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Christian Oriental Colophons: Notes for a Structural Analysis (with a Look to the Past): A Preface

Paola Buzi, Sapienza Università di Roma

The articles collected in this ‘thematic section’ of the present issue of the *COMSt Bulletin*, dedicated to Greek, Coptic, Ethiopic and Armenian colophons, represent an outcome of the round table *I colofoni cristiani orientali: per un’analisi strutturale*, which took place at Sapienza University of Rome on 14 February 2020, as the fourth annual conference organised by the ‘PATHs’ project.¹ The round table also included interventions on colophons of the Syriac, Christian Arabic, Georgian and Slavonic manuscript traditions, which however are not published here.

It was certainly not the first scientific meeting dedicated to colophons, and to oriental colophons in particular,² but compared to the previous occasions its purpose was very targeted, aiming to a strict comparative analysis of the structural elements that compose the colophons of the various Christian oriental traditions and trying to answer questions like: Which are the ‘basic elements’ for a colophon to be considered as such? Within the various traditions of the Christian Near East, is it possible to identify a sort of ‘standard colophon’? What denomination is it possible to attribute to the textual sec-

- 1 See <<http://www.paths.uniroma1.it>>, where a detailed programme is also available. The three previous meetings—the conference *The Coptic Book between the 6th and the 8th Century*, Sapienza Università di Roma – Academia Belgica, 21–22 February 2017, the round table *Linking Manuscripts from the Coptic, Ethiopian and Syriac domain: Present and Future Synergy Strategies*, organised in collaboration with the projects *Beta mašāḥaft* and *TraCES* (Hamburg), Universität Hamburg, 23–24 February, and the conference *Coptic Literature in Context. The Contexts of Coptic Literature. Late Antique Egypt in a Dialogue between Literature, Archaeology, and Digital Humanities*, which took place at Sapienza Università di Roma on 25–27 February 2019—have been published respectively in *Adamantius*, 24 (2018), 6–210, *COMSt Bulletin*, 4/1 (Spring 2018 = *Linking Manuscripts from the Coptic, Ethiopian and Syriac Domain: Present and Future Synergy Strategies*), 39–58, 69–78, 115–120; and Buzi 2020.
- 2 The notion of ‘oriental’ follows the reflections and terminological choices of the COMSt project (and consequently of this journal). It therefore ‘embraces all non-Occidental (non-Latin-based) manuscript cultures which have an immediate historical (‘genetic’) relationship with the Mediterranean codex area. This definition first excludes all East-Asian manuscript cultures, which are also ‘oriental’ in a broader sense but which do not share the relationship with the Mediterranean codex area’. Bausi and Gippert 2015, 2–3.

tions that compose it? Is it possible to follow the formal evolution over the centuries of this textual element within a specific oriental culture? Are there points of contacts between two or more oriental traditions, as some recurring formulas seem to suggest? Are there any original ancient terms designating these textual categories in the individual manuscript traditions?

In a few words, the meeting was not a free topic conference, dedicated to colophons in general, but a compelling comparison on what the different manuscript traditions of oriental Christianity have or do not have in common regarding their structure and function, and, at the same time, an in-depth analysis of the specificities of each tradition.³

The structural architecture of colophons—or their syntax, to quote the title of a recent conference on Southern, South-eastern and Central Asian colophons⁴—was therefore at the core of the discussion among specialists—speakers and discussants—of Greek, Syriac, Coptic, Ethiopic, Armenian, Georgian, Slavonic, and Christian Arabic manuscript traditions.

As always happens in challenging enterprises, only few questions could be properly answered, while some others emerged, and old ‘comfortable’ concepts and categories had to be reformulated, as the contribution by Marilena Maniaci clearly shows.

Studies on Oriental Colophons: A Short History of the Last Thirty Years

It is probably not useless to re-trace some of the steps in the reflection on colophons—not necessarily Christian and not exclusively oriental—so far.

It is mainly from the 1990s that scholars have started to more or less systematically investigate this paratextual category,⁵ and it is not surprising that such enquiry moved its first steps in the field of Greek and Latin manuscript studies.

In 1995 Emma Condello and Giuseppe De Gregorio edited the volume *Scribi e colofoni. Le sottoscrizioni di copisti dalle origini all'avvento della stampa*, that collected the proceedings of a conference which had taken place two years earlier in Erice.⁶ The volume included a certain number of articles

3 In order to stimulate an effective dialogue the speakers had received in advance a list of the structural aspects of colophons that would have been discussed, in a comparative way, during the meeting.

4 See below.

5 The definition of ‘paracontent’ instead of ‘paratext’ has been recently proposed as an ampler category. See Ciotti, Kohs, Wilden and Wimmer 2018.

