused in the conjunct grapheme; e.g. *k=ku*, *t=ta*)
=m / =ma	below-base Grantha consonant *m* or *ma* in a conjunct grapheme
(abc)	graphemes not clearly legible
[abc]	lost graphemes supplied by conjecture

---

29 See <https://tst-project.github.io/editor/entities.html> (accessed on 20 July 2023), under construction. These graphemes are used in the Tamil display of the TST catalogue <https://tst-project.github.io> (accessed on 20 July 2023).

⟨abc⟩	graphemes omitted by the copyist and supplied
௨	*piḷḷaiyār cuḻi* (short and long forms)
·	explicit *puḷḷi* or *virāma*

The BnF manuscripts are referred to above by their current BnF shelfmarks, that is, 'Indien' or 'Sanscrit', followed by accession number. In the case where the manuscript is a composite manuscript, a letter follows immediately the accession number.

Abbreviations

BnF = Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France.
EI = *Epigraphia Indica*, 42 vols (1892–1992), New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India.
IP = *Inscriptions of the Pallavas*; see Mahalingam 1988.
IT = *Inscriptions of Tirunaḷḷāṟu*; see Viyavenugopal 2017.
SII = *South Indian Inscriptions*, 27 vols (1890–2001), New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India.
U = unit of a manuscript, followed by a number or a number + letter to indicate the codicological/textual unit (e.g. 'U1', 'U2a' and 'U2b').

References

Franceschini, Marco (2022), 'A Modular Framework for the Analysis of the Dates Found in Manuscripts Written in the Tamil and Tamilian Grantha Scripts', in Nalini Balbir and Giovanni Ciotti (eds), *The Syntax of Colophons: A Comparative Study across Pothi Manuscripts* (Studies in Manuscript Cultures, 27), Berlin: De Gruyter, 171–207.

Francis, Emmanuel (2013a), 'Praising the King in Tamil during the Pallava Period', in Whitney Cox and Vincenzo Vergiani (eds), *Bilingual Discourse and Cross-cultural Fertilisation: Sanskrit and Tamil in Medieval India*, Puducherry: Institut français de Pondichéry / École française d'Extrême-Orient, 359–409.

Francis, Emmanuel (2013b), 'North Indian Scripts & South Indian Kings', available at <https://rcsi.hypotheses.org/288> (accessed on 30 March 2023) [first published 1 February 2013].

Francis, Emmanuel (2021a), 'Multilingualism in Indian Inscriptions: With Special Reference to Inscriptions of the Tamil Area', in Giovanni Ciotti and Erin McCann (eds), *Linguistics and Textual Aspects of Multilingualism in South India and Sri Lanka*, Puducherry: Institut français de Pondichéry / École française d'Extrême-Orient, 42–163.

Francis, Emmanuel (2021b), 'Imperial Languages and Public Writings in Tamil South India: A Bird's Eye View in the very *Longue Durée*', in Peter C. Bisschop and Elizabeth A. Cecil (eds), *Primary Sources and Asian Pasts* (Beyond Boundaries, 8), Berlin: De Gruyter, 152–183.

Grünendahl, Reinhold (2001), *South Indian Scripts in Sanskrit Manuscripts and Prints: Grantha Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu, Kannada, Nandinagari*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

Lockwood, Michael (2008), 'The Creation of Pallava Grantha Tamil Script', in R. Kalaikkovan et al. (eds), *Airāvati: Felicitation Volume in Honour of Iravatham Mahadevan*, Chennai: Varalaaru.com, 77–110.

Lubin, Timothy (2013), 'Legal Diglossia: Modeling Discursive Practices in Premodern Indic Law', in Whitney Cox and Vincenzo Vergiani (eds), *Bilingual Discourse and Cross-cultural Fertilisation: Sanskrit and Tamil in Medieval India*, Puducherry: Institut français de Pondichéry / École française d'Extrême-Orient, 411–455.

Mahadevan, Iravatham (2003), *Early Tamil Epigraphy*: *From the Earliest Times to the Sixth Century A.D.*, 1st edn (Harvard Oriental Series, 62), Chennai: Cre-A / Harvard: Harvard University Press.

Mahadevan, Iravatham (2014), *Early Tamil Epigraphy*, vol. 1: *Tamil-Brāhmī Inscriptions*, 2nd edn, Chennai: Central Institute of Classical Tamil.

