

Preface

In the following pages, I shall present the results of research projects undertaken partly during my doctoral studies, and partly in the two and half years between my doctoral defence at the University of Turin in May 2013 and the final writing-up of this book in winter 2015. The *leitmotiv* of the four chapters comprising the volume that I now present to a broader readership – scholars of Indology, manuscript studies, and ritual studies – is the investigation of ritual practices involving, and in most cases primarily centred on, the use of manuscripts. Manuscripts and rituals, and thus manuscript and ritual cultures, are two areas in which Indic cultural regions have traditionally been very prolific, offering abundant material for different types of analysis. The perspective offered in this book focuses on the intersection and interplay of these two complex entities, for which I have adopted a textual and philological approach. The topics under discussion are thus examined through the prescriptions and descriptions found in the Sanskrit textual sources, with sparse references to epigraphical evidence both in Sanskrit and in other classical Indian languages. My main sources are normative texts addressed to an audience of lay practitioners which were composed in a time span of about ten centuries, ranging approximately from the sixth and seventh century to the seventeenth. They reflect the views of various communities contributing to the religious landscape of premodern India, though the most specific focus is on the literature of the Śaivas and the Dharmaśāstra. Buddhist texts are taken into consideration only as a point of comparison in the analysis of analogous phenomena in Śaiva contexts, while Jaina literature does not make an appearance within the sizeable body of sources on which this study is based.¹

¹ The need to narrow down the range of sources on which this research is based, as well as my specialization in different doctrinal and textual traditions and the availability of unpublished Śaiva texts containing valuable information on the topics under investigation, are the main reasons for my excluding the Jaina materials from the scope of this book. However, the study of the Jaina manuscript cultures is a promising field of study in which scholars have produced and continue to publish important pieces of scholarship. Above all, I refer the reader to Cort 1995, Balbir 2010 and 2014, and Hegewaldt 2015, all contributions based on a direct study of manuscripts of Jain texts within the context of their production and uses. A relevant point of comparison for the topics in this book is the passage from the *Svopajñāvr̥tti* by Hemacandra (twelfth century) to which Cort (1995, p. 78 fn. 7) calls attention. Here, commenting on *Yogaśāstra* 3.119, Hemacandra names the manuscripts of Jain scriptures as one of the three main objects that lay Śvetāmbaras must donate, the other two being the images of the Jina and the temples where these images are installed.

This book therefore aims to offer some insight into how the textual and religious traditions of India have treated manuscripts, regarded simultaneously as a means of transmitting knowledge and as objects of worship; moreover, it strives to deepen our understanding of the practices connected to the production and use of manuscripts amid the world view and material culture of the people who in fact first conceived and handled those manuscripts through which knowledge has been transmitted and preserved through the centuries. It is perhaps relevant to point out to the reader that this study on manuscripts and rituals had started out as one on textual criticism and traditional hermeneutics. Then, when I first started perusing the Dharmaśāstra literature in search of an ‘orthodox’ viewpoint on scriptures and authoritative texts, and the ways one should materially deal with their transmission, I stumbled upon the descriptions of the donative rituals and worship ceremonies that are examined in detail in the chapters of this volume. These texts in part provided an answer to some of the questions I had in mind — for example, what is the role of the manuscript in the transmission of a text, and how does its material form interact with its scriptural status. On the other hand, this set of sources also inspired new topics, such as the use of manuscripts in the same manner as icons, with the corollary identification of the manuscripts with the gods they are believed to embody; the equivalence between the purity of the manuscript-icon and the correctness of the text it transmits, whose pristine conditions the devotees are exhorted to preserve; and the magical agency of the manuscripts, which overlaps with that of the text when they are used in performative contexts.² These are just a few of the points that are touched upon in the textual sources used for this book. For the authors of these texts, it was especially relevant to establish a connection between the various ritual uses of manuscripts and religious institutions. On the one hand, monasteries are evoked not only as the repositories of manuscripts, but also as the primary location in which they were used — both in rituals and as teaching and learning tools; on the other hand, the selection of the texts whose manuscripts should be used in ritual is meant to set a boundary between orthodox and heterodox, authoritative and

² In applying this opposition between the ‘iconic’ and ‘performative’ aspects of the use of manuscripts, I refer to the tripartite ‘dimension of scriptures’ illustrated in Watts 2015. The third of such dimensions, which according to this categorization are intrinsic to scriptures and necessary to their nature and function as scriptures, would be the semantic aspect, which applies to the cases in which a scripture is actually used as a text. Throughout the book I will sporadically refer to this terminology in order to highlight the different functions with which the manuscript, not necessarily of a scripture, should be used according to the sources that I examine.

non-authoritative texts. In this case, the ritual practice overlaps with a hermeneutic stance, and the uses of a manuscript contribute to enhancing the status not only of the physical manuscript, but also of the text it contains. In the eyes of the lay devotees who sponsored these practices for their own spiritual and material benefit, the cultic contexts in which a manuscript was used was sufficient evidence for it being the receptacle of incontrovertible authority.

As I shall point out in the chapters of this book, several of the manuscripts that have been handed down to us and that are now used for textual studies and critical editions have been produced, copied, and preserved for reasons that go beyond the transmission of the text, and are rather concerned with the expectation of material and immaterial benefits. However, the study of the manuscripts alone is not sufficient to fully understand the ideology surrounding these practices, their genesis and development. Integrating the study of the manuscripts as objects with that of the manuscripts as carriers of texts, and thus turning to the information that the latter can provide, has proved to be the sole method conducive to having a more comprehensive idea of the culture in which these peculiar artefacts emerged and with which they actively interacted.

This book is the result of several long years of research and writing in three different European towns, namely Naples, Hamburg, and Leiden, where I could work under the guidance of the extremely knowledgeable and generous scholars whom I now have the privilege of calling my teachers. To them I want to express my most sincere gratitude. I especially want to thank Francesco Sfera (University of Naples), a teacher and a friend, who has been on my side since the very beginning of my Sanskrit studies, and has supported, challenged, and instructed me throughout the years leading up to the completion of this book. This research was prompted and nurtured by our countless conversations and reading sessions which have greatly enriched the past ten years of my life. Harunaga Isaacson (University of Hamburg) and Peter Bisschop (University of Leiden) have always been very generous with their time and knowledge, reading with me, perusing my work and sharing their opinions and suggestions. I will always be grateful for all the help they offered me, both while working on my doctoral thesis and in finalizing this book.

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