

## 4 The Public Life of Sanskrit Manuscripts

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THE MUSEUM OF ANTHROPOLOGY at the University of British Columbia (MOA) possesses several manuscripts composed in Sanskrit, the classical language of India, though only one of them actually hails from the subcontinent itself. For centuries, in fact, Sanskrit texts accompanied the spread of Buddhist and Hindu traditions beyond India's borders, and MOA's collection speaks evocatively to the impact that they have had in East and Southeast Asia.<sup>1</sup> In India itself, the classical language of Sanskrit served as the pre-eminent medium for producing and disseminating elite works of intellectual, sacred, and poetic expression for more than two thousand years. This essay will briefly explore the cultural value of Sanskrit manuscripts, their life as material objects, and how they were produced and used in pre-modern India.

First, it is worth taking a moment to appreciate the complexity of the archives that we have today and the work that Sanskritists do within them. According to conservative estimates, more than seven million manuscripts are housed in public repositories in India alone, not to mention those in Europe, North America, and the rest of Asia. And there are undoubtedly many millions more that are gathering dust (and themselves turning to dust) in private cabinets and attics throughout South Asia. Just cataloguing and preserving these manuscripts is a Herculean task, never mind saying

anything meaningful about their date, provenance, or authorship. Beyond that, there is the problem of the manuscripts' textual history. Though Sanskrit had been the premier register for elite intellectual expression since at least 1000 BCE, the peak of literary activity in this language, by most accounts, came during a roughly thousand-year period between the formation of the Gupta Empire and the Delhi Sultanate, about 300–1300 CE. During this so-called Cosmopolis, documents written in Sanskrit were regularly disseminated across a vast geographical area stretching from Afghanistan to Bali, including places where the local vernaculars were totally unrelated to Sanskrit. Due in large part to the unforgiving climate of South and Southeast Asia, and the relentless work of rodents, insects, and fungi, few physical works from this era have survived. Instead, what we have today are multiple copies of the original exemplars—or rather, copies of copies of copies—that were produced by scribes of later times.<sup>2</sup>

Because they were handmade, these medieval copies typically contain mistakes, interpolations, and deviations from one another. And so, at its core, the modern study of Sanskrit is *philological*—the aim is to collect existing manuscript copies of any given text, to compare what they say, and to reconstruct what the original version likely would have been. Textual criticism, as this method is

◀ Sanskrit paper manuscript in Devanāgarī script (detail)  
Eastern India • ca. 19th century  
Ink on paper  
WELLCOME LIBRARY, LONDON, UK,  
SHELFMARK GAMMA 15, FOLIO 1,  
VERSO



called, is rigorous and time-consuming work, and the resulting scholarly editions of Sanskrit texts are often quite expensive to publish and highly technical in their appearance. It is no surprise, then, that the field of Sanskrit studies has become marginalized in today’s fast-paced, theory-driven academy; still, it is indispensable for the historically grounded study of India, for without knowing precisely what the texts were, we can say little about the contexts in which they were written down.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, for an average person today, whether in South Asia or Canada or anywhere else, the encounter with Sanskrit manuscripts is a strikingly visual one—an immediate engagement between the eyes and an obscure but fascinating set of symbols etched or drawn on pieces of handmade paper, birch bark, or palm leaf. Though few people today are able to read the texts, Sanskrit manuscripts are nonetheless treated with reverence as repositories of transcendent wisdom, as relics of an ancient, vanishing heritage, as sacred artifacts, or even as tools for fortune-telling. This was, to some extent, also true in the ancient and medieval past. Manuscripts were treasured for the information they carried, whether sacred, intellectual, or expressive, and were created and copied to preserve and transmit this knowledge in visual form. Sometimes manuscripts were lavishly illustrated and decorated, and gifted by rich patrons to temples or gurus to earn religious merit. And in some esoteric contexts, they came to have magical, occult, or mystical functions, such that the symbolic value of Sanskrit texts carried more weight than their literal meaning. We should note that in pre-modern India, the engagement with manuscripts would rarely have been a *private* one. Rather, Sanskrit manuscripts were fully couched within *public* acts

of performance: writing a manuscript involved a student or scribe faithfully recording the words of the original author as he or she spoke them out loud, while reading a manuscript involved a live exposition of the text by a skilled reader and knowledgeable guru to groups of eager listeners whose grasp of Sanskrit was cursory at best. This is to say that the long history of Sanskrit manuscript culture has involved a robust and inescapable engagement with orality.