Mahalingam, Therazhundur Venkataraman (1988), *Inscriptions of the Pallavas*, New Delhi: ICHR and Agam Prakashan.

Pollock, Sheldon I. (2006), *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Viyavenugopal, G. *விசயவேணுகோபல், கோ.* (2017), *திருநள்ளாறு அருள்மிக்கு தர்ப்பாரண்யெச்வரர் திருக்கோயில் கல்வெட்டுகள், திருநள்ளாரு: அருள்மிக்கு தர்ப்பாரண்யெச்வரர் திருக்கோயில் தேவஸ்தானம்.*

Appendix: Images

All photos of BnF manuscripts, either retrieved from Gallica (<https://gallica.
bnf.fr>) or taken by Emmanuel Francis, by courtesy of BnF.

a

b

c

d

e
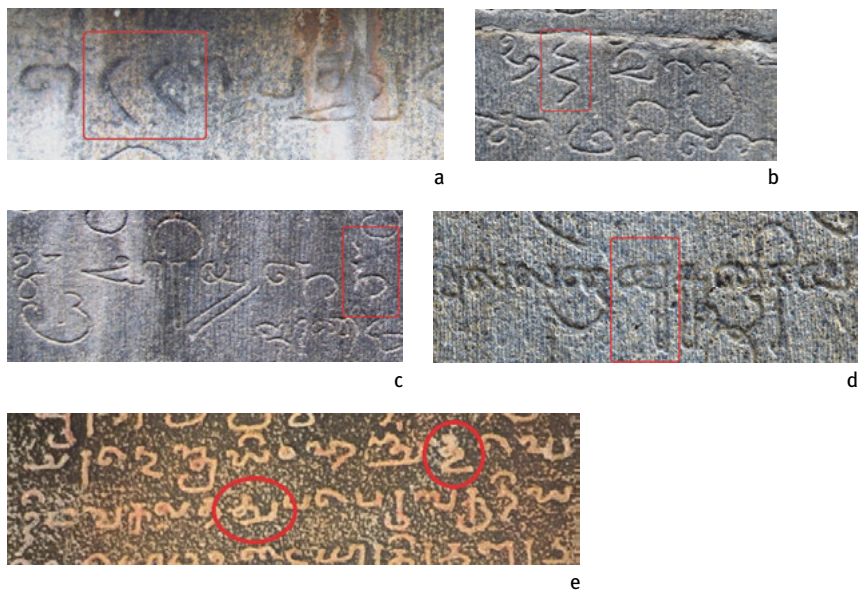
Figs 1a–e: Graphemes differing between Grantha and Tamil alphabets from inscriptions: (a) the word Eṭṭā*vatu* at Uttiramērūr *c.* 877 CE; IP 205, l. 1 (© E. Francis); (b) the word bhāṭṭa*nu*kku at Uttiramērūr *c.* 877 CE; IP 205, l. 4 (© E. Francis); (c) the word Ācāriryya*nēn*· at Uttiramērūr *c.* 877 CE; IP 205, l. 7 (© E. Francis); (d) the word *va*llaṉ āy uktaṉākiya at Tirunaḷḷāṟu, late ninth century CE; IP 96, l. 2 (© E. Francis); (e) the word śrīcoḻentrasiṃhaccatu<r>vvedimaṅkala*t*tu at Tirunaḷḷāṟu, *c.* 1048 CE; IT 4, ll. 6–7 (© Babu N. Ramaswamy).
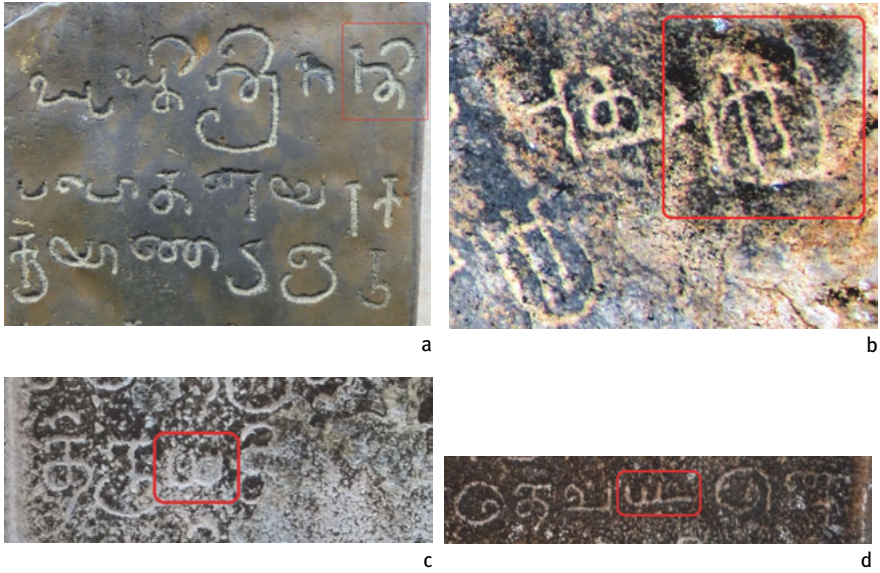
Figs 2a–d: Tamil conjunct graphemes from inscriptions: (a) the phrase svasti śrī *na*n=tippō(*t*)*ta*rai-*ya*rkku at Guḍimallam, *c.* 849 CE; IP 144, ll. 1–3 (© Valérie Gillet); (b) the word pu*tu*k=ku at Vanta-vāci, *c.* 852 CE; IP 120, supplementary inscription, l. 2 (© Valérie Gillet); (c) the word *ti*rup=pa*ti* at Tirunaḷḷāṟu, *c.* 1241 CE; IT 30, line 12 (© Babu N. Ramaswamy); (d) the word *tēva*pa=ṭ=ṭaṉ IT 30, line 12, *c.* 1241 CE; IT 30, l. 15 (© Babu N. Ramaswamy).

