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Introduction

An eccentric approach to colophons

This volume programmatically sits at the centre of a number of blatant contradictions. First, it studies colophons in a number of written cultures of South, South-East and Central Asia that hardly seem to have a word for ‘colophon’. Even when some of these cultures have coined terms that could be translated as such, it is immediately clear that none of them fully overlaps with the term as we inherit it from the European traditions.¹ Finally, both considerations must be pondered against the fact that there is no actual agreement on the scholarly use of the term ‘colophon’, which is not consistently differentiated from other terms, such as ‘post-colophon’, ‘sub-colophon’, ‘subscription’, ‘explicit’, ‘(final) rubric’, ‘ex libris’, etc.² It is probably worth reflecting upon the fact that among the causes of what looks like a terminological pandemonium is the material realisation of all these paratexts, which in each manuscript tradition and sub-tradition find specific locations in which they are written within the manuscripts, as well as different *mises en page*, graphic characteristics, etc.

Nevertheless, this volume pushes forward and studies colophons as they emerge from the investigation of manuscripts produced in South, South-East and Central Asia. But how can an indigenous point of view be offered if we operate from a pre-concept – vague as it may be – of what a colophon is? Albeit this could very well remain an irreconcilable methodological conundrum, we propose to sever the proverbial Gordian knot with a Derridean sword. Instead of centring our investigation and the structuring of our data around an unattainable definition of

1 Cf. von Hinüber 2017, 47–48; Balbir, Formigatti, and Wangchuk in this volume. Furthermore, von Hinüber 2017 and Baums in this volume also offer a brief history of the first attestations of colophons found in manuscripts hailing from South Asia and draw insightful connections to colophons found in inscriptions.

2 On how some of these terms should be used in Latin, Greek, Syriac, Hebrew and Islamic codicology, see Agati 2009, 288–293 and Reynhout 2006, 20–25. More specifically, the term ‘post-colophon’ seems to have been introduced in Indological literature by Pratapaditya Pal in his 1978’s *The arts of Nepal II.: Painting* (a fact noted by Dominik Wujastyk in a blog post from 2012 [<https://cikitsa.blogspot.com/2012/01/colophons-names-of-text-portions-in.html>], accessed on 30 May 2022)).

colophon, we move eccentrically and work around a new centre, in particular that of a specific manuscript form, namely the pothi.³

Comparative pothi manuscript studies

Inspired by what COMSt (‘Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies’) has accomplished for the study of the codex in the eastern Mediterranean cultures and beyond,⁴ this volume intends to be a step into the direction of a more comprehensive and coordinated approach to the study of pothi manuscripts with contributions from all the written cultures of South, South-East and Central Asia that have historically made use of this book form. Despite the availability of numerous studies of colophons in single manuscripts as well as small and large collections,⁵ unfortunately it is rare for scholars engaged in the study of manuscripts hailing from the above-mentioned areas to find a common platform to present their materials in a way conducive to drawing a bigger picture, a picture that can help us observe similarities and differences, continuities and innovations in the manuscript cultures of the Indic world.⁶ In a way, colophons are our expedient of choice here to set the stage for a more ambitious codicological enterprise.

Before embarking on such an enterprise, we need to dwell a little longer on terminology and spare a few words regarding the terms ‘Indic’ and ‘pothi’.

Indic manuscripts

Unsurprisingly, there is no consensus on the geographical and cultural scope of the term ‘Indic’, even if we simply stick to the study of manuscripts. Just to give a couple of examples, Helmut Krasser used it to indicate North Indian manuscripts

³ See Derrida 1967, 409–428.

⁴ See Bausi et al. 2015.

⁵ For a pertinent bibliography, we refer the reader to the references provided in the contributions of this volume, where one can virtually find all the relevant literature on the topic mentioned.

⁶ There are of course notable exceptions, such as Berkwitz, Schober and Brown 2009, Harrison and Hartmann 2014, and Balbir and Szuppe 2014. However, none of them readily shares the same scope of the present volume, the former two being exclusively focused on Buddhist manuscript cultures, and the latter exceeding the scope of what we refer to by Indic manuscripts (see below).

in opposition to Tibetan manuscripts,⁷ whereas in a recent volume in this very series the same term is pragmatically used in a way that includes both manuscripts and woodblock prints from both India and Tibet.⁸

Here we go decisively farther and use the term to indicate a broad geographical area that includes South, South-East and Central Asia, despite the high variety of languages, scripts and traditions that characterises their manuscript cultures and, thus, differentiate them from one another. It is nevertheless possible – we maintain – to define a common ground on the basis of the clear historical and cultural connections within which they emerged and thrived and that finds its roots in the Indian subcontinent, hence our terminological choice. Such commonalities range from the extended trade networks – both on land and sea – that linked with one another the sub-regions of the areas in question to the spread of various forms of Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism together with their liturgical, iconographic and literary cultures. In this respect, the roles played by Sanskrit and Pali are of paramount importance as far as the broad and complex cultural phenomena of the Sanskrit and Pali cosmopolises are concerned.⁹ The pothi form adds to this list of commonalities and offers therefore a particularly apt point of reference to pursue our comparative agenda.