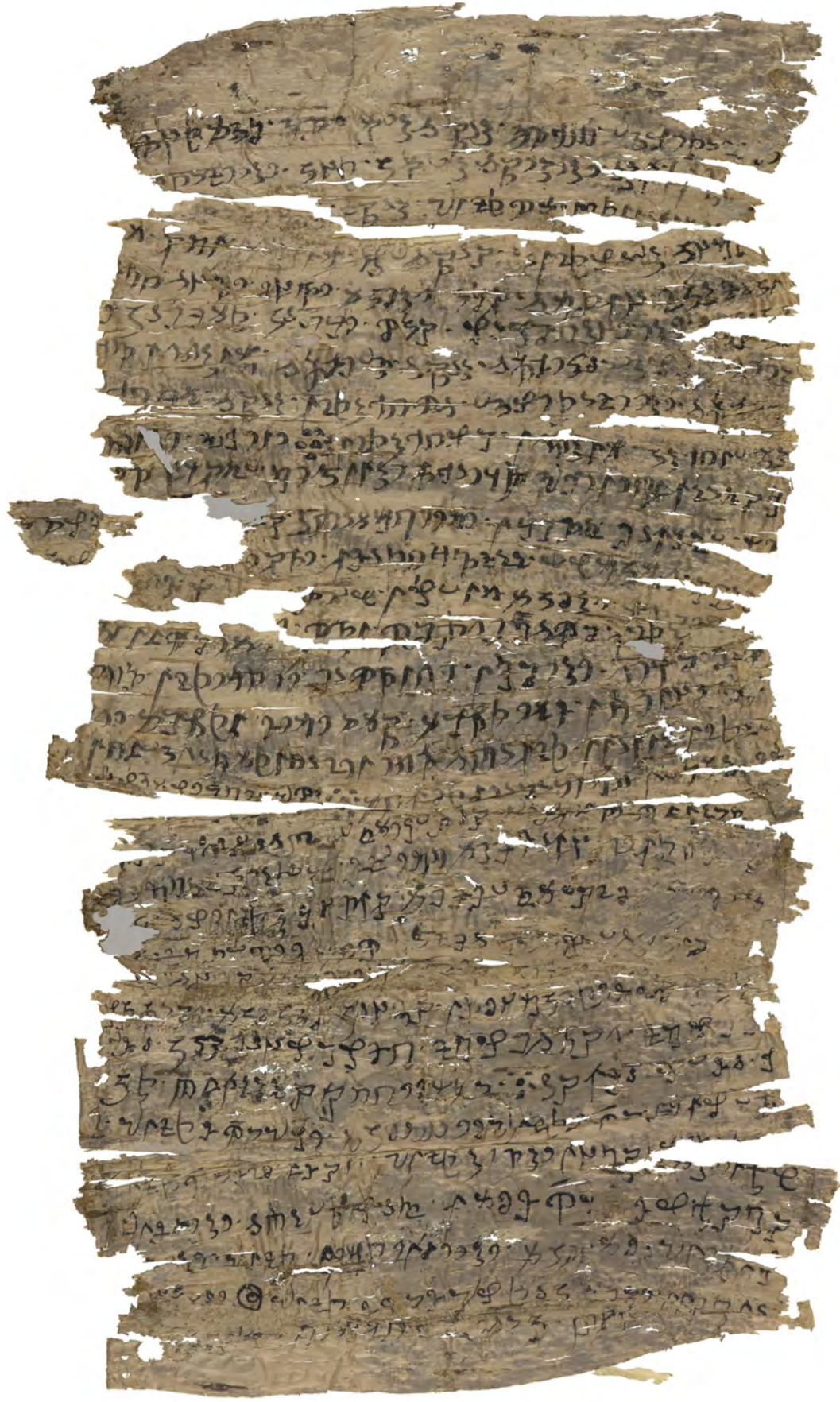
Writing In Sanskrit: A Brief History

The earliest evidence of writing in India is shrouded in mystery. The archaeological remains of the Indus Valley civilization (ca. 2400–1900 BCE) have yielded numerous seals, inscriptions, and other examples of a prehistoric writing system, but their script has not been convincingly deciphered, and in any case, did not survive the decline of this prehistoric urban civilization. The next major phase of Indian cultural history, the Vedic period (ca. 1500–500 BCE), featured a complex system of poetry and ritual culture that was decidedly oral in its nature. For centuries, the sacred Sanskrit scriptures of the Vedas were memorized and transmitted verbatim from person to person within exclusive circles of Brahmin priests using a highly sophisticated system of oral pedagogy, with no hard evidence of writing practices. The “oral literacy” of Vedic culture fostered intensive forms of linguistic, philosophical, and scientific learning, but writing does not appear to have been used for the production and distribution of these texts until well after the Vedic period.

The earliest bona fide writings from the Indian subcontinent are found in two contexts—first, a famous set of inscriptions on pillars and rock

► **Gāndhārī birch bark scroll**  
Gandhāra (northern Pakistan/eastern Afghanistan) • 1st century CE  
Ink on birch bark  
5 sheets, each 14 × 24 cm, laminated to form a scroll, 119 cm (length)  
BRITISH LIBRARY, LONDON, DETAIL OF SCROLL OR. 14195.20; PLATES 5–6 FROM STEFAN BAUMS, “A GĀNDHĀRĪ COMMENTARY ON EARLY BUDDHIST VERSES: BRITISH LIBRARY KHAROṢṬHĪ FRAGMENTS 7, 9, 13 AND 18,” PHD DISS. (UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON, 2009)

*This is a portion of a Gāndhārī scroll containing a commentary on verses from the Dhammapāda, the Sutta-nipāta, and other early Buddhist sources. It was composed in the Gāndhārī language using the Kharoṣṭhī script. It was discovered in the 1990s among a collection of twenty-eight Buddhist manuscripts buried in a clay pot in the Gandhāra region and is currently housed at the British Library in London, UK.*