Fig. 3: Initial blessing *svasti śrī* at Kōṉērirājapuram, late tenth century CE; SII 3, no. 146, l. 1 (© E. Francis).
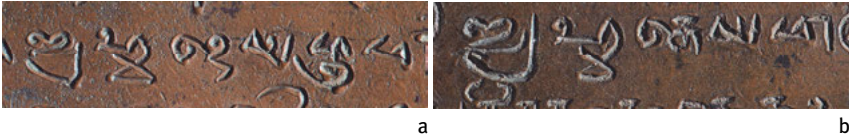
Figs 4a–b: Allographs in the Bāhūr plates: (a) the word brahmade*ya*m, *c.* 877 CE; IP 155, l. 50; (b) the word brahma*tēya*m, *c.* 877 CE; IP 155, l. 73 (courtesy of BnF).
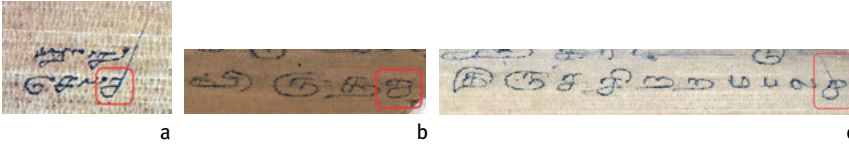
Figs 5a–c: Independent final Grantha *m* in manuscripts: (a) the phrase śrīrā=maceyam·; BnF Indien 1039, U2b, fol. 167ʳ, left margin; (b) the word virut=tam; BnF Indien 303, U2c, fol. 77ᵛ, l. 2; (c) the word tiruccirrampalam·; BnF Indien 303, U2c, fol. 77ᵛ, l. 2 (courtesy of BnF).