It goes without saying that the limits of this supposed Indic sphere are not only fuzzy but also porous, with endless connections with other cultural domains, both geo-cultural (Iran/Persia, China)¹⁰ and religious (Islam, Sikhism, Christianity),¹¹ throughout all the regions taken into consideration here.

Pothi manuscripts

A pothi is a stack of folios – prominently palm-leaves, paper sheets and birch-bark sheets, but many more materials have been also used – crafted in an oblong rectangular shape of different lengths and flipped upward (the writing on the versos would be upside down if the folios were to be flipped sideward). These folios can be placed between two wooden plates and bound by means of threads that run through the hole(s) pierced on their surfaces, as is the case for example for pothis made of palm-leaf and birch-bark. Alternatively, folios can be unbound

⁷ Krasser 2014, 301.

⁸ See Vergiani, Cuneo and Formigatti 2017.

⁹ See Pollock 2006 and Fräsch 2017, respectively.

¹⁰ See, for instance, Baums and Kasai in this volume.

¹¹ Concerning Islam, see for example van der Meij in this volume.

and the whole stack can be wrapped with a cloth, placed between two wooden plates, or inserted in a paper sleeve, as is typical of pothis made of paper, the surface of which has no holes for inserting threads.

It should be noted that the term ‘pothi’ is chosen for convenience’s sake, for it is widely understood by scholars of different fields as referring to the manuscript form just described. Naturally, each language of the cultural areas here under consideration has words meaning ‘pothi’ that are either loanwords eventually going back to Sanskrit *pustaka/pustikā* – from which, for example, North Indian languages derive *pothī* and Tibetan ultimately *pod* – or specific words, such as *lontar* (‘palm’) in Javanese, that are taken from the indigenous lexicon. In other languages, both kinds of words can coexist, such as in Tamil, where one has both *puttakam* (< Sanskrit *pustakam*) and *ēṭu* (‘leaf’).

Despite the fact that it can be confidently argued that in areas such as Tibet, South India, mainland South-East Asia, and Bali, the pothi has been – to say the least – the most widespread manuscript form until modern times and has been one of the most prominent forms in North India and Central Asia,¹² a scholarly approach or narrative that encompasses these regions and their pothis seems largely lacking.¹³

As in the case of the term Indic, here too we should acknowledge the porosity of the boundaries between manuscript forms and production technologies, without imposing an artificial and probably useless compartmentalisation. For example, scrolls from North-West India and leporellos from South-East Asia are essential in understanding the history of Indic manuscripts.¹⁴ Furthermore, Tibet introduced – following Chinese usage – large-scale woodblock printing during the second millennium and saw the production of a vast number of prints that imitated the main characteristics, in particular the oblong format, of pothis.¹⁵ This is to say that, despite having historically been the predominant manuscript form, pothis alone cannot tell the whole story in isolation and other forms also partake in the writing traditions that we encounter in South, South-East and Central Asia, and which we investigate here through the exploration of their colophons.

¹² For the marked Buddhist orientation of the pothi form in Central Asia, see for example Pinault in this volume.

¹³ For a recent attempt, see Ciotti 2021.

¹⁴ See Baums and Panarut in this volume, respectively.

¹⁵ About the interrelation between manuscript and woodblock prints in pothi forms, see Ciotti 2021, 879–880 and the relevant bibliography quoted there.

The syntax of colophons

Recent studies on colophons¹⁶ and on paratexts in general¹⁷ have shown that colophons can be investigated as sources for tracing the personal engagements of scribes with the culture they belong to, as texts that are part of the broader literary culture of the tradition in question and as examples of informal linguistic and graphic forms that may have no other attestations and whose interpretation presents many challenges,¹⁸ etc. However, a desideratum that remains almost unfulfilled, at least regarding the Indic world, is that of a typological and quantitative approach to the study of colophons – granted one of the most obvious obstacles in achieving this goal is simply the limited number of scholars engaging with the topic!¹⁹ Of particular relevance in this respect therefore is the overt engagement with quantitative codicology exemplified by several of the contributors to this volume, who have had the chance over the years to build up sizable corpora of colophons and engage in producing their editions, many of which are presented here either for the first time or in revised versions.²⁰ Thus extrapolating patterns or even clusters of patterns of characterising features and, in the long run, comparing them to one another would certainly help us gain a much more complete understanding of the broad and long history of writing in South, South-East and Central Asia.