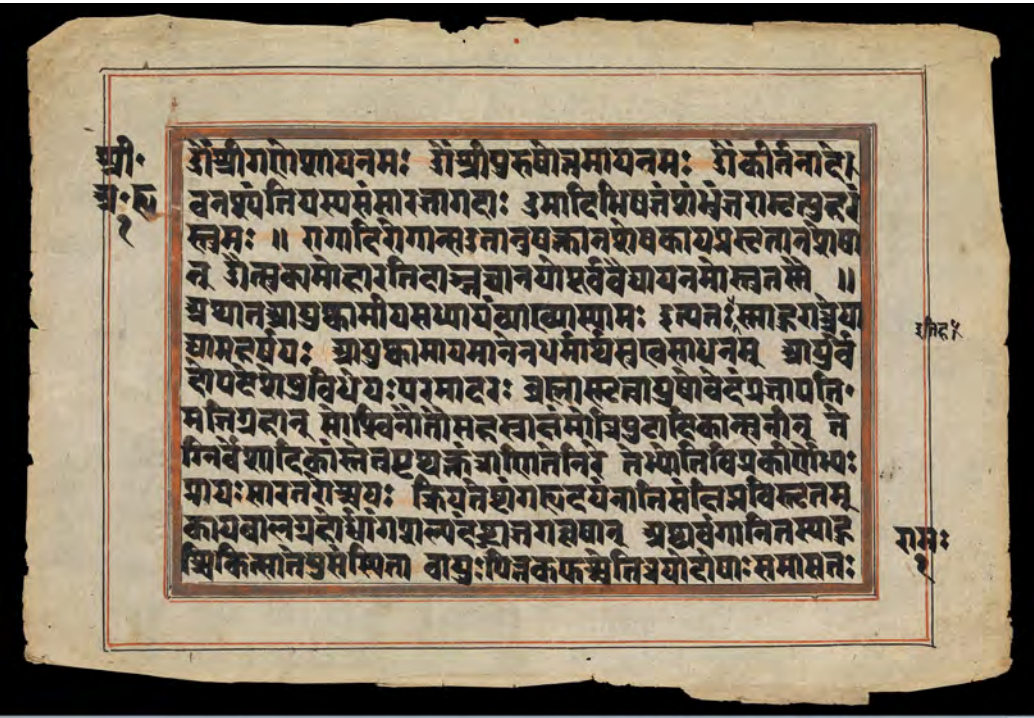




outcroppings across the subcontinent attributed to the Mauryan emperor Aśoka (r. 268–231 BCE), composed in an eastern brand of Prakrit and written mostly in the Brāhmī script; and second, a variety of birch bark manuscripts, datable to between 100 BCE and 200 CE and composed in Gāndhārī, a regional language spoken in northwest Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan and written primarily in a right-to-left script called Kharoṣṭhī.<sup>4</sup> Both the Aśokan and Gāndhārī materials suggest that a vibrant tradition of writing had established itself across North India by the onset of the Common Era. This technology then appears to have acted as a catalyst for a new form of elite literary culture in early India that was fundamentally anchored by fixed writings in the language of Sanskrit. This Sanskrit written culture, deeply engaged with the more nebulous oral traditions that surrounded it, was to dominate the cultural landscape of South Asia for the next thousand years.<sup>5</sup>

As mentioned above, the earliest South Asian manuscripts were written on materials made from the inner bark of the birch tree (*Betula utilis* D. Don),

which was either prepared as separate leaves or sheets, or laminated to create long-form scrolls. Texts were inscribed using wooden or reed pens and soot-based inks. Birch bark is quite fragile, and in South Asia, the tree grows natively only in the Himalayas (page 55). And so, while birch bark manuscripts continued to be manufactured in the state of Kashmir until the seventeenth century, in the rest of India, beginning in the early centuries of the Common Era, writing materials were more commonly made from various species of palm tree, such as *Corypha umbraculifera* L. (talipot or ola palm), *Borassus flabellifer* L. (toddy or lontar palm), and *Corypha utan* Lam. (gebang palm).<sup>6</sup> A number of items in the MOA collection are made from the lontar palm, which grows in humid, coastal areas throughout South and Southeast Asia, and yields a thicker, broader writing surface than the other two types (this page and 128–29). To produce manuscript pages, palm leaves were dried, cut, and then seasoned by first boiling them in water or milk, burying them in wet sand, and then redrying and oiling them before polishing them with shells or stone. Depending on



◀ **Palm leaf manuscript in Tham script**  
Thailand • n.d.  
Ink on palm leaf, and wood and plant fibre  
10.3 × 23 × 3.8 cm  
MOA COLLECTION, 2902/23

◀ **Sanskrit paper manuscript in Devanāgarī script**  
Eastern India • ca. 19th century  
Ink on paper  
WELLCOME LIBRARY, LONDON, UK, SHELFMARK GAMMA 15, FOLIO 1, VERSO

*The first folio of the Aṣṭāṅgahrdayasaṃhitā (Compilation on the heart of medicine) by Vāgbhaṭa, a highly influential seventh-century treatise that outlined, in more than seven thousand Sanskrit verses, the eight branches of ancient Indian medicine.*

the width of the leaves, one or two holes were bored in the middle, through which a cord would be passed to bind the book. Decorative wooden slats were affixed to both sides of the manuscript to act as a protective covering and to identify the text.

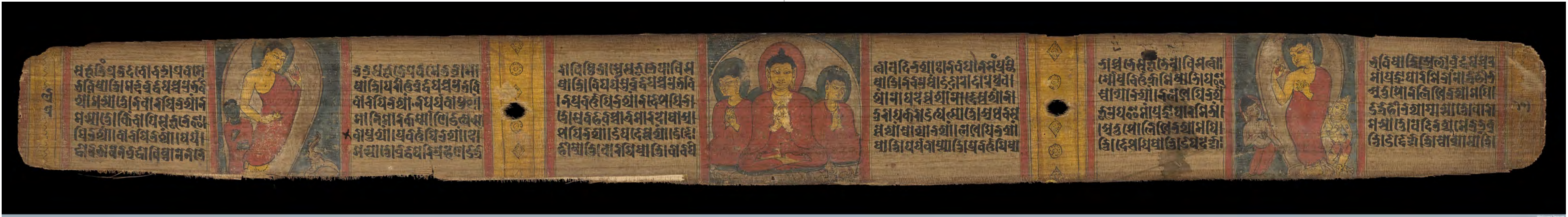
Texts were written onto palm leaf using two methods. One way was, as with birch bark manuscripts, to paint ink onto the writing material using a pen or brush. This method is found mostly in Nepal and eastern India (page 58–59). The second way was to incise the letters into the palm leaf using a stylus made of metal or bone, and then to apply a dark pigment made from lampblack or vegetable extracts to accentuate them. This method was especially popular throughout South India and Southeast Asia and has prompted scripts from these regions to take on a more “rounded” nature than those of North India, since engraving straight lines can cause more fragile leaves to split (page 126).<sup>7</sup>

