

# Sri Lankan Palm-leaf Manuscripts as Sources for Medical History and the Revitalization of Traditional Knowledge



**DANISTER PERERA**

# Contents

- Sri Lankan Palm-leaf manuscripts
- Indigenous Medical Manuscripts
- Features of Casey Wood Collection





# Sri Lankan Tradition of Palm-leaf Manuscripts

- As a cultural property (traditional practices associated with)
- As a historical source
- As a source of indigenous science, art and literature
- As an intellectual property
- As an epistemological identity (materials, sizes, covers, designs, letter styles)



CEYLON (SINHALESE) OLAS OR BOOK MANUSCRIPTS ON  
EARLY MEDICINES AND HOW THEY WERE MADE

By ANDREAS NELL, M.D. M.R.C.S. (ENG.)

KANDY, CEYLON

**Annal of Medical History, 1928 pp. 293-296**

**Making palm-leaf manuscripts is a long and labouring process  
associated with a cultural practices and norms.**

**It is a craftsmanship.**

**Manuscript inscribing is an art. Reading the text is a skill.**

**Interpreting the context is a competency.**





# Science of Palm-leaf manuscripts (conservation within the process)

- Two types of leaves (Talipot (*Corypha umbraculifera*) and Palmyra palm (*Borassus flabellifer*)
- Ceremonial Plucking of shoots (season, day and time) on new moon day or dark half in early morning after offering votives on the previous day
- Boiling process (a herbal concoction and techniques) boiled in a copper vessel
- Drying process (sunlight and exposed to moonlight and dew)
- Seasoning and polishing
- Cutting (span of lengths according to the textual types)
- Writing (types of letters: Lion, Elephant, Swan, Crow) and the technology of stylus
- Inking (resin oil of *Shorea oblongifolia* or *Doona zeylanica* mixed with other ingredients, charcoal of *Trema orientalia*, and followed by rubbing of flour of *Eleusine coracana* to remove the excessive oil)
- Code (String made of fibre of *Sansevieria zeylanica*)
- Cover boards (wooden or silver, gold, ivory, tortoise shell)
- Copying and blackening (re-inking)
- Utilization (human touch and voice)
- Respect as living being (worship and rituals)



# Palm-leaf manuscripts: Where are they?

- National Museums
- National Archives
- National Library
- Universities
- Temple libraries
- Traditional Families
- Private collections (acquired or bought)
- Antique traders



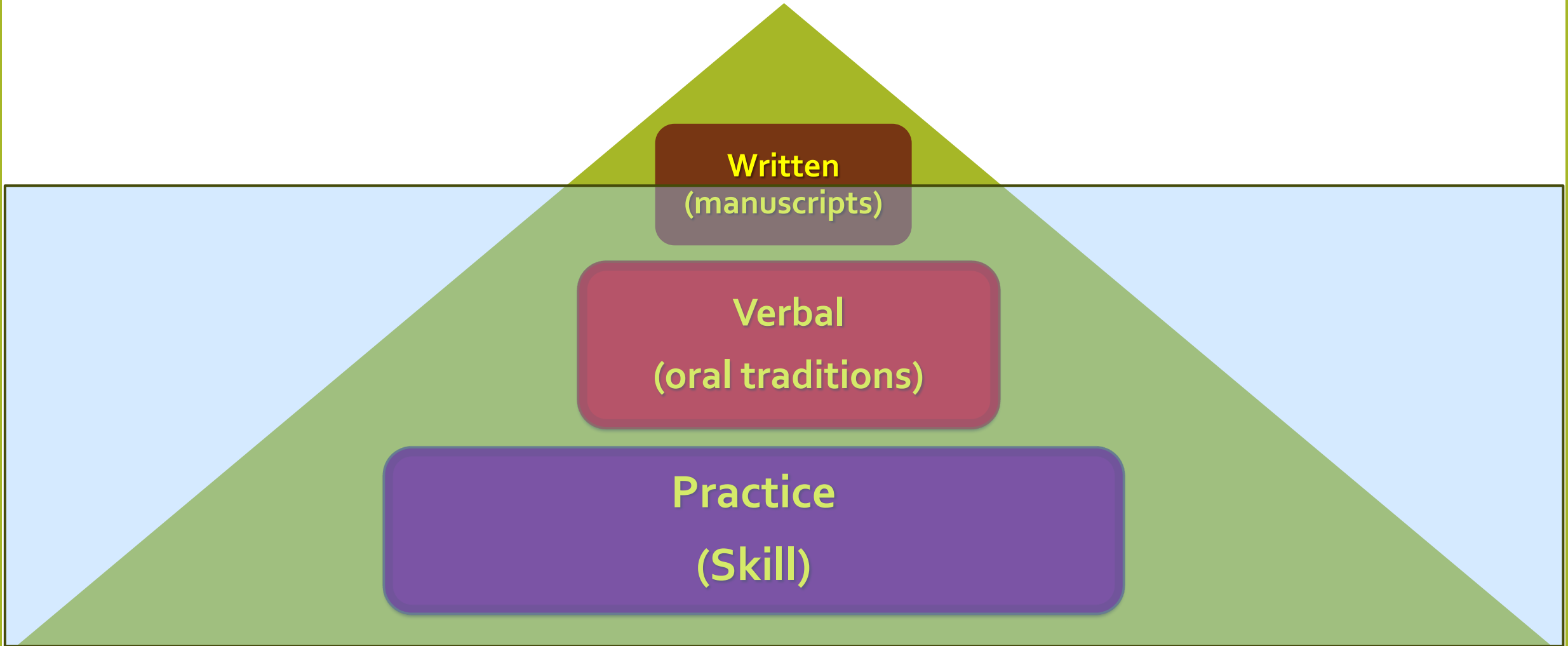


# Sri Lankan Manuscripts in Foreign Collections

- British Museums
- Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine
- Bodleian Library, University of Oxford
- Osler Library and Rare Book Collection, McGill University
- Cambridge University Library
- University of Manchester Library
- National Library of Paris
- Musée de l'Homme (anthropology museum in Paris)
- Library of the University of Leiden
- Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin (Berlin State Library)
- National Library of Medicine of New York
- Galter Health Sciences Library, Chicago, USA
- Bernard Becker Medical Library, Missouri, USA
- Fryer Library, The University of Queensland
- Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, University of Pennsylvania
- National Library of New Zealand
- Public library of Cleveland (accidentally found 1 medical MS with 97 folios)