What we are therefore interested in this volume are the constituent components of colophons (dates, personal names, place names, scribal maxims, invocations, etc.) and their actual position within the manuscripts (after the main text, at the beginning of the manuscript, in a specific folio used with the sole purpose to host the colophon, etc.). In this respect, we use the term ‘syntax’ in a

16 See, for example, Bahl and Hanß 2022 in general, and Cabezón 2001 for Tibet in particular.

17 See, for example, Ciotti and Lin 2016 in general, and Wilden and Anandakichenin 2020 for South Asia in particular.

18 For attempts at dealing with linguistic challenges, see also Franceschini, Ciotti, Schnake and van der Meij in this volume.

19 See, for example, von Hinüber 2017, 57, who writes in reference to Buddhist manuscripts: ‘In spite of a wealth of material available so far comparatively little research has been conducted on colophons. [...] Therefore, this interesting, important and very promising, but scattered material still awaits closer investigation’. There are of course laudable exceptions and, once again, we refer the reader to the lists of references in the contributions to this volume.

20 See, in particular, Formigatti, Balbir, Franceschini, Ciotti, Grabowsky, van der Meij, and Kasai in this volume. Among them, Formigatti and Balbir also offer brief, yet interesting methodological remarks on the perks and pitfalls of quantitative codicology. For a recent assessment of quantitative codicology in general, see Maniaci 2021, 1–32.

broad sense: an internal, at times merely grammatical order of the components of the colophons, as well as some sort of codicological order that places these paratexts in particular locations within the manuscripts. On the other hand, the absence of a strict syntax is also of interest, perhaps due to the difficulty in detecting patterns caused by the idiosyncratic nature of the scribes' activity,²¹ the prevalence of prosodic constraints over the order of the components when colophons are in metrical form,²² or the obvious challenges of providing an overview for an entire manuscript culture that spans centuries.²³

The main focus of this volume is on statements composed by scribes about dates, places and individuals involved in the production and use of the manuscripts. However, as above, here too the boundaries we set for our analyses cannot be but porous. For example, scribes can sometimes also be the owners of the manuscripts in which they wrote, hence ownership statements are also taken into consideration here.²⁴ At other times the distinction between the author of the text contained in a manuscript and its scribe is not neatly cut, perhaps because the scribe is also the author or simply because of the authorial impact that all scribes exert on the texts that they are copying.²⁵ Hence, text colophons, chapter colophons, author colophons, translator colophons, etc. are also investigated.²⁶

Contributions

The contributions in this volume have been arranged geographically. Given the variety of manuscript cultures they engage with, they are in fact representative enough to provide a comprehensive – though of course not exhaustive – overview of the colophonic practices of the Indic world.

We begin with South Asia, and in particular North India, with the contribution by Stefan Baums on the three earliest colophons found in birch-bark Gāndhārī scrolls, including a new reading of the colophon found in the so-called 'Khotan Dharmapada' and an assessment of the original position of the one in the so-called 'Gāndhārī Prajñāpāramitā'. Although not in pothi form, these scrolls

²¹ See, for instance, Schnake and van der Meij in this volume.

²² See, for instance, Franceschini and van der Meij in this volume.

²³ See, for instance, Wangchuk in this volume.

²⁴ See Ciotti in this volume.

²⁵ On the broad concept of 'copying manuscripts', cf. Brita et al. 2020. For a case of differences between scribal colophons and authorial colophons, see Formigatti in this volume.

²⁶ See, for example, Pinault and Wangchuk in this volume.

are the oldest extant manuscripts hailing from South Asia and are essential to set the scene in which pothis and their colophons will play the major part. Linking these three colophons with scribal traditions both contemporary (Achaemenid documents in Aramaic, and Buddhist inscriptions) and following (Gāndhārī Niya documents, Bactrian documents, and finally the Gilgit pothis),²⁷ Baums traces the expansion of the number of elements ‘from a simple indication of scribe, commissioner and witnesses to much more elaborate colophons that also include text titles and long lists of intended beneficiaries’, thus integrating Buddhist donative practices.

