FROM TWO OLAS, or palm leaf manuscripts: 1, Burmese; 2, Sinhalese. Probably 18th Century. The sacred literature of both Burma and Ceylon is preserved in Pali, which has survived as the priestly language of the Southern Buddhist countries. Pali was the living tongue of the people of India at the time of the Gotama, but together with the religion the glories of which it still celebrates it gradually receded before the rising tide of Brahmanism. Hence scholars must search the monasteries of Burma, Ceylon and Siam for the sacred Buddhist records long since lost or destroyed throughout India. These records exist largely in the form of just such manuscripts as are here shown, prepared leaves from the Taliput (or Palmyra) palm upon which the scribe writes with a sharp stylus, applying a pigment to render the characters legible. Should the writing in these specimens become faint, it can be made visible by applying a little lampblack with the finger, afterwards wiping the leaf with a cloth. Both these specimens are from Buddhist canons, and in both cases the Pali has been transliterated into native characters. The short leaf is from Ceylon, while the long leaf, which we have been forced to fold, is from Burma.

The making of olas is a fast vanishing art. Like the book-manuscripts of other lands they are being superseded by the printed page, and already good specimens are becoming rare. Note the holes through which cords were inserted and wound around the manuscript to hold the leaves securely within their wooden bindings. However, as a Pali scholar amusingly observes, “it was discovered, after an experience of a thousand years or so, that the second series of holes in the ola were not really necessary to the preservation of the book-mass, and we often find that the second lot of perforations are ignored by the owner of the ola in wrapping his manuscript.”