The earliest use of paper in the Indic context can be traced to the mid-first millennium (ca. 400–800 CE), based upon manuscripts found at Buddhist sites along the ancient Silk Road in the Xinjiang

Province of China and in Gilgit in northern Pakistan. Paper manuscripts became more widespread in the subcontinent beginning in the eleventh century. In Nepal and eastern India, paper production was influenced by Chinese techniques and resembled that of Tibet and Southeast Asia, with the use of wood fibres as a raw material. In western India, especially among Jain communities in Gujarat and Rajasthan, paper began to be used for manuscripts around the twelfth century. Its manufacture was adapted from Persian methods and tended to use hemp, cotton, silk, and other repurposed textiles as raw material. Paper manuscripts were generally left unbound and were wrapped in a cloth for transport and protection.<sup>8</sup>

A word may be said about two distinctive visual features of certain Sanskrit manuscripts, especially those of the Jains and Buddhists: rubrication and illumination. Rubrication—the application of red or other coloured ink—was mostly used to highlight important passages, accents, colophons, verse and sentence markers, or other breaks in the text. Yellow pigment made from turmeric paste





was sometimes used for highlighting or making erasures. Such embellishments are quite common even in the most rudimentary Sanskrit manuscripts. Illumination—adding illustrations to a written text—became an especially refined artistic practice among Jain and Buddhist copyists, and there is evidence that in some studios, the scribe and the artist would work independently of one another in producing illuminated manuscripts (page 60). Other types of decorative features include centre dots, fleurons, geometric patterns, and border patterns. Rubrication and illumination both appear to have gained popularity with the transition from palm leaf to paper. When creating palm leaf manuscripts, copyists had been required to leave a prominent gap in the centre of each folio where holes would later be punched for the cord that bound the book together. In paper manuscripts, no hole would be made, since the manuscript was left unbound. Copyists took advantage of this centre gap to add a large red dot to represent the hole, as well as more creative decorative shapes or geometric patterns. While we can only speculate about the motivations behind these forms of scribal ornamentation, they clearly indicate an expectation that the manuscripts would be seen by a broader public, and not just read in private.

Birch bark, palm leaf, or paper, or stone, copper, iron, or wood—no matter what the material was,

and no matter the ink, script, or hand, the millions of manuscripts and inscriptions that we now possess are the material legacy of the cultural practice of writing in Sanskrit, an enduring tradition that spread across pre-modern South and Southeast Asia. In order to gain an understanding of how this Sanskrit manuscript culture worked from the perspective of the authors, readers, and copyists, we may now turn to three distinct “moments” in which Sanskrit writers themselves commented on the act of writing in Sanskrit. They also offer a glimpse into how manuscripts, as physical objects, interacted with the larger, more nebulous world of orality and performance that swirled around them, and how they would have come to constitute a pre-modern Sanskrit “public culture.” First, we will turn to an origin myth told in the Sanskrit epic *Mahābhārata* (ca. 500 CE) that explained how the deity Gaṇeśa had originally written down the words of the great epic’s composer, Vyāsa. Then, we will take up the writings of a celebrated Sanskrit poet named Rājaśekhara (ca. 900 CE), who argued that a good poet should always have a well-trained scribe by his side. Finally, we will look at a medieval compendium on gift giving attributed to a king named Ballālasena (1170 CE), who explained in detail why publicly donating fresh new copies of books to temples and Brahman scholars would be a good thing to do.<sup>9</sup>

**The Primal Scribe: Gaṇeśa and the Great Epic (ca. 500 CE)**

At the beginning of the *Mahābhārata*, we find a self-reflexive anecdote about how this great Sanskrit epic came to be written down by Lord Gaṇeśa, the auspicious, elephant-headed god of new undertakings. Legend has it that after the mythic sage Vyāsa had mentally created the *Mahābhārata*, he was in need of a scribe capable of transcribing his massive new poem as he recited it from memory. Brahmā, the all-knowing grandfather of the gods, felt that Gaṇeśa would be the best fit for the job and urged Vyāsa to consult the deity. Gaṇeśa agreed to take on the task, but under the condition that he would remain Vyāsa’s scribe, “so long as my pen does not stop writing, even for a moment.” In response, Vyāsa stipulated, “At no point should you write anything down without understanding it.” This scribal challenge is used to explain why, even today, we find the occasional hard-to-understand verse in the *Mahābhārata*—it turns out that Vyāsa had intentionally placed these “textual tangles” (*granthagranthi*) in his composition to give himself some extra time to come up with the rest of it!<sup>10</sup>

We should note here that the textual authenticity of the *Mahābhārata*’s Gaṇeśa anecdote is quite shaky, at best. It is found in quite a number of manuscripts, but the epic’s modern editors were convinced that it was an interpolation, and therefore relegated the whole thing to a footnote in the appendix of the critical

▲ Sanskrit palm leaf manuscript in Bhujmoli script  
Nepal • 11th century  
Ink on palm leaf  
6 × 55 cm  
WELLcome LIBRARY, LONDON, UK, SHELFMARK EPSILON 1, FOLIO 101, VERSO

*A folio from an eleventh-century illuminated prose copy of the Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramita-sūtra, or “The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines,” an early Mahayana Buddhist text dating perhaps from the first century BCE. The manuscript contains eighteen miniature images, made with red, yellow, and green colouring. The three images shown here reflect the Buddha’s taming of an elephant at Nalagiri (left), his miracle of emanating water and fire from his multiplied bodies at Śrāvastī (centre), and his visit to the Trayastriṃśa heaven (of the thirty-three gods) (right).*