# Epistemology of Indigenous Medicine



**ICEBURG OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE**



# Manuscripts as Sources of History of Medicine

## CONTENTS

- Language (etymology/ loan words)
- Technology (apparatus/ implements)
- Methods (diagnosis)
- Ingredients (endemic / exotic)
- Nosology and nomenclature of diseases
- Material culture
- Inscriptural errors

## PHYSICAL FEATURES

- Status of folios
- Artistic designs
- Letters
- Pagination
- Cover
- Buttons
- Codes



# Brief history of indigenous medical manuscripts

- Sārārtha Sangrahaya (4<sup>th</sup> Century) (Sanskrit in Verse)

(there is a big vacuum of about 9 centuries in between due to invasions of South Indian forces and destroyed many manuscripts as recorded by historical sources)

- Yōgārnavaya (13<sup>th</sup> Century) (Sinhala)
- Bhēsajjamanjusā (13<sup>th</sup> Century) (only Pali manuscript and has referred the classics existed when it was written)
- Prayōgaratnāvaliya (13<sup>th</sup> Century) (Sinhala)
- Varayōgasāraya (14<sup>th</sup> Century) (Sinhala)
- Yōgaratnākaraya (16<sup>th</sup> Century) (Sinhala in Poems)
- Sārasankṣēpaya (16<sup>th</sup> Century) (Sanskrit in Verse)
- Vaidyacintāmani Bhaisajjya Sangarahaya (17<sup>th</sup> Century) (Sinhala)
- Varasārasangrahaya (18<sup>th</sup> Century?) (Sinhala)
- Even after the paper is introduced to Sri Lanka (1606 AD), palm-leaf manuscripts were written. There are many manuscripts written during the Colonial period too.



# Subject Diversity in Indigenous Medical Manuscripts

- General medicine
- Fractures and dislocations
- Snakebites
- Abscesses and ulcers
- Eye diseases
- Catarrh
- Diarrhoea
- Children's diseases
- Post-partum disorders
- Fevers
- Sanni (acute and critical conditions)
- Burns
- Insanity
- Veterinary (Cattle and Elephants)
- Crop treatments (Agricultural)
- Therapeutic burning and venepuncture
- Astrological prescriptions
- Ritual healing
- Formulations (pharmacy)
- Materia medica (plants, minerals and animal substances)



# Special Features of Medical Manuscripts

- There are many manuscripts without names. Only the classical works have names.
- Usually author's name is not mentioned. Date is mentioned sometimes in traditional style.
- Written in Sinhala, Sanskrit in Sinhala characters (only one book is written in Pali language)
- In some manuscripts diagrams are found. Some of the diagrams cannot be interpreted without the cultural literacy.
- Some contents are encoded and the decoding key is elsewhere in another manuscript or verbally transmitted.
- They are repeatedly copied and copies are kept as identical replicas (sometimes inscriptional errors can be found).
- The content is considered as valuable heritage of the ancestors and therefore the manuscripts is respected as sacred. They worship the book which is reputed as a living being
- Some manuscripts are unique to a one family lineage and they are kept as their family treasures secretly and Not permitted to access, touch or read by a **outsiders**.
- Therefore the genuine practitioners o families with ancestral heritage **NEVER SELL their** manuscripts.