Figs 6a–h: Tamil-Grantha conjunct graphemes with appended final Grantha *m* in manuscripts: (a) ṇam; (b) ṇa=m; (c) ṉam; (d) ṉa=m; (e) yum; (f) yu=m; (g) yam; (h) ya=m (courtesy of BnF).
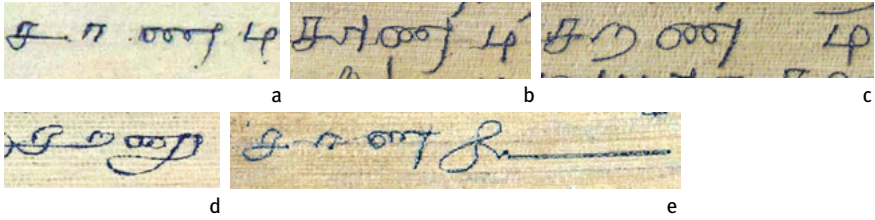
Figs 7a–e: Allographs of the word *caraṇam* (standard form) in manuscripts: (a) the word caraṇam in BnF Indien 246, U2, fol. 77ᵛ, l. 7 (courtesy of BnF); (b) the word caraṇam in BnF Indien 362, U3, fol. 17ʳ, col. 3, l. 3 (© E. Francis); (c) the word caraṇam in BnF Indien 362, U3, fol. 17ʳ, col. 2, l. 2 (© E. Francis); (d) the word caraṇa=m in BnF Indien 89, U2a, fol. 1ʳ, l. 3 (courtesy of BnF); (e) the word caraṇam in BnF Indien 247, U2, fol. 1ᵛ, l. 5 (courtesy of BnF).

Figs 8a–i: Allographs of the phrase *śrīrāma* in manuscripts: (a) the phrase śrīrāmaceyam in BnF Indien 390, U2c, fol. 2ᵛ, l. 2 (courtesy of BnF); (b) the phrase śrīrā=maceyam in BnF Indien 265, U2b, fol. 601ʳ, l. 2 (courtesy of BnF); (c) the phrase śrīrā=maceya=mꝋ in BnF Indien 3, U2c, fol. 14ᵛ, l. 5 (courtesy of BnF); (d) the phrase śrīrā=maceyam in BnF Indien 1037, fol. 1ᵛ, left margin (© E. Francis); (e) the phrase śrīrā=maceyam· in BnF Indien 1039, U3, fol. 167ʳ, left margin (courtesy of BnF); (f) the phrase śrīrāmaceyam in BnF Indien 143, fol. 1ʳ, l. 1 (© E. Francis); (g) the phrase śrīrāmajayam·in BnF Indien 431, U2a, fol. 1r, col. 1, l. 1 (© E. Francis); (h) the phrase śrīrāmajeyam· in BnF Indien 143, fol. 271ʳ, l. 1 (© E. Francis); (i) the phrase śrīrāmaceyam in BnF Indien 143, fol. 464ʳ, l. 1 (© E. Francis).
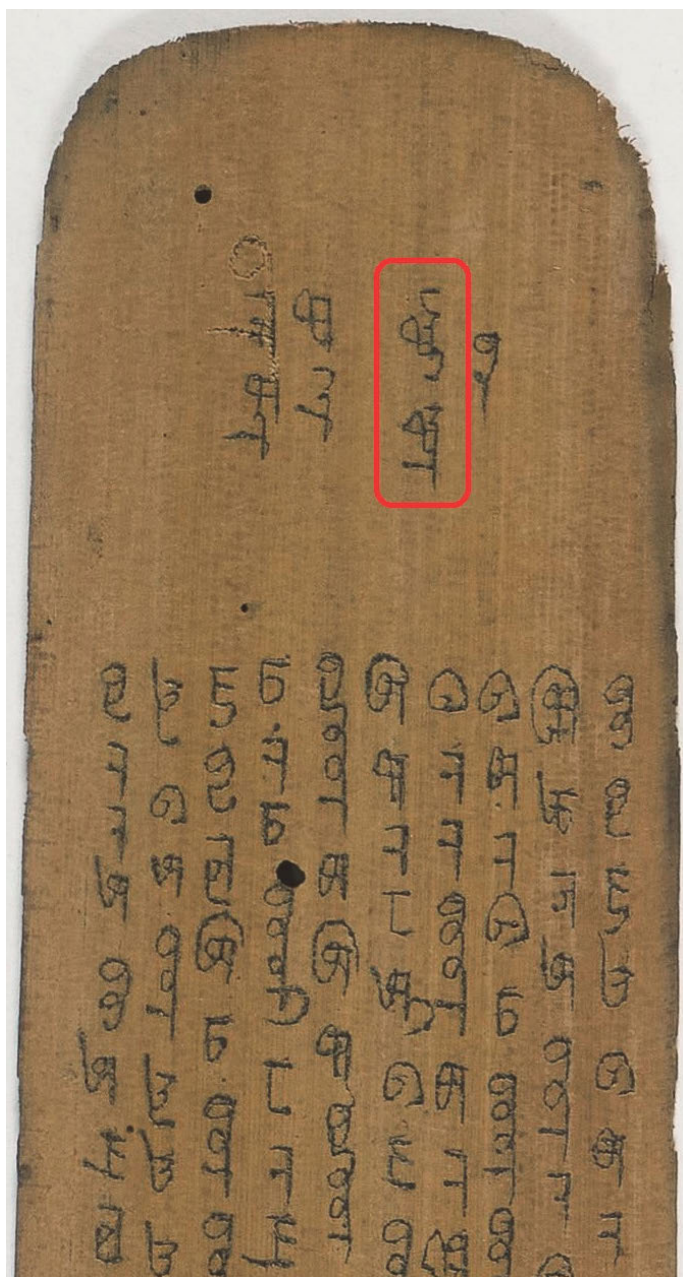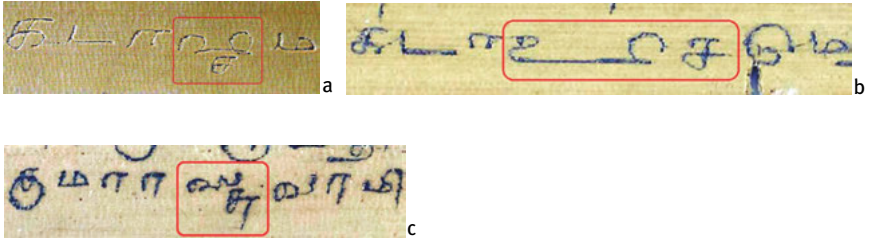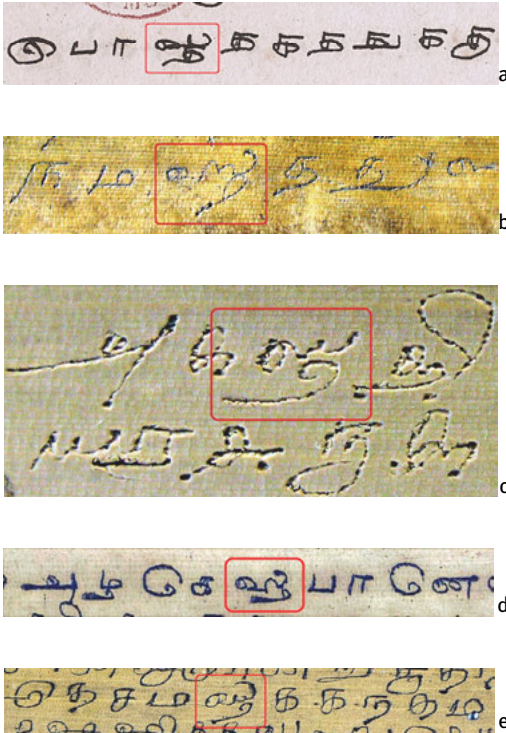
**Fig. 9:** The phrase śrīrā=mā in BnF indien 335, U5, fol. 476ʳ, left margin (courtesy of BnF).

