

The treasure chambers of the Leiden University Library

There can be no university without a library. Twelve years after William of Orange established Leiden University in 1575, he founded Leiden University Library, which, from the beginning, was meant to serve as a research facility. Access was restricted to a few privileged men (and their dogs!), and the books had to be consulted on the spot as they were chained to the shelves. Times have changed. Books are electronically protected, academia is no longer a man's world – and dogs are asked to stay outside. The collection has grown from a few hundred books to over 4 million printed copies, plus approximately 1 million electronic books. Electronic resources, such as the 500+ databases in the University Library, allow us to share knowledge with, and to connect to, the most remote parts of the world. However, some things have not changed: the library still guards true treasures, thousands of jewels that reflect ideas and thoughts of times long past.

Doris Jedamski

The Special Collections

The Leiden University Library has excelled in building up an eminent collection of non-Western material, patiently brought together and studied by scholars and librarians since the 16th century. At first, it was principally Middle-Eastern manuscripts that were collected. Stimulated and facilitated by the European colonial expansion, thousands of letters, drawings, prints, maps, rubbings, inscriptions, photographs, and about 18.000 manuscripts soon travelled from Southeast Asia to Leiden. A large part originated from the Malay archipelago and covers a great variety of languages, among others Malay, Javanese, Balinese, Bimanese, Acehnese, various Batak languages, and Buginese. Many manuscripts are written in a vernacular script, some use the Arabic scripts for Javanese and Malay (fig. 1). With its unique religious, historical, epic and law related texts this Leiden manuscript collection still attracts researchers from all over the world.

A great number of items derive from the legacies of two celebrated scholars, the great Arabist and colonial official Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, and the bible translator and linguist H. N. Van der Tuuk. Both collected not just thousands of manuscripts; Snouck Hurgronje also accumulated an extraordinary collection of photographs. His legacy was bequeathed to the University Library in 1936. Van der Tuuk left, in addition to the manuscripts, an exquisite collection of Balinese drawings to the library after his death in 1894 (fig. 2).

In the field of South Asian and Tibetan Studies, it is the legendary Kern collection (named after Hendrik Kern, the first Sanskrit Professor in Leiden) that has elevated the Leiden collections to world fame. In 2010, it became part of the University Library. Kern, together with Jean Philippe Vogel and Johan van Manen, accumulated a varied collection of Sanskrit palm-leaf manuscripts, mostly from South India. The Van Manen collection, however, is first and foremost renowned for its more than 1000 Lepcha and Tibetan (block) manuscripts, which he collected in India between 1908 and 1943 with a focus on non-canonized historical and religious works. The Lepcha manuscripts collection is the largest of its kind in the world.

Three other jewels in the Leiden University Library are the extensive collection of Congshu, or 'Chinese collectanea'; the collection of unofficial poetry journals from the PR of China; and the personal library of Robert Hans van Gulik, renowned Dutch sinologist, diplomat, and author of the Judge Dee Mysteries.

Many distinguished scholars have enriched Leiden academic life and the library, among them J.L.A. Brandes, G.F. Pijper, N.J. Krom, A.A. Bake, J.P.H. Vogel, J.G. Casparis, J. Gonda, and R.R. Ras. Many archives have yet to be explored. In the past, facsimiles and catalogues facilitated access to items or collections, but in-house digitization facilities of the highest standards have made research and high-quality publication much easier. On-going digitization projects are soon to provide open access to the Snouck Hurgronje collection and the Tibetan block prints from the Van Manen collection.

In the spotlight

While a few items are seemingly left to oblivion, others attract attention even outside the scholarly world. A late 19th century watercolour by an anonymous Javanese painter,

from the Snouck Hurgronje collection, featured in one of the major Dutch newspapers recently. It shows the Javanese Prince Dipanagara, the leader of the Java War against the Dutch (1825-30), in a western-style room with a little demon at his feet (fig. 3).

La Galigo, a Buginese manuscript from Makassar (South Sulawesi), made the international spotlight when, in 2010, it was included in the UNESCO's Memory of the World register (MOW). The Leiden manuscript is the longest coherent fragment of this epic poem extant in the world. It consists of twelve parts that together constitute the first part of the creation myth of the Buginese.

With its striking presence on the internet, the Charter of King Rājendra Chola I (11th century) has reached a different kind of fame. Its 21 copper plates are held together by a bronze ring bearing the seal of the king (fig. 4) – altogether weighing more than 30 kg. On the web, praised as the most relevant of its kind, the Charter is simply referred to as 'the Leiden plates'.

Thousands of other items are still waiting for their turn to be rediscovered, to be researched and written about, to be looked at or listened to. The Kern collection alone contains more than 70,000 photographs and almost the same amount of slides; about 37,000 images have been catalogued. In the age of data management it is worth emphasizing that old research data do not lose their significance. Aryan Usharbudh published his PhD in 1968, but his recordings of Hindustan ritual folk songs in Suriname are still of enormous linguistic and cultural relevance, and not just to the present-day Hindustan community of Suriname.

Still growing

Soon the Leiden University Library collections will expand impressively once again. Regrettably, due to funding cuts, both the libraries of the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT, Amsterdam) and the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV, Leiden) are closing down. As a result of intense negotiations, both collections could luckily be saved. The Heritage Collection of the KIT collection will soon be part of the Leiden University Library Special Collection. The KITLV collection, too, will find its new home in the UB on Witte Singel 27. Sad as it is in some respect, the fusion of these magnificent collections is also a chance to put South and Southeast Asian Studies in Leiden and beyond even more prominently on the map.

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The Special Collections of the Leiden University Libraries:
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Annually, the Scaliger Institute offers various research grants (1-3 months) for research of (parts of) the Special Collections.
www.library.leiden.edu/special-collections
/scaliger-institute
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Fig.1: Quran, probably 19th c. with notes on recitation in Malay and Acehnese, found on the body of a dead 'Acehnese priest' after the storming of the Great Mosque of Kotaradja (Banda Aceh) during the first Aceh War of 1873-1874.

Fig.2: Van der Tuuk collection, drawing by I Ketut Gede, Singaraja/North-Bali, c.1880. Scene from the Balinese fable of the bull, the tiger and the palm-wine tapper, narrated in verse in the geguritan Gunawtai.

Fig.3: Prince Diponegoro, West Java, late 19th century (before 1892).

Fig.4: Charter of King Rājendra Chola I (11th century).