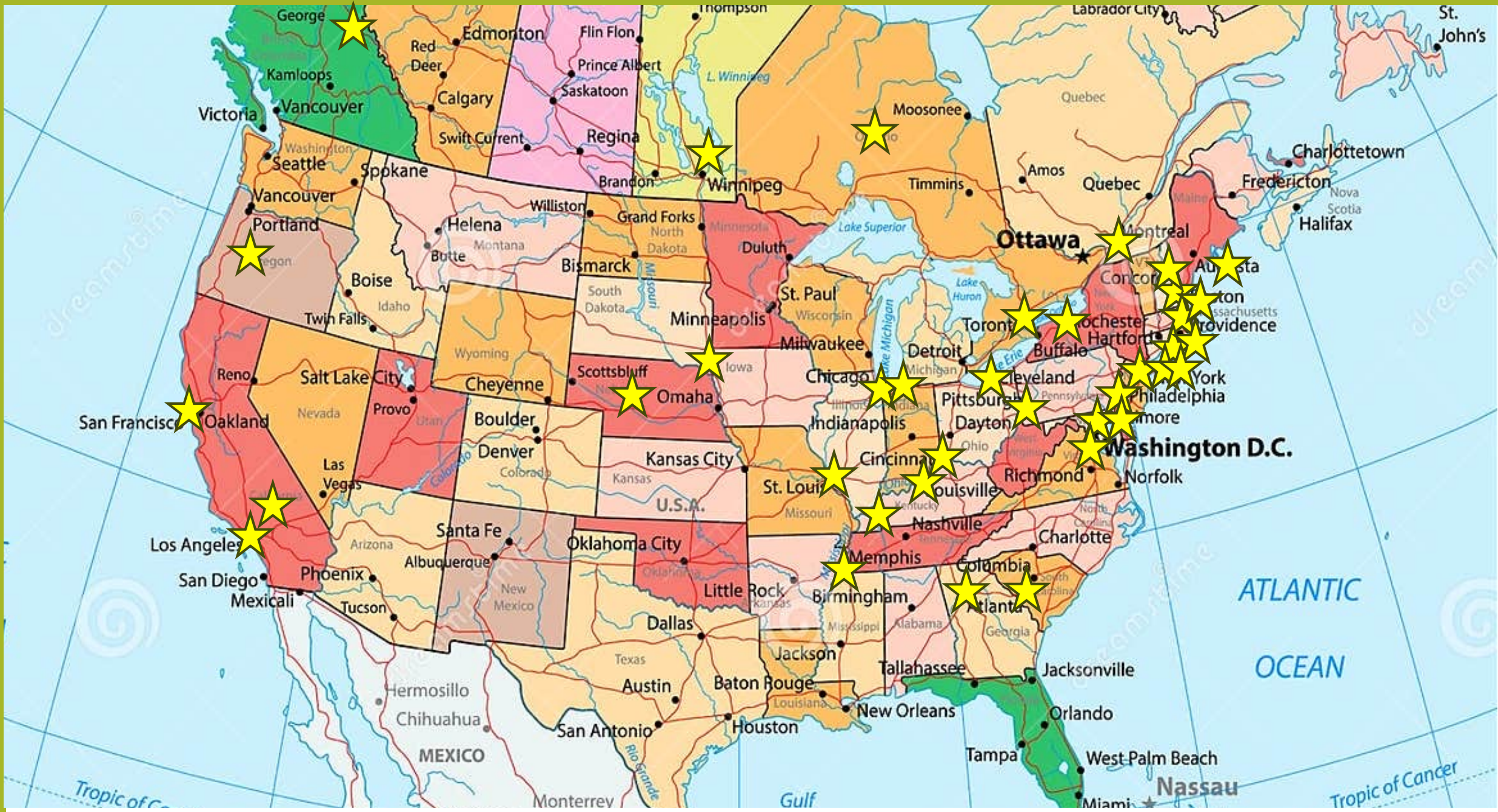
# Background of CW Collection

- The Osler Library contains 20 olas (palm-leaf manuscripts) from Sri Lanka on medical subjects written in Sinhala and Sanskrit. (Some of them are mistaken as written in Pali).
- There is also a collection of around one hundred Sri Lankan olas in the Rare Books and Special Collections department of the McGill Library, many of which deal with medical or astrological topics and ritual practices. Also there are Buddhist religious texts written in Pali or Sinhala.
- These manuscripts date from between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries and were collected in the 1920s and 1930s by Dr Casey Wood. These manuscripts are now being digitized and are updated with revised catalogue information.
- Some of them are of well-known texts and few were misidentified while others were remained unknown almost all of which could be correctly identified.
- In this talk, I will discuss history of medical manuscripts of Sri Lankan indigenous medicine and the contents of the olas at McGill, noting some interesting features of the manuscripts.

# Where the other medical manuscripts of CW collection exist?

1. Yale university Library
2. The University of North Carolina
3. St. Louis Medical Society,
4. University of Michigan
5. Medical Society of County of Kings, New York
6. Vanderbilt University Medical School
7. Medical and Chirurgical Faculty, Baltimore
8. General Hospital, City of Cincinnati
9. Brown University
10. The Cleveland Medical Library Association
11. Johns Hopkins Hospital
12. College of Medicine Syracuse University
13. Dartmouth Medical School
14. State University of Iowa
15. Jefferson County Medical Society Louisville
16. Connel University Medical College, New York
17. Harvard Medical School, Massachusetts
18. Army Medical Library, Washington
19. Stanford University, California
20. Northwestern University Medical School
21. Barlow Medical Library, Los Angeles
22. Rochester Academy of Medicine, New York
23. Calhoun Memorial Library Emory University
24. Colonel Fielding Garrison Washington DC
25. One of Surgeons of the Manhattan
26. Chairman, Charaka Club
27. Dr Leo Eloesser, San Francisco
28. Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research
29. Memphis, ENT Hospital
30. University of Pennsylvania
31. Treadwell Library, Massachusetts General Hospital
32. Washington University School of Medicine
33. Georgetown University Medical School
34. University of Nebraska
35. Crerar Library, University of Chicago
36. Academy of Medicine, Toronto
37. Queen's University Library, Ontario
38. University of Alberta
39. Dalhousie University
40. University of Montreal
41. University of Western Ontario
42. University of British Colombia
43. University of Manitoba
44. University of Saskatchewan
45. Rush Medical College, University of Chicago
46. Library of College of Physicians, Philadelphia
47. Boston Medical Library
48. University of Oregon
49. University of California
50. Lane Medical Library, California
51. Surgeon General's Library , Washington
52. University of Illinois





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# Types of manuscripts recorded in CW Collection

- Classical texts in general medicine
  - Eg: Yōgaratnākaraya
- Compendia written in recent past
  - Eg: Ariṣṭaśataka (misidentified as Yōgamālāva) / Vaidyālinkārasangrahaya
- Special subjects (snakebites, eye diseases)
- Formulations (oils, pills and other preparations)
- Handbooks
- Astrological contents with rituals
- Buddhist religious texts
- Statue crafting
- Mixed manuscripts
- Fragments



