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TOWARDS A DISCIPLINE OF COLOPHONOLOGY AND COLOPHONOGRAPHY

Since 2016, we have been holding workshops on Middle Eastern manuscript culture at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, twice interrupted by Covid during 2020 and 2021. The purpose of our meetings is to provide a space for scholars to discuss various aspects of manuscript production, use, and transmission, concentrating on the scribe and the user rather than the main literary texts found in manuscripts. Our first meeting was in 2016 on allographic/garshunographic writing systems; the results were published in two special issues of *Intellectual History of the Islamicate World* (Vol. 7, Number 2–3, 2019 and Vol. 8 Number 1, 2020) under the title *Writing in My Own Script: Allographic and Garshunographic Systems in Late Antiquity*. The second meeting in 2018 was on dots, marginalia, and paratextual elements and the third meeting in 2019 on scribal habits; results from both of these meetings were published in the volume *Scribal Habits in Near Eastern Manuscript Traditions* (Gorgias Press, 2020). Our fourth meeting, planned for 2020 but postponed due to the Covid pandemic to 2022, was on colophons. We now present its outcomes in this volume.

Late antique scholars and medievalists who work on manuscripts as primary sources are very much familiar with the art of the colophon. But the history of the colophon dates back much further than late antiquity, to ancient history when scribes in ancient Mesopotamia chiseled colophons on cuneiform tablets as early as the mid-third millennium BCE. Two papers in this collection—one by Szilvia Sõvegiarto the other by Jon Taylor et al.—cover the BCE Mesopotamian period. At their inception, colophons were writing production records: who wrote what, when and where? In a way, they are the earliest formation of what we now call metadata. Ancient colophons even provide statistics: how many lines were written in a particular work? As we enter late antiquity, colophons take on a life of their own and begin to acquire literary properties—snippets but nevertheless literary objects. They developed into an art form with distinctive formulaic phraseology. In some traditions, scribes began to record historical events that occurred just before or during the production of a manuscript, events that otherwise would be lost to history. Readers and users also began to insert colophons in existing manuscripts, creating a plethora of colophon types.

How are we to approach the study of colophons? At one extreme, one can collect a large set of colophons and perform distance reading methodologies to draw
general conclusions about the collected colophons or their intellectual milieu. Depending on one’s inquiry, colophons can be approached at different degrees of the macro-micro analysis trajectory. Some of the studies presented here aim to tell us something about communities at large. Ali Langroudi focuses on West Syriac Persian speakers as a community and uses the colophons they produced to reconstruct their history. Ephrem Ishac goes beyond the main scribes who produced the primary colophons and focuses on secondhand colophons which intersect with the world of documentary sources: agreements, canons, and letters, scattered here and there at the front and end leaves of manuscripts. Menachem Katz and Hillel Gershuni investigate Hebrew and Aramaic colophons produced by Jews, especially ones that occur at the beginning of manuscripts. Evelyn Burkhardt studies the Samaritans; not wanting to introduce additional texts into their scripture, they found ingenious ways to represent colophons without adding texts.

Several papers in this collection focus on specific scribes. This is indeed most welcome as scholarship tends to concentrate on literary authors who produced larger texts. But it is the scribes who bring us these texts and learning something about their life or intellectual environment gives us a better understanding of how the text was utilized throughout history. Some scribes may already be known to us from history, either because they held a religious position or if they were also the authors of literary texts. But most scribes remain in obscurity. Habib Ibrahim reconstructs the life of Marqus of Aleppo, a seventeenth century scribe who wrote in Arabic. Víctor de Castro León investigates ʿAlī b. Ahmad b. Muḥammad al-Sharafi through three colophons that were previously trivialized in scholarship. Shiva Mihan illuminates us with hitherto unknown factoids about Azhar, the scribe who was instrumental in the development of the nastaʿliq hand, all based on the colophons he produced. Aslisho Qurboniev and Gowaart van den Bossche tell us about the scholarly acts during the early Ilkhanid state through the prism of one scribe named Buzurgmihr. Robert Vanhoff tells us the story of two brothers who produced a Hebrew manuscript, Shlomo b. Buya‘ah writing the consonantal text and his brother Ephrayim providing the dotting and other paratextual material. These are otherwise unknown or at best obscure names. But their colophons secured for them a place in history and a role in our scholarly dramas.

Indeed, early humanists of the Early Modern period were well aware of the value of colophons to the degree that some of them began to mimic traditional colophons, using phraseology found in historical colophons, and produced mini colophons in print form. And manuscript catalog writers, especially those of the nineteenth century, almost always produced snippets of important factoids in their printed catalogs. Nick Posegay focuses his study on colophons produced by the movable-type printing business.

But comprehensive studies of the colophon as an object—producing a typology of colophons as well as determining their formal properties—did not take place in earnest until recently, and even then, such studies are rare. An overview of “the field” as it stands is given here by Miriam L. Hjälm and Peter Tarras; they also provide a bibliography of colophon studies for Armenian, Arabic, Coptic, Ethiopic,
Georgian, and Syriac. When studying the colophon itself as an object one can drill into its text as any other piece of literature, studying various aspects of its literary style and function, as well as linguistic features that distinguish colophon texts from the main text found in a manuscript. This is particularly interesting in multi-lingual environments, or when the scribe’s mother tongue is connected to the primary text of the manuscript in a diglossic relationship. Here, the colophon is an essential linguistic source into how the scribe’s native tongue interacts with the higher literary register of the manuscript text. An exemplary study of the literary and linguistic features of colophons can be found here by Khachik Harutyunyan for Armenian. F. Redhwan Karim and Yousry Elseadawy utilize stylistic features, this time in Arabic colophons, to demonstrate how one can reconstruct scribal bibliographical details. Hamid Bohloul and Sonja Brentjes present a microtypology of colophons based on keywords found in the colophon text.

While the history of early literature is dominated by men, colophons give us the opportunity to peek into the lives of women, be it scribes (see the “female scribe” in Jon Taylor’s contribution), women who were active in financing the production of manuscripts, or women who saved a manuscript by purchasing it and donating it to a monastic library. Melissa Moreton dedicates her entire study to female scribes in Early Modern Italy. David Zakarian utilizes colophons as a source for Armenian women history.

Whatever you would like to get out of colophons, we hope that there will be at least one paper here that will draw your attention. If not, there are enough literary snippets quoted to keep you entertained.

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