We then move to Nepal and the detailed article by Camillo A. Formigatti, which begins with an insightful discussion about the ambiguities that accompany the term ‘colophon’ (the term ‘final rubric’ is preferred, instead) and the Sanskrit terms that can to a certain extent be considered its equivalents. He then offers us a typological classification (‘through the lenses of quantitative codicology’) that identifies fifteen components in a large corpus of colophons from 121 manuscripts kept in Nepal and dated between 1320 and 1395 CE. Formigatti also provides an edition for each colophon.

The first section of this volume ends with Nalini Balbir’s contributions on Jain manuscript culture in Western India – surely one of the most prolific in the whole Indic world. Balbir introduces us to the colophons of this particular manuscript culture through a broad overview based on years of research in the field, interspersed with a number of telling examples. She also observes that the history of colophons is intertwined with that of the writing support, as a clear difference emerges between those found in palm-leaf pothis against paper pothis, a difference that corresponds to unmarked versus marked layouts. Balbir also discusses matters of linguistics, in particular the choice of the language and its register to compose colophons, their grammatical correctness (compared to what is usually perceived to be the standard), etc. Furthermore, the mention of individuals sponsoring the copying of the manuscript in question is thoroughly analysed, since it is of major importance in the Jain context. Note that similar analyses are also offered in the other articles of this volume for the relevant manuscript cultures, not only of course Buddhist, but also Hindu.

Shifting to South India we have two complementary articles that elucidate aspects of colophons found in manuscripts hailing from Tamil Nadu and containing texts both in Tamil and Sanskrit. These are the contributions by Marco Franceschini and Giovanni Ciotti, who over the past years have been building a

²⁷ Oskar von Hinüber has published on colophons in Gilgit manuscripts for years (see the relevant bibliography in von Hinüber 2017).

corpus of 910 scribal colophons, lending/borrowing statements, and ownership statements from 438 palm-leaf manuscripts. In this volume, Marco Franceschini offers an exemplary study on dates by analysing 518 dates, extrapolating their sub-modules, such as year, month, lunar calendrical elements, etc. and the patterns of the sequences in which these sub-modules are displayed. Sub-modules are here understood to be the combination of the ‘value’ of a calendrical element (name or numerical amount) and, when present, one or more of its ‘markers’, i.e. a symbol, word, or else, that identify the kind of calendrical element in question. The emerging patterns allow us to clear up the meaning of potentially ambiguous elements, as well as profile the manuscripts, divide them into significant groups, and potentially link them to their geographical origin and scribal background. Furthermore, Giovanni Ciotti ruminates on the way in which personal names occur in colophons written in Tamil. Their syntax can be ambiguous enough to prevent the immediate interpretation of the role played by the people named, in particular whether they refer to scribes, owners, or individuals playing both roles at the same time. This study, based on a corpus of 193 manuscripts, shows that the combination of philological, palaeographical and codicological observations can lead to a convincing disambiguation, but that at the same time methodological limitations are still to be overcome.

Approaching South-East Asia, we have three contributions that cover different manuscript traditions from the mainland regions. The first is a contribution by Javier Schnake on colophons found in a corpus of 373 manuscripts containing Pali texts written in Khom and Mül scripts. These are datable between the eighteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century and all hail from Central and Southern Thailand as well as Cambodia. After having described salient features of the colophons, such as their location within the manuscripts, their components and linguistic characteristics, Schnake maintains that it is not possible to extrapolate a regular syntax of such paratexts (versus, it is argued, colophons in comparable Burmese and Sinhalese manuscripts) and that what emerges is rather a ‘variable geometry’, which reflects practical concerns instead of readymade patterns.

Moving on to Laos, Volker Grabowsky offers us the most detailed survey of colophons found in Lao palm-leaf manuscripts to date, all of which are selected from the 1,220 manuscripts held at the repository of the Vat Maha That monastery in Luang Prabang, the old royal capital. Granted there is a marked similarity in the way the elements in colophons from Lao, Northern Thai (Lan Na), and Tai Lü manuscripts appear, Grabowsky is able to show the peculiar character of the corpus under investigation by means of an insightful quantitative analysis of the names of the scribes and, in particular, the sponsors mentioned in the colophons.

This opens a window on the whereabouts and social background of these individuals, that interestingly comprise a relatively high percentage of women and members of the royal family.