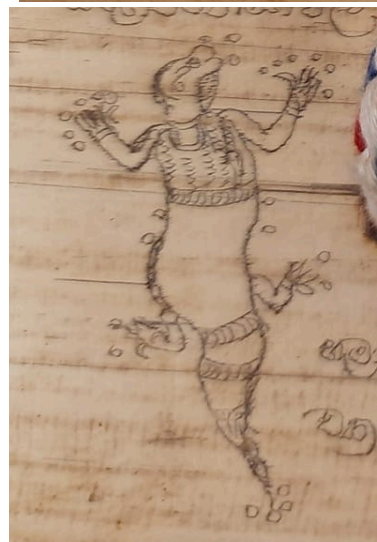
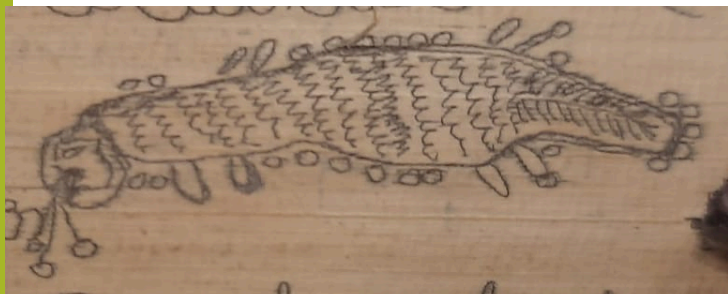
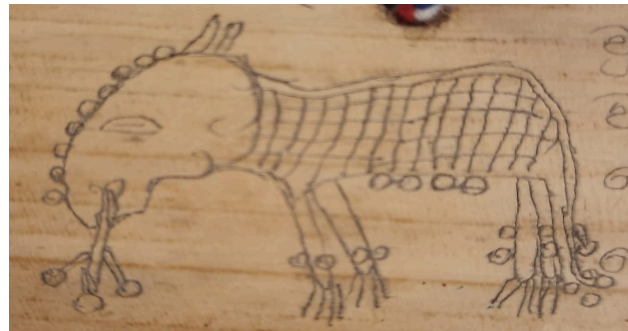
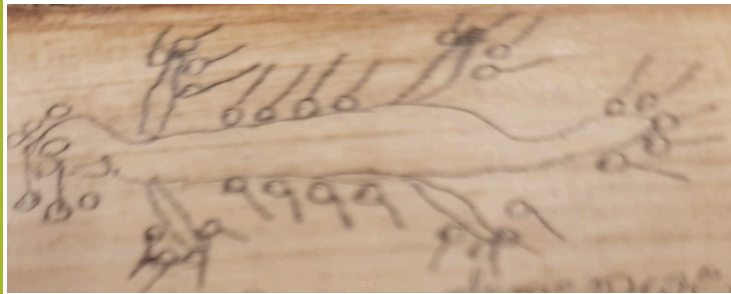
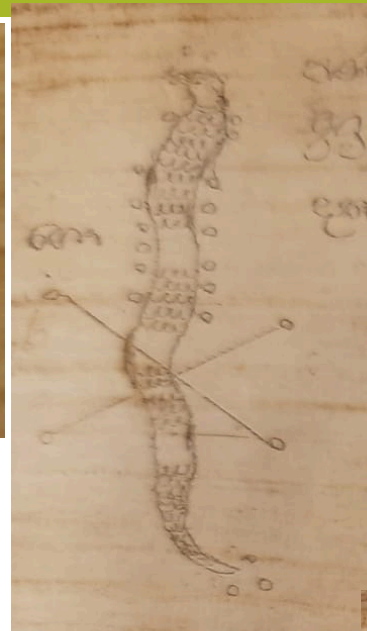
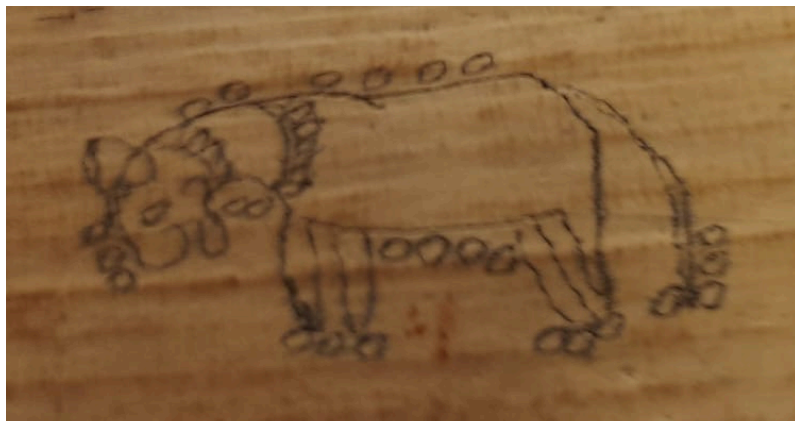
# Special manuscripts and features in CW collection

- There is no any RARE manuscript found in the collection. Most of them are printed or copies recorded in Sri Lanka.
- Most of them are well-preserved and still readable after 100 years of collection.
- Most of the covers and strings are replaced by CW and correctly described with the help of Dr. Nell (except few mistaken)
- The language of the manuscript is mentioned in some labels as Pali - Sinhala due to misguidance
- Some figures are mistaken as **zoological** features but they are astrological diagrams.
- Estimated dating of some manuscripts are based on assumptions and cannot be rationally confirmed.