Figs 10a–c: Tamil-Grantha conjunct graphemes in manuscripts: (a) the word kaṭāṣ=cam in BnF Indien 294, U2, fol. 1ʳ, col. 2, l. 3 (© E. Francis); (b) the word kaṭāṣcam in BnF Indien 237, U3, fol. 211ʳ, l. 5 (courtesy of BnF); (c) the phrase śrīkumārascuvāmi in BnF Indien 28, U3, fol. 181ʳ, l. 2 (courtesy of BnF).

**Figs 11a–e:** Vowel-killer (*virāma*) in manuscripts: (a) the word pos·takattukku or posttakattukku in BnF Indien 339, U1, fol. 1ʳ, l. 3 (courtesy of BnF); (b) the phrase namas· ttu NOT namas ttu in BnF Indien 449, U1, fol. 1ʳ, l. 3 (© E. Francis); (c) the word Akas·t=tiyar NOT Akastt=tiyar in BnF Indien 112, U2, fol. 1ʳ, col. 1 (© E. Francis); (d) the word Aḻakēs·paraṉ rather than Aḻakēstparaṉ in BnF Indien 417, U2, fol. 1ʳ, l. 1 (courtesy of BnF); (e) the phrase tecamas·kkantam rather than tecamastkkantam in BnF Indien 256, U2, fol. 276ᵛ, l. 4 (courtesy of BnF).