With Peera Panarut's contribution we enter the Siamese royal court to investigate manuscripts produced by royal scribes. While both palm-leaf pothis and *khoei*-paper leporellos have been produced in this particular setting, Panarut focuses on the latter. This choice does bring us outside of the domain of pothis manuscripts, but encourages us to think of the two forms as coexisting and complementing each other. In general, we should keep in mind that in virtually no culture pothis represented the only type of written artefact, perhaps simply due to the copresence of inscriptions on rock or metal, or the acquaintance with other forms.²⁸ In the case of the Siamese royal court, the difference in form does correspond to a division of labour, as religious texts are reserved for palm-leaf pothis, whereas secular and literary texts are written on *khoei*-paper leporellos. Furthermore, colophons in leporellos show specific features, such as a rather consistent internal structure that includes date, names or titles of the royal scribes, editors and proof-readers, the absence of informal, rustic statements, such as imprecations against the misuse of manuscripts (versus monastic manuscripts produced in the larger Siamese manuscript culture), and the use of the royal language register.

Dick van der Meij then brings us to Maritime South-East Asia with a study based on pothis from the islands of Bali and Lombok (Indonesia), focusing on their dates in particular. These manuscripts contain either Hindu or Islamic texts and are for the large majority produced in the nineteenth and twentieth century. The syntax of their colophons – understood as the internal order of its components – is difficult to establish, in particular as far as manuscripts from Bali and the Balinese community in Lombok are concerned. Their length is in fact unpredictable ranging from a few words to rather complex statements. On the other hand, the position of the colophons within the manuscripts seems to be quite regular. They are exclusively at the end of the texts in manuscripts from Bali and the Balinese community in Lombok, but can often be both at the beginning as well

28 Rolls/scrolls are rather ubiquitous in written cultures, but one can also think of the bewildering variety of coexisting manuscript forms in Dunhuang (see Galambos 2020), the almost inextricable symbiosis between codex and Islam, which has of course reached almost all corners of South, South-East and Central Asia since centuries, or the concomitant availability of materials that would permit the production of leporellos, as in the case in point, but also in Central Asia, Nepal, and Maritime South-East Asia (concerning the latter, see for example van der Putten and Zollo 2020).

as at the end of manuscripts with Islamic content from the Sasak community in Lombok.

Finally, we reach Central Asia and its vast array of languages, cultures, and written artefacts. Dorji Wangchuk provides us with a comprehensive overview of colophons in Tibetan manuscripts and woodblock prints, the latter – as mentioned above – maintaining the pothi form and, at least in part, its scribal features. Wangchuk details the complexities of identifying a Tibetan counterpart for the term ‘colophon’ and very informatively investigates the various types of (para)texts that can be subsumed under such a label, namely author colophons, translator colophons, editor colophons, printing colophons, scribal colophons, treasure/revelation colophons, etc. Wangchuk also attempts to outline the essential features of the colophons in question, albeit conscious of the limitations set by the large number of types of colophons taken into consideration, their diachronic variation, and the remarkable number of exceptions.

Moving further north into the Tarim Basin, Georges-Jean Pinault offers us the first thorough study of Tocharian colophons found in pothis. Due to the damages suffered by manuscripts, only ‘sub-colophons’ have been preserved, i.e. colophons appended to the end of text chapters. In this respect, Pinault’s contribution shows that an *a priori* distinction author/scribal colophon or text/chapter colophon can be misleading: names of donors are sometimes recorded in the sub-colophons, too, thus indicating that manuscript- rather than text-related information can be found not only at the end of the manuscript itself, but can also be interspersed between the sections of the text(s) it contains. Furthermore, Pinault shows how certain metrical colophons link to their oral performance, as the names of the metres are also given.

The volume ends with Yukiyo Kasai’s contribution on Old Uyghur Buddhist manuscripts, which have been copied in manuscripts of various forms probably beginning with the codex of Manichean influence and transitioning to concertina and pothi forms as the conversion to Buddhism and the closer connection with Tocharian and Chinese cultures took place. In this respect, Old Uyghur manuscripts bring us to one of the outer limits of the pothi sphere, right at its above-mentioned porous boundaries. Here colophons and their components have been strongly – but by no means passively – influenced by the Chinese Buddhist culture, with the Indic component having already gone through several layers of processing.

Many more pertinent manuscript cultures could be included in this volume. However, we are confident that the richness of case studies we are able to present will not only prove adequate to permit the reader to obtain a detailed overview on the state of the art of the research on colophons from South, South-East and

Central Asia, but also incite efforts to enlarge the pool of pertinent examples and thus extend and deepen our understanding of manuscript cultures that have made use of pothis, aiming at breaching the divide that often affects some of the scholarly traditions devoted to their study.

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