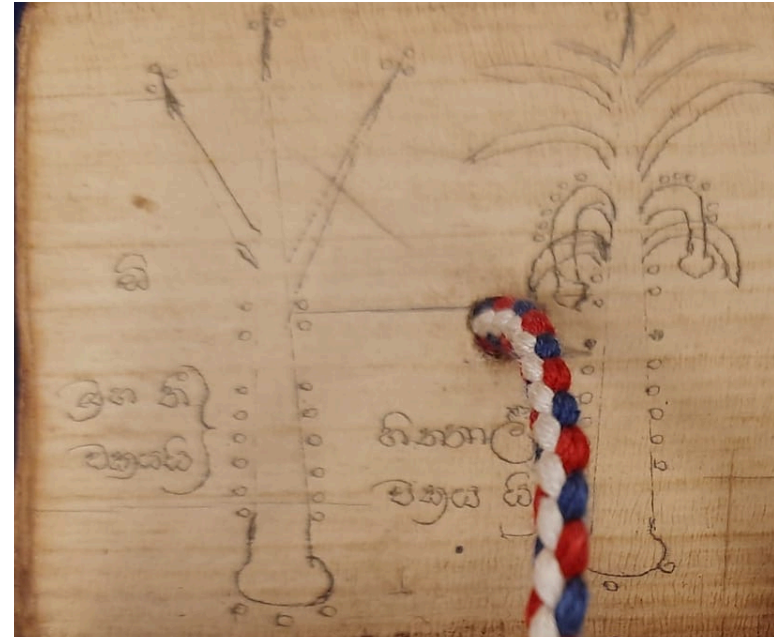
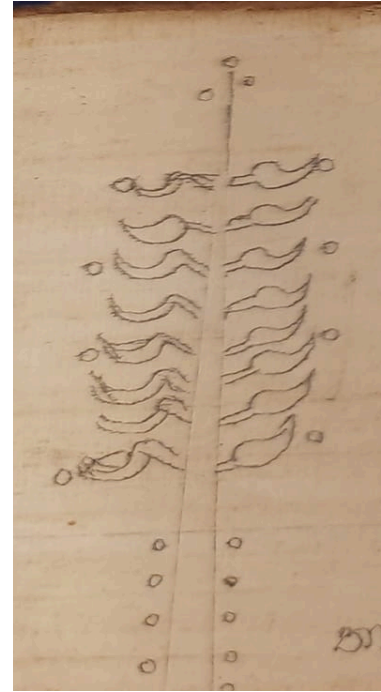
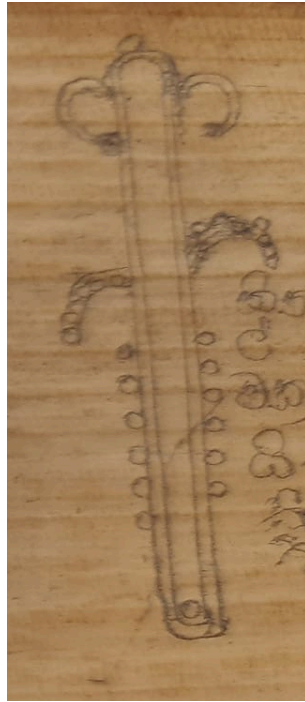
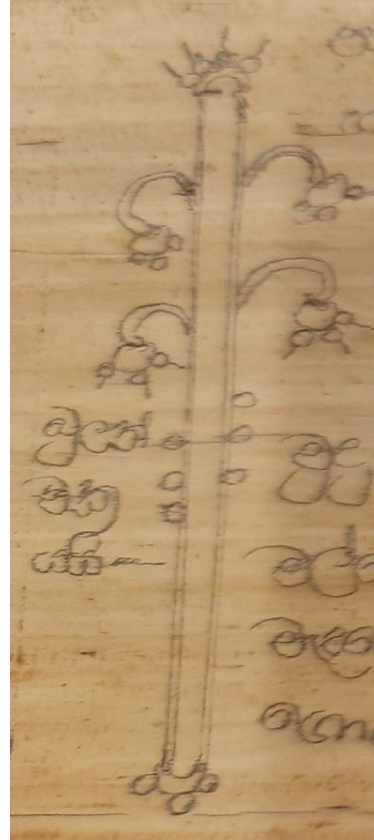
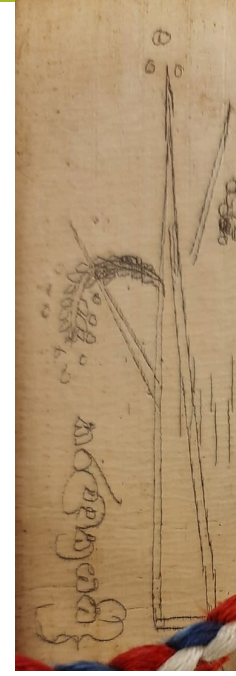
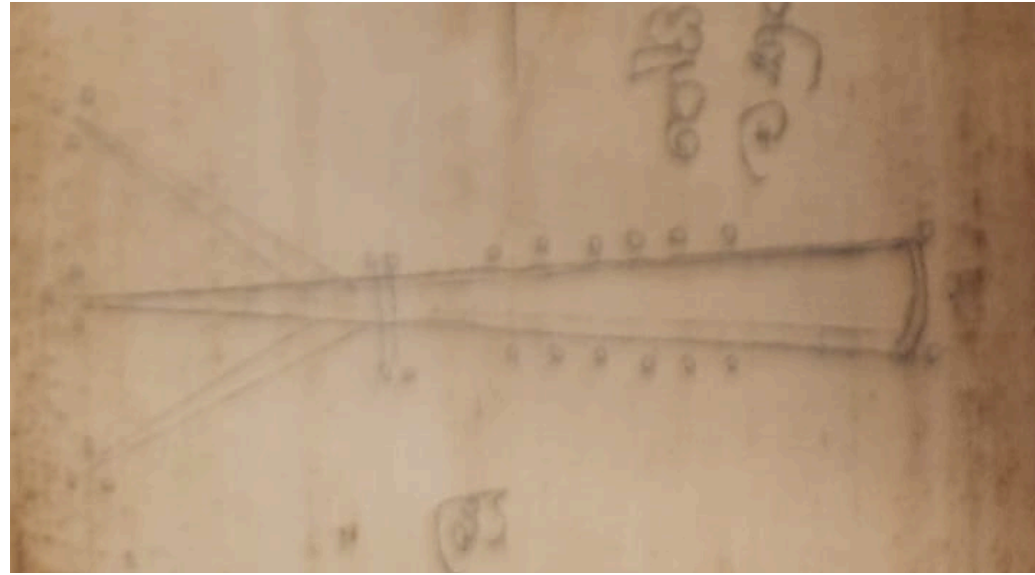
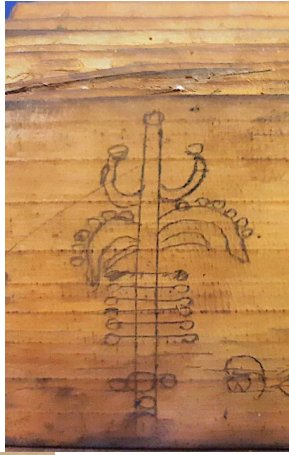
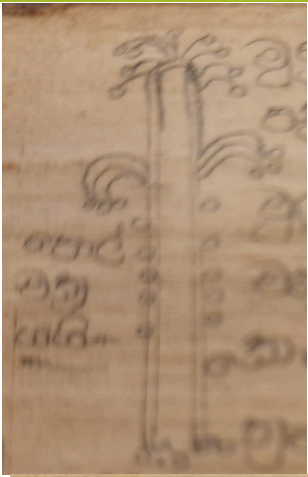