a   b   c

Figs 12a–c: Allographs of *hariḥ Om* in manuscripts: (a) the phrase hariḥ Ōm in BnF Indien 291, U2, fol. 1ʳ, left margin (courtesy of BnF); (b) the phrase hariḥ Ōm in BnF Indien 433, U2, fol. 1ʳ, left margin (© E. Francis); (c) the phrase hari Om in BnF Indien 294, U4a, fol. 1ʳ, left margin (courtesy of BnF).

a   b

c

d
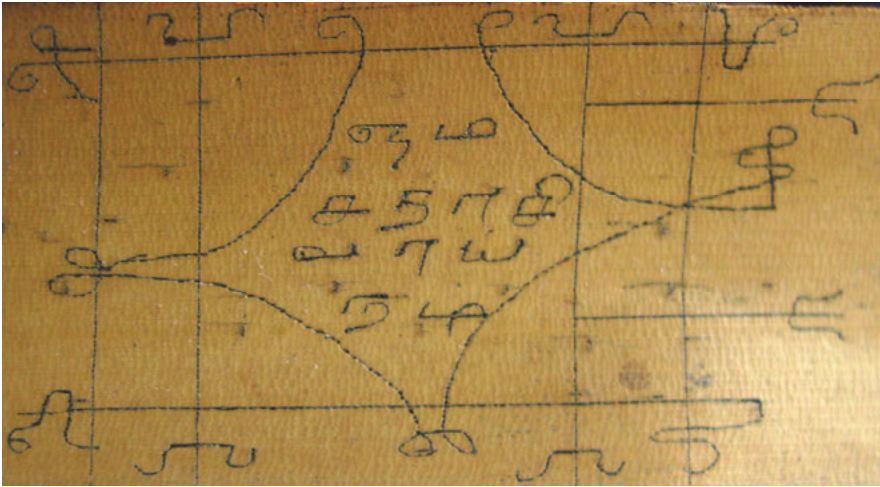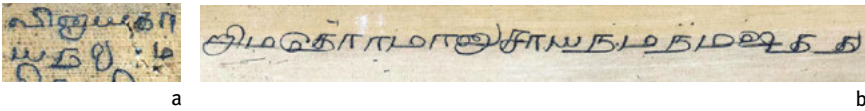
Figs 13a–d: Sanskrit homage formulae (*namaskāra*) in Tamil alphabet in manuscripts: (a) the phrase viṉāyakāya namam in BnF Indien 983, U2, fol. 1ʳ, left margin (courtesy of BnF); (b) the phrase śrīmatē ramāṉucāya nama namaṣ ṭṭu in BnF Indien 381, U3c, fol. 26ᵛ, col. 1, l. 1 (courtesy of BnF); (c) the phrase Ōm catācivāya nama in BnF Indien 516, U2, fol. 2ᵛ, col. 2 (© E. Francis); (d) the phrase kuruppiyō nama in BnF Indien 307, U2a, fol. 1ᵛ, l. 4 (courtesy of BnF).
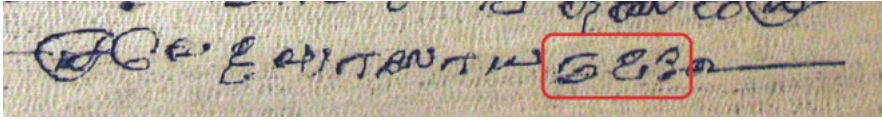
a
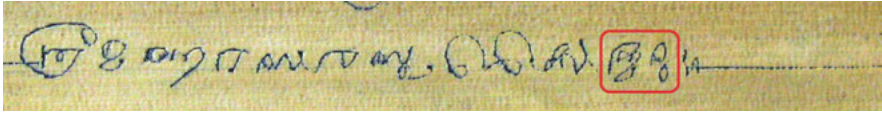
b

Figs 14a–b: Allographs *nama* and *n=ma* in manuscripts: (a) the phrase śrīvedavyāsāya namaḥ ௳ in BnF Sanscrit 290, U4, fol. 342ʳ, l. 5 (© E. Francis); (b) the phrase śrīmahāsarasvatyai n=maḥ ௳ in BnF Sanscrit 290, U3, fol. 1ʳ, l. 25 (© E. Francis).