▲ Jain illustrated paper manuscript in Devanāgarī script Western India • 1503  
Link on paper 11 × 26 cm  
WELLCOMED LIBRARY, LONDON, UK, SHELFMARK GAMMA 3, FOLIO 1, VERSO

The first folio from an illustrated paper copy of the Kalpasūtra or “Manual of Ritual,” one of the central canonical texts of the Śvetāmbara Jains of Western India. Composed in Ardhamāgadhī Prakrit, the Kalpasūtra is traditionally attributed to Bhadrabāhu, an ancient monk who is thought to have lived in the fourth century BCE. It provides

detailed hagiographies of the twenty-four founders or tīrthaṅkaras (Ford-makers) of the Jain religious tradition. Pictured here is the twenty-fourth and final tīrthaṅkara, Vardhamāna Mahāvīra (599–527 BCE), residing in the puṣpottara vimāna, a celestial palace where he is thought to have lived for many ages until taking on a human

birth in order to gain liberation. This paper manuscript, produced in western India and dated 1503, not only exemplifies the artistic merits of Jain illustration, but also demonstrates the elaborate use of centre-hole decoration, rubrication, marginal commentary (in Sanskrit), and turmeric-based highlighting.

edition of the epic. This would mean that it was not part of the original text, but had been inserted at a later date—perhaps by the year 500 CE, and in any case certainly before the early tenth century, when Rājaśekhara alludes to it. Still, even if it were a late addition, the story must have been added for a very good reason, for it remained a part of the epic tradition once it found its way in.

The Gaṇeśa story evokes, in striking mythological terms, the cultural power of Sanskrit manuscripts. For a text to truly exist, to be given public life, it has to be transformed from oral to written form. And if the manuscript is to be an effective conduit for the author’s wisdom, the scribe must be the author’s intellectual match, since the scribe is required to understand every single verse. In this way, the author maintains a scholastic primacy over the scribe—even if the latter happens to be a deity! Moreover, the anecdote authenticates whichever physical manuscript of the *Mahābhārata* a reader may happen to possess, even years later, assuring him or her that it faithfully represents the voice of the ancient author and the hand of his subordinate scribe.

Above all, the *Mahābhārata*’s Gaṇeśa anecdote acts as a mythological charter for the public reception of the written Sanskrit text. The idea that Vyāsa has intentionally interjected textual puzzles into his work means that any difficulties that readers might have in interpreting the manuscripts of the *Mahābhārata* are supposed to be part of the experience. It is not that Vyāsa had erred, or that his scribe had corrupted the text, but rather that the text was originally *meant* to contain enigmas. As readers, we can only struggle with such puzzles, inside our own heads, unless we seek the counsel of experts who can explain what the text means. In other words, while manuscripts were designed to be material vehicles for the original texts, they still required specially trained drivers—that is, scholastic commentators—who would orally generate the Sanskrit public culture around them.

#### A Scribe at Every Poet’s Side: Rājaśekhara’s Views on Writing (ca. 900 CE)

While the *Mahābhārata* yields a mythological reflection on the cultural value of written texts, a more practical perspective appears in the writings of Rājaśekhara, an illustrious Sanskrit poet who lived and worked at the onset of the tenth century in the North Indian city of Kannauj, the bustling imperial capital of the Gurjara-Pratihāras. Rājaśekhara’s plays and poems abound with references to inscriptions, manuscripts, and other forms of writing, while his theoretical manual on poetics, the *Kāvyamīmāṃsā* (An investigation into poetry), details the place of scribes within Sanskrit courtly culture.

As one of the earliest examples of a theoretical work aimed at professional poets rather than critics or connoisseurs, the *Kāvyamīmāṃsā* is candid in its descriptions of what everyday life may have been like for the courtly literati of tenth-century India. Especially so is its tenth chapter, titled “The Life of a Poet and the Life of a King” (*kavīcaryā rājacaryā ca*), which delineates how a good court poet ought to organize his home and establish a daily routine that would be most beneficial to his career. First, Rājaśekhara asserts that a poet should comport himself in a gentlemanly manner and make sure that his house and his gardens are well kept and accommodate the various natural settings, flora, and fauna that are conducive to Sanskrit poetry. Next, explaining that a poet should keep a retinue of attendants and friends who are skilled in the various registers of formal poetry, Rājaśekhara suggests that every good poet also ought to have a competent scribe (*lekhaka*) at his side. This scribe should be “adept in all languages, speak quickly, have pleasant handwriting, understand gestures, be conversant with many different scripts, and himself be a poet who understands the deeper meanings”—that is, the deeper meanings of poetry. Such an educated scribe is necessary, says Rājaśekhara, for the purpose of



“polishing and editing one’s work for the public.” If no scribe is available, or if it happens to be late at night, he suggests the poet may get one of his servants or friends to do the job. But in all cases, he should be prepared to write down his compositions whenever inspiration strikes. The poet is therefore instructed always to keep close at hand “a box containing a slate and chalk, or another box filled with toddy palm leaves or birch bark, pens, pots of ink, or talipot leaves with an iron stylus, or well-wiped walls” onto which, one presumes, a desperate poet could scribble his new creations.<sup>11</sup>

Rājaśekhara also places strict regulations on a poet’s daily routine, and here, too, writing plays a key role. After performing his morning rituals, a poet is instructed to engage in scholastic studies and compose new poetry. After lunch, he is to hold gatherings with fellow poets, solve riddles, or pursue other kinds of literary pastimes. For the rest of the afternoon, the poet should review and revise his morning compositions, and in the evening, finalize in writing (*abhilekhana*) everything that had passed his earlier inspection, before spending some time with his wife and retiring for the night.