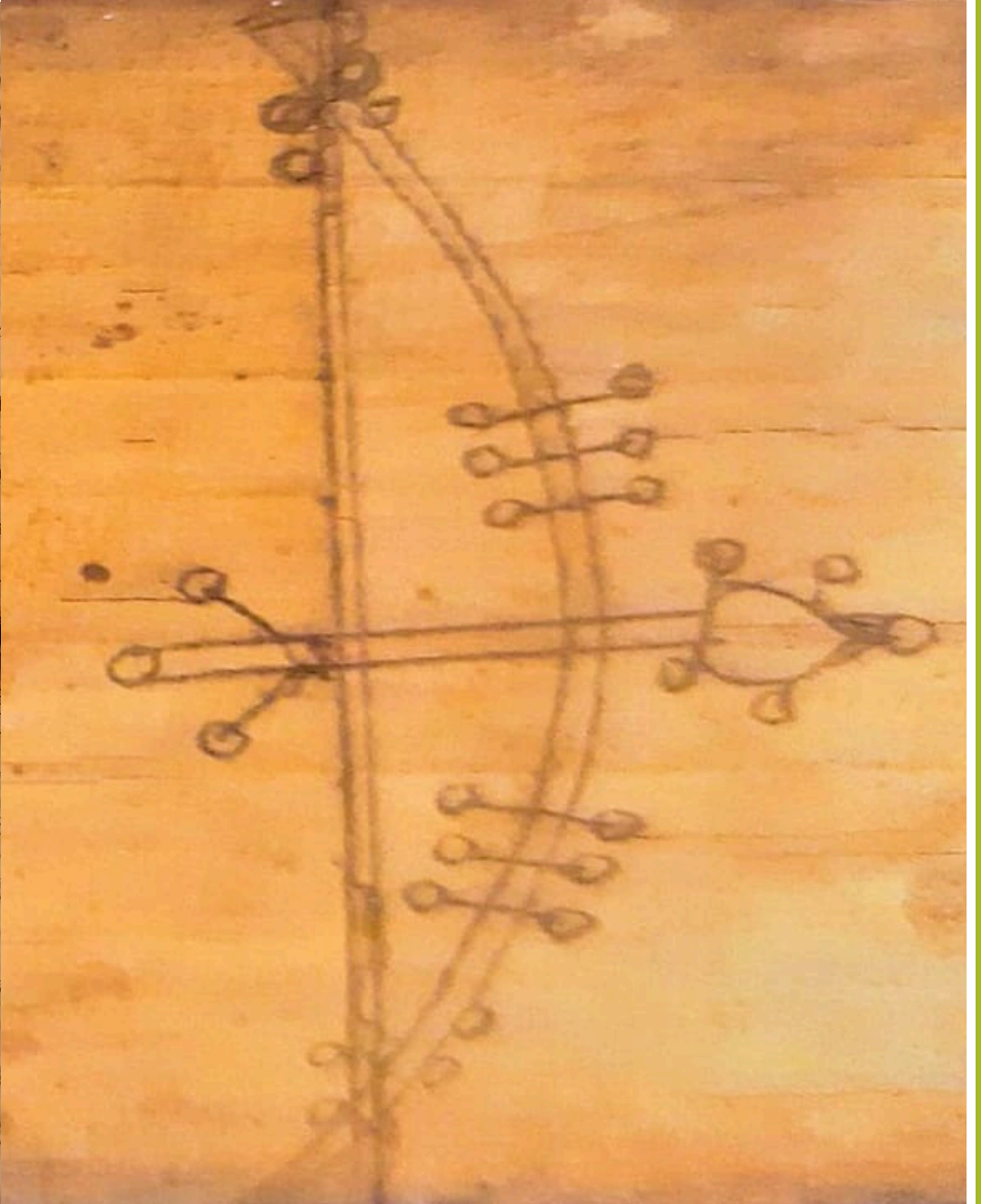
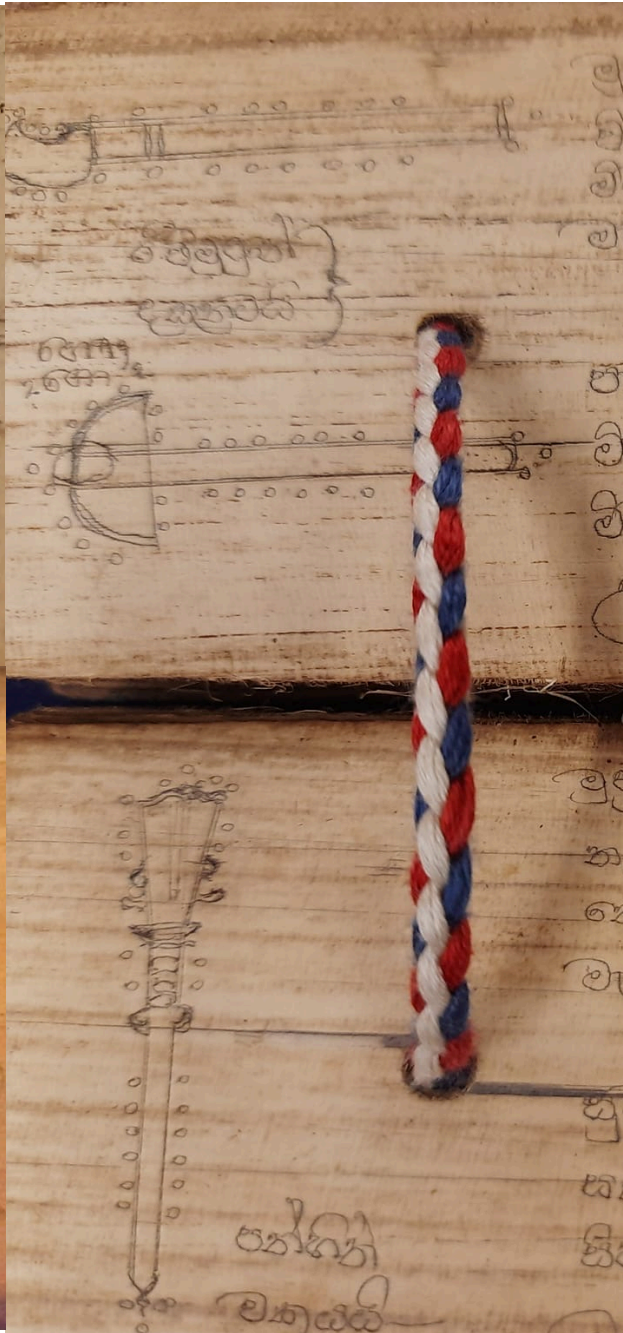
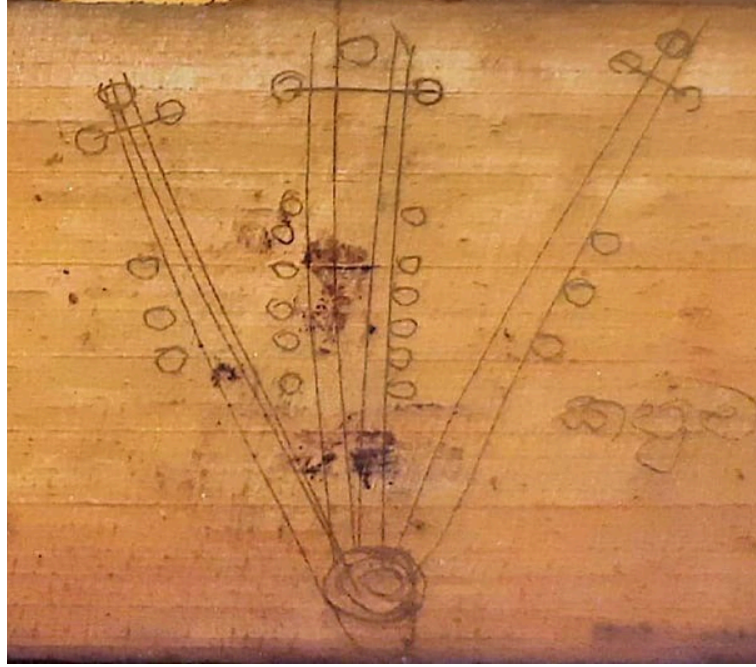
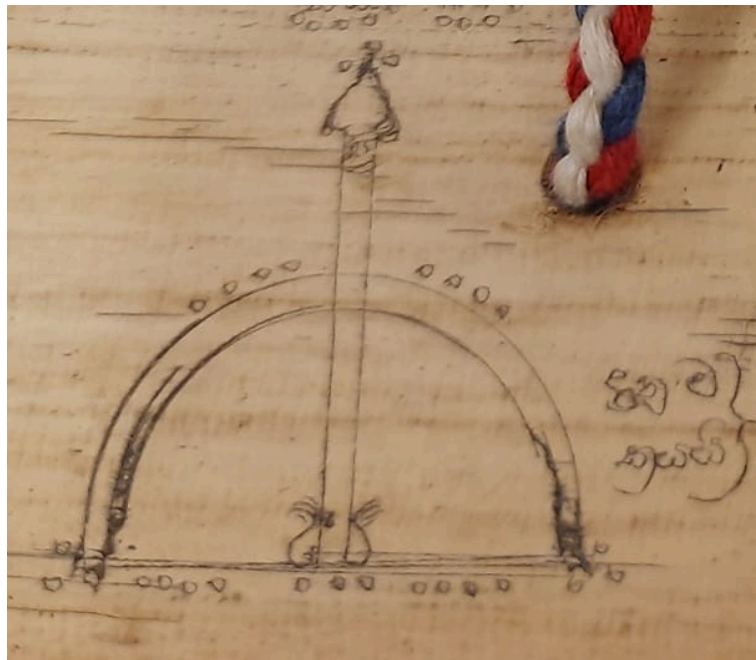