Though the picture is assuredly an idealized one, Rājaśekhara’s *Kāvyamīmāṃsā* speaks in highly practical terms about the importance of writing in the careers of Sanskrit poets and scholars in early medieval India. Handwritten documents were indispensable for the daily creation of poetry, and, as Rājaśekhara reminds us, they were the physical instruments through which a poet’s work was presented within the *sadas*, or the public assembly, where they were to be recited aloud, perhaps by others besides the poet. Depending on how his work was received by the king, connoisseurs, and the other cognoscenti of the royal court, the poet

would either succeed and achieve everlasting fame or fail and fall into ignominy. This is why Rājaśekhara sets such high standards for what constituted a good scribe—not only did he have to have a firm command of scripts and handwriting, he needed to be practically a poet himself.

### The Written Gift: Donating Manuscripts in Ballālasena’s *Dānasāgara* (1170 CE)<sup>12</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the vast majority of the Sanskrit manuscripts we now possess were *not* made in the way that Rājaśekhara described. That is, they are not, for the most part, the physical recordings of the original authors; rather, they are copies thereof, and copies of copies, which have been passed down through chains of scribal transmission for hundreds if not thousands of years. The reasons why manuscripts were copied are as diverse as the contexts in which the copying was done—in order to replace a worn-out manuscript in a temple, monastery, or royal court, or at the behest of a teacher or father, or perhaps for one’s own personal edification. But it is clear that the world of Sanskrit copyists operated under quite a different set of rules and regulations than Rājaśekhara’s world of Sanskrit poets did.

One especially fascinating motivation for copying a manuscript in the mainstream Hindu culture of the medieval period was to donate it to a temple, a spiritual guru, or a venerable Brahman scholar for the sake of earning merit, or *punya*. This process is described in great detail in the *Dānasāgara* (Ocean of gift-giving), a theoretical compendium composed at the court of the Bengali king Ballālasena in approximately 1170 CE. This encyclopedic text delineates the correct methods for all kinds of religious donations—everything

from making rice and grain offerings to hosting large-scale sacrifices and festivals. In one chapter dedicated to the giving of knowledge (*Vidyādāna*, chapter 43), the *Dānasāgara* explains how and why manuscripts are to be copied and donated. First, the donor should select the appropriate text to be copied and gather together the right kind of paper (pure white, with a black or red border), pots of good black ink, gilded pens, and well-made wooden book covers. The *Dānasāgara* advocates the use of a special device for the copying process, called a *sarayantra* (spreading device) or *vidyādhara* (knowledge carrier). What this artifact looked like is unknown, but it was probably a kind of book stand, fashioned from gold, silver, ivory, or wood, that could simultaneously hold both the exemplar and the new copy in place. The scribe is instructed to face east; wear white garlands and clothing, a golden armband, and finger caps; and have at hand a set of pens and a nail cutter (for sharpening the pen). Then, as string music plays in the background, a sample of five or ten verses is to be copied and thoroughly scrutinized for writing mistakes as well as to check the content, consistency, and subject matter. In subsequent sessions, the copying is to proceed in this same, deliberate manner, and, upon completion, the manuscript should be nicely decorated, perfumed, tied, and wrapped in cloth, and if it was going to be donated to a temple, ceremoniously taken by palanquin, elephant, horse, or chariot to a temple, and offered to the presiding deity.

This procession is designed to be quite a public affair, and the *Dānasāgara* describes it with great pomp and circumstance. The vehicle should be brightly decorated with bells, garlands, and banners, and a large umbrella. It is accompanied by dancers, singers, and musicians, and the chanting of Vedic

hymns. At the temple itself, elaborate ritual procedures are to be undertaken to honour the donor’s ancestors and teachers, dignitaries, and devotees of the presiding deity, and an additional gratuity (*dakṣiṇā*) is to be offered to Brahman officiants to ensure the permanency of the gift. The donor then is asked to organize some festivities to celebrate the donation—a large-scale public festival if you are a king, and a simple house party for your relatives if you are a common citizen.

The *Dānasāgara* next instructs the donor to sponsor a formal public recitation of the text at the temple. A professional reader (*vācaka*) as well as a teacher (*guru*) are hired to read the text out loud and teach its contents to the general public assembled there. The *Dānasāgara* takes great pains to regulate this aspect of the public life of a manuscript. The reader must be highly educated in scripts as well as the Sanskrit language. The teacher must be well versed in all of the major branches of knowledge, such that his words act as rays of light dispelling the darkness of the audience’s ignorance. And the audience must be ever attentive, respectful, and reflective. The recitation should not be rushed, should be in a tone that is appropriate to the content, should include pauses at the end of chapters or sections, and should close with auspicious benedictive utterances to ensure the well-being of the teacher and the audience.

Besides providing a detailed picture of the technicalities of Sanskrit manuscript production and how it continued to be fully couched within traditions of public oral performance well into the medieval period, the *Dānasāgara* also gives some clues about the religious and social motivations behind it. A manuscript donation was reckoned as having the equivalent merit of ten thousand Vedic



▲ Palm leaf manuscript in Malayalam script  
Kerala, India • n.d.  
Ink on palm leaf, and wood, fibre, and ivory  
3.9 × 21.3 × 3.8 cm  
MOA COLLECTION, B557

horse sacrifices, or a thousand royal consecrations. It would permit the donor to stay in heaven for as many thousands of years as there were syllables in the donated manuscript. And, perhaps most compelling of all, donating manuscripts in this ritually prescribed way was also thought to rescue one’s ancestors from hell. Ballālasena’s *Dānasāgara* provides a lucid, if idealized, impression of how copying certain kinds of Sanskrit writings generated a secondary cultural field—of merit-earning and public education at Hindu temples in medieval India.

The Pre-modern Public Culture  
of Sanskrit Manuscripts

Based on these brief explorations, how might we understand the public culture that developed around practices of writing Sanskrit texts onto palm leaf, birch bark, and paper in first-millennium India? The pre-modern world of Sanskrit manuscripts, it should be said, was quite unlike the modern notion of a “public sphere,” which Jürgen Habermas has used to describe the new modes of civil life that emerged through print journalism, clubs, and coffeehouses in eighteenth-century Europe.<sup>13</sup> Rather, it bore a closer resemblance to the medieval European domains of elite cultural power and discipline that the bourgeois public sphere is said to have displaced. The world of Sanskrit, in general, was a domain of strict social regulation and control. There was a right way to do things, and complex hierarchies were put in place to self-circumscribe a refined “elite” society from the general public.

And so, in all three moments that we have considered, we find that great emphasis was placed on scribal competence, training, and procedure. The scribe needed to demonstrate proficiency in various writing systems, but also an ability to comprehend

the Sanskrit text he was writing down. The copying of a manuscript was a methodical process in which the scribe’s attire, his comportment, and even his background music were carefully spelled out. And throughout the process, a system of checks and balances enabled Sanskrit scholars to maintain authoritative command over the documents that scribes were creating. Gaṇeśa had to solve textual tangles before he could write down the *Mahābhārata*, Rājaśekhara’s ideal scribe had to be good enough to be a poet himself, and the *Dānasāgara* stipulated that the scribe’s work always be thoroughly double-checked and presented in public only under the guidance of professional scholars.

Finally, we should note that these are *idealized* depictions of scribes and their craft, written from the point of view of Sanskrit poets, pandits, and priests. We must keep in mind that their descriptions do not necessarily reflect the realities of how Sanskrit manuscripts were made. Still, they do give us valuable details about the cultural anxieties of Sanskrit authors regarding the technicians who made the manuscripts and how the public might receive them. The perspectives of the scribes are somewhat more difficult to locate, but they can be found either within the interstitial spaces of manuscripts—such as colophons, marginalia, or even scribbles on the covers—or in certain genres of Sanskrit literature that circulated more exclusively among scribal communities, such as verse anthologies, digests, and story collections. By studying more and more of the millions of existing Sanskrit manuscripts with a sensitivity to such scribal voices, we will undoubtedly gain a better appreciation of the public culture that formed around them, as well as the thoughts and inclinations of the copyists to whom we owe the manuscripts’ survival.

- 10 Ichirō Hariu, “Sengo Nihon no zen’eisho: Kaiga tono mitsuduki jidai wo koete” [Avant-garde calligraphy in postwar Japan: Beyond the honeymoon period with paintings], in O Bijutsukan (O Art Museum), *Sho to kaiga no atsuki jidai*, 1945–1969 [Calligraphy and painting, the passionate age: 1945–1969] (Tokyo: O Bijutsukan [O Art Museum], 1992), 2–5; and Alexandra Munroe, “Circle: Modernism and Tradition,” in *Japanese Art after 1945: Scream against the Sky*, ed. Alexandra Munroe (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 125–47.
- 11 Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press / Clarendon Press, 1998), 18.
- 12 Louise Boudonnat and Harumi Kushizaki, *Traces of the Brush: The Art of Japanese Calligraphy* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2003), 170.
- 13 Sōfū Okabe, “Hidai and His Work” (chapter translated by Audie Bock), in *Hidai Nankoku sakuhinshu*, ed. Hidai Nankoku (Yokohama: Shogaku-in Shuppan-bu [Shogakuin Publications], 1987), 231.
- 14 Fuyubi Nakamura, “Creating or Performing Words?: Observations on Contemporary Japanese Calligraphy,” in *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation*, ed. Tim Ingold and Elizabeth Hallam (Oxford: Berg, 2007).
- 15 Tim Ingold, “Notes Toward an Anthropology of the Line,” *Dwelling* no. 2 (2003).
- 16 Nakamura, “Creating or Performing Words?”
- 17 Christine Flint Sato, “Tsubasa Kimura,” *Letter Arts Review* 23, no. 3 (Summer 2009); Fuyubi Nakamura, “Creating New Forms of ‘Visualised’ Words: An Anthropological Study of Contemporary Japanese Calligraphy” (DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 2006); Nakamura, “Creating or Performing Words?”; Nakamura, “Tsubasa Kimura: The Infinite Possibility of Words,” in *Ephemeral but Eternal Traces of Words*, ed. Nakamura, 31–33; and Nakamura, “A Brief Introduction to Japanese Calligraphy,” in *Trazos del tiempo, trazos de palabras*, ed. Nakamura, 4–6.
- 18 Kimura held a series of three exhibitions entitled, originally in English, *Crowd*; *After the Crowd*; and *and crowd lost* in 2005, and then a series of four exhibitions called *Crowded 1/3*, *Crowded 1/3 high*, *Crowded 2/3*, and *Crowded 3/3* in 2006. See Nakamura, “Creating New Forms”; and Christine Flint Sato, “Tsubasa Kimura,” 34–36.

- 19 *Iroha uta* is often attributed to the Buddhist monk Kūkai (774–835 CE), but the use of certain syllables suggests it was composed after 950. See Christopher Seeley, *A History of Writing in Japan* (Leiden, the Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1991), 106.
- 20 Kimura majored in Buddhist studies for her bachelor of arts at Ryūkoku University in Kyoto and studied *bokuseki*, or the calligraphy of Buddhist monks, during her post-graduate years at Kyoto University of Education. While her practice at private schools did not necessarily focus on Buddhism-inspired calligraphy, her calligraphy teacher of many years was a Buddhist monk.
- 21 Norman Bryson, “The Gaze in the Expanded Field,” in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hall Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988), 103.
- 22 Kimura, email message to author, February 2, 2010.
- 23 Ingold, “Notes Toward an Anthropology of the Line.”