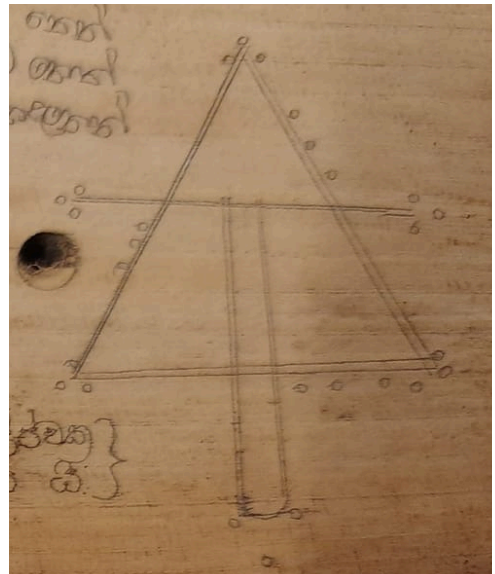
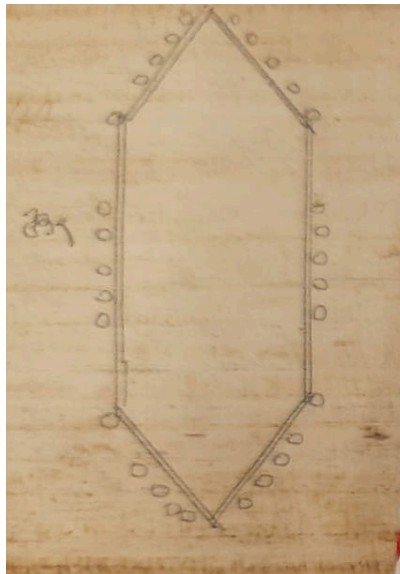
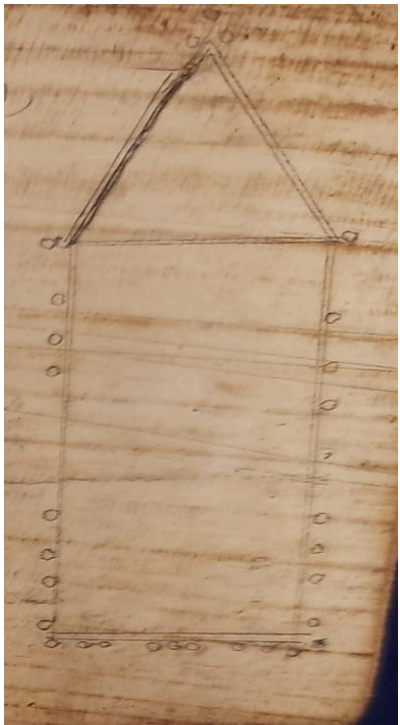
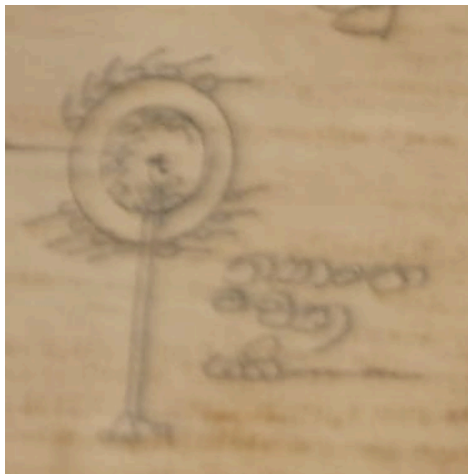
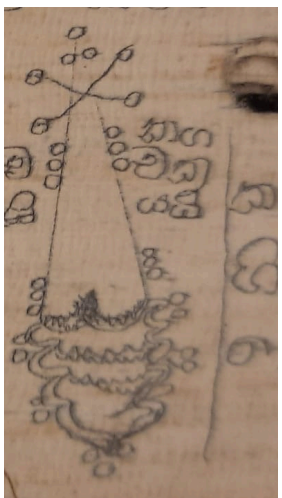
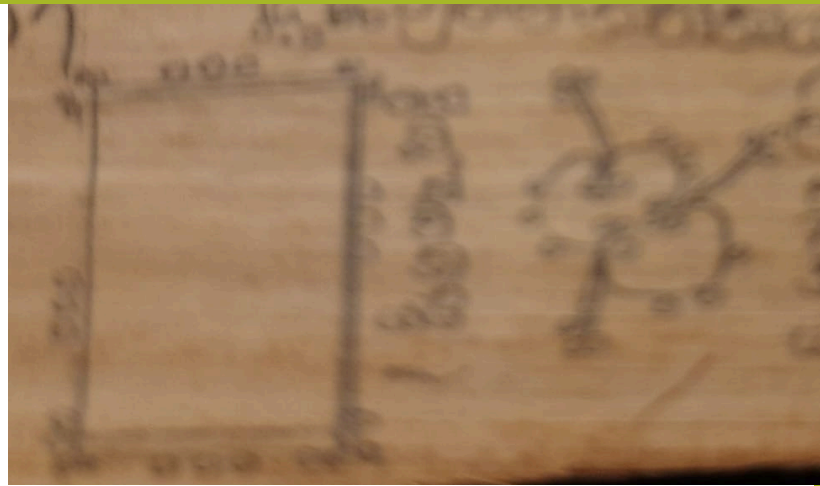
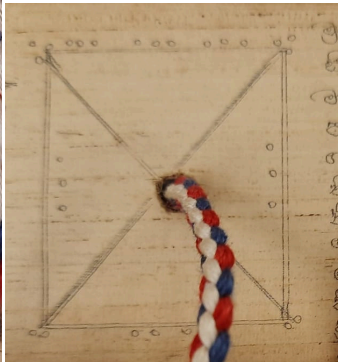
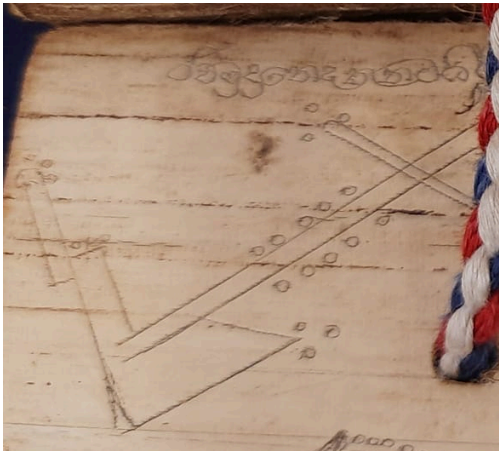
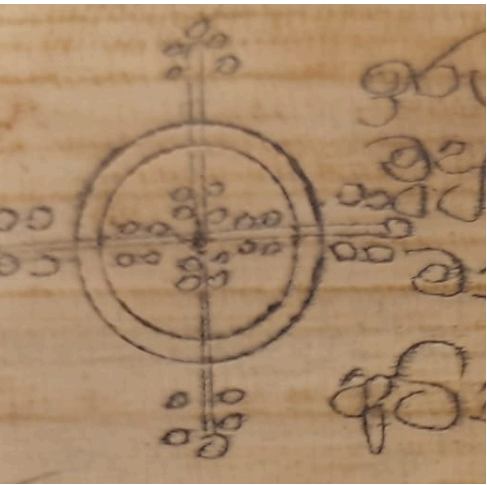
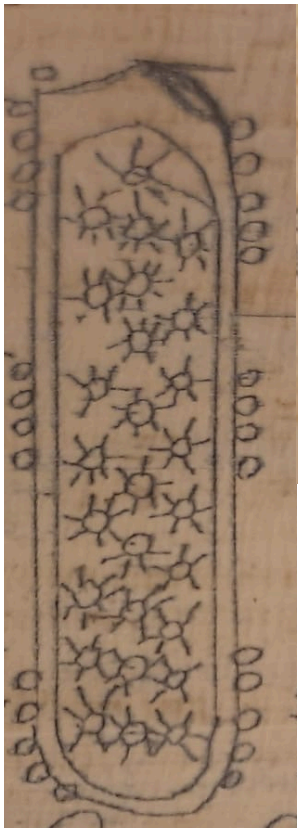




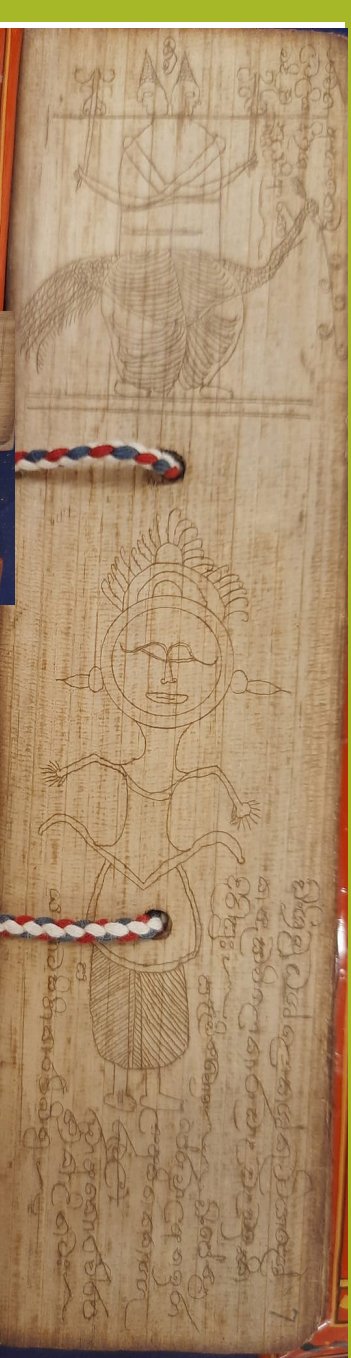






















If anybody is interested to get more details,  
please follow the link in Google Arts and Culture

## **Hela Weda Mahima: The Glory Indigenous Medicine in Sri Lanka**

<https://artsandculture.google.com/story/hela-weda-mahima-the-glory-of-indigenous-medicine-in-sri-lanka-ichcap/aAVxCNJK9sDILw?hl=en>







**My gratitude goes to  
Dr Casey Albert Wood,  
a great scholar, researcher, traveller,  
adventurer as well as a nature explorer  
who kept every single evidence  
preserved for our study.**