### Chapter 3

- 1 Mohamed Zakariya, *Music for the Eyes: An Introduction to Islamic and Ottoman Calligraphy* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1998), pamphlet published in conjunction with the exhibition *Letters in Gold*.

### Chapter 4

*I offer my gratitude to Stefan Baums, Dominik Wujastyk, Fuyubi Nakamura, and Grace Yaginuma, whose detailed and thoughtful comments on earlier drafts of this essay have greatly enriched its revision; all remaining flaws, however, are my own.*

- 1 Most of the Southeast Asian manuscripts held by MOA are not in Sanskrit, but in either the closely related Pali—the language of the Southern Buddhist canon—or hybrid registers that synthesize Sanskrit and Pali with local languages (Burmese, Thai, Sinhala, etc.). For the purposes of this essay, however, I am treating them as falling within a larger historical formation that we may call “Sanskrit manuscript culture.”
- 2 On Sanskrit manuscriptology, see Dominik Wujastyk, “Indian Manuscripts,” in *Manuscript Cultures: Mapping*



- the Field*, ed. Jörg B. Quenzer, Dmitry Bondarev, and Jan-Ulrich Sobisch, *Studies in Manuscript Cultures* no. 1 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 159–82. On Sanskrit literary culture and the “Cosmopolis,” see Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). For key overviews of Sanskrit manuscript studies, see S.M. Katre, *Introduction to Indian Textual Criticism* (Bombay: Karnatak, 1941); and Jayant P. Thaker, *Manuscriptology and Textual Criticism* (Vadodara, India: Oriental Institute, 2002).
- 3 On the marginalization of Sanskrit studies, see Sheldon Pollock, “Future Philology? The Fate of a Soft Science in a Hard World,” *Critical Inquiry* 35: 931–61.
- 4 On Gāndhārī birch bark manuscripts, see Stefan Baums, “Gāndhārān Scrolls: Rediscovering an Ancient Manuscript Type,” in *Manuscript Cultures*, ed. Quenzer, Bondarev, and Sobisch, 183–226.
- 5 On the early history of writing in South Asia, see Richard Salomon, *Indian Epigraphy: A Guide to the Study of Inscriptions in Sanskrit, Prakrit, and the Other Indo-Aryan Languages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Harry Falk, *Schrift im alten Indien: ein Forschungsbericht mit Anmerkungen*, *ScriptOralia*, no. 56 (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1993); and Oskar von Hinüber, *Der Beginn der Schrift und frühe Schriftlichkeit in Indien*, *Abhandlungen der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaftlichen Klasse* (1989), no. 11 (Mainz: Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur / Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1990).
- 6 *World Checklist of Selected Plant Families*, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, accessed June 13, 2016, apps.kew.org/wcsp.
- 7 On the technical details of manuscript production see Katre, *Introduction to Indian Textual Criticism*; Thaker, *Manuscriptology and Textual Criticism*; and P. Perumal, “The Sanskrit Manuscripts in Tamilnadu,” in *Aspects of Manuscript Culture in South India*, ed. Saraju Rath (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2012), 157–72. Rath’s collection of essays offers an invaluable and up-to-date resource for South Indian manuscriptology.
- 8 On the history of paper in South Asia, see Sita Ramashan, “The History of Paper in India up to 1948,” *Indian Journal of History of Science* 24 (1989): 103–21; and Jeremiah P. Losty, *The Art of the Book in India* (London: British Library, 1982).
- 9 The primary sources I consulted were *The Mahābhārata* (Critical Edition), ed. Vishnu S. Sukthankar et al., 19 vols. (Poona [Pune]: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1927–66); *Kāvya-mīmāṃsā* of Rājaśekhara, ed. C.D. Dalal and R.A. Shastry, 3rd ed. (Baroda [Vadodara]: Oriental Institute, 1934); and *Dānasāgara* of Ballālasena, ed. Bhabatosh Bhattacharya (Calcutta [Kolkata]: Asiatic Society, 1956).
- 10 “śrutvaitat prāha vighneśo yadi me lekhanī kṣaṇam |  
likhito nāvatiṣṭheta tadā syāṃ lekhako hy aham |  
vyāso ‘py uvāca taṃ devam abuddhvā mā likha kvacit |  
om ity uktvā gaṇeśo ‘pi babhūva kila lekhakaḥ |  
granthagranthiṃ tadā cakre munir gūḍhaṃ kutūhalāt |  
yasmin pratijñayā prāha munir dvaipāyanas tv idam |”  
*Mahābhārata* 1, appendix 1, note after 30, lines 10–14.
- 11 “sadaḥsaṃskāraviśuddhyarthaṃ sarvabhāṣākuśalaḥ  
śīghravāk cārvaṣara iṅgitākāraṇā nānālipijñāḥ  
kaviḥ lākṣaṇikaś ca lekhakaḥ syāt | tadasannidhāv  
atirātrādiṣu pūrvoktanām anyatamaḥ | . . . tasya samputikā  
saphalakakhaṭikā samudgakaḥ salekhanīkamaṣībhājanāni  
tāḍipatrāṇi bhūrjatvaco vā, salohakaṇṭakāni tāladalāni  
susammṛṣṭā bhittayaḥ satatasannihitāḥ syuḥ |”  
*Kāvya-mīmāṃsā*, 50, lines 7–10, 21–23.
- 12 I am indebted to James McHugh of the University of Southern California for providing me with an unpublished essay on the *Dānasāgara* that has motivated my thoughts in this section; his forthcoming study of this text will assuredly eclipse the cursory reflections I have presented here.
- 13 On Jürgen Habermas’s public sphere, see Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), originally published as *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (Darmstadt and Neuwied: Hermann Luchterhand Verlag, 1962).



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