6 Condello and De Gregorio 1995.

dedicated to oriental traditions—Greek, Slavonic, Armenian, Hebrew—, but it did not envisage a real comparison among them.⁷

About fifteen years later, in 2009, at Hamburg University an interdisciplinary conference entitled ‘On Colophons’ was organized. For the first time a very wide range of disciplines was involved, from mediaeval Latin and Ethiopic traditions to those of the far East, such as the Tibetan, the Japanese Buddhist and the Chinese. Unfortunately, the proceedings were never published, but the concept of the scientific meeting envisaged a comparative approach focused on some of the most stimulating issues related to the study of this textual category, as the organizer, Jörg B. Quenzer, explained in a report of the event:

...Taking into consideration the enormous differences between the various manuscript cultures, the main objective of the conference was not to arrive at a general characterisation, but to present and discuss the individual traditions. A number of guidelines, however, were provided to the participants in advance, as for example, the genesis of the genre, typological and systematic standards, particularities of native terminology, and specifics of usage... Strong emphasis was placed on the difference between textual and codicological approaches to the phenomenon of colophons. Various misunderstandings could be traced back to inconsistency of terminology in this regard. Close relations to other paratexts were observed in several manuscript cultures, especially with regard to titles.⁸

Within the activities of the networking project *Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies*, funded by the European Science Foundation, the team dedicated to Codicology, coordinated by Marilena Maniaci, organized a workshop in Arles (9–13 October 2012) entitled ‘The Shaping of the Page, the Scribe and the Illuminator at Work, The Making of Oriental Bookbindings and their Conservation’. Colophons were also dealt with, although not in a systematic way, since in that context, mainly for a matter of time and space, they were taken into consideration together with many other aspects of the manufacture of a manuscript. The results of the workshop converged in the manual produced at the end of the project.⁹

Also in 2012, the conference *Colofoni armeni a confronto. Le sottoscrizioni dei manoscritti in ambito armeno e nelle altre tradizioni scrittorie*

7 Section ‘VII. Scribi e colofoni in aree geografiche non latine’ included E. Gamillscheg, ‘Struktur und Aussagen der Subskriptionen griechischer Handschriften’; N. Golob, ‘A Few Comments on Glagolic Colophons (14th and 15th Centuries)’; M.E. Stone, ‘Colophons in Armenian Manuscripts’; A.M. Piemontese, ‘Colophon persiani fioriti e illustrate’; M. Beit-Arié, ‘Colophons in Hebrew Manuscripts: Source of Information on Book Production and Text Transmission’.

8 Quenzer 2009.

9 Bausi A. et al. 2015 (Chapter 1 – Codicology, edited by M. Maniaci).

del mondo mediterraneo, organized at Bologna University by Anna Sirinian, took place. It resulted, four years later, in the first systematic collection of studies on oriental colophons.¹⁰ The meeting aimed at a specific objective, that is investigating whether the use of Armenian copyists to add extremely long and textually rich colophons found elements of comparison in other written cultures of the Mediterranean world. The ‘Armenocentric’ perspective found justification in the remarkable diffusion of the colophons in the Armenian manuscript tradition, in which this paratext appears as a real literary genre in itself.¹¹

The *Hugoye Symposium III. Colophons in the Syriac Tradition*, which took place in the Beth Mardutho Research Library, Piscataway (NJ), on 16 May 2014, was exclusively dedicated to Syriac colophons, as its title suggests. Most of the papers dealt with specific texts and literary genres or newly established databases. Some of them have been published in *Hugoye. Journal of Syriac Studies*, 18 (2015).¹²

Lastly, an attempt to analyse the structural features of the colophons of a determined tradition was represented by *The Syntax of South, Southeast and Central Asian Colophons: A First Step Towards a Comparative and Historical Study of Manuscripts in the Poṭhi Format*, a conference that took place, once more, at Universität Hamburg (11–13 October 2018). Again, the concept of the conference was very meaningful:

The expression ‘syntax of colophons’ in the title of this workshop refers to the questions of which basic elements can be distinguished in colophons (e.g. dates, names of scribes, places of copying, scribal maxims and other formulaic expressions in the case of scribal colophons) and in which order they are arranged. We also include formulas which signify that the text or one of its sections is completed (in this case, one may use labels such as ‘sub-colophon’ or ‘chapter colophon’). Worthwhile are also attempts to distinguish and characterize heterogeneous colophons in the end of manuscripts or xylographs, in particular colophons of different actors involved in text production and transmission, and examinations of their arrangement, interplay and degrees of authenticity...¹³

10 Sirinian, Buzi and Shurgaia 2016.

11 Sirinian 2016, 7.

12 See e.g. McCollum 2015, Boero 2015, Carlson 2015, Muraviev 2015, Brock 2015.

13 Programme Abstracts (see the web cache version at <<https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:ROgczrPGJ5gJ:https://www.manuscript-cultures.uni-hamburg.de/cal-details/Programme%2520Abstracts%2520The%2520Syntax%2520of%2520Colophons%25202018.pdf>>, last accessed 15 February 2022).

‘The question of which basic elements can be distinguished in colophon’ was also the crucial issue that has inspired the round table of Rome.¹⁴ The decision to limit the comparative analysis to Christian late antique and mediaeval oriental cultures was determined by the desire to have, as far as possible, a common ground of comparison. Even in these circumstances, however, the specific features of each manuscript culture emerged.

At the same time, the meeting was the occasion to reflect on the terminology, starting from the same definition of ‘colophon’.

The Persisting Difficulty in Defining What a Colophon is

Even before attempting a comparative trans-tradition analysis, the effort of defining what a colophon is represents a challenge in itself, since even about the appropriateness of the term, which is generally used to designate this textual element, there is a lively debate and certainly not a total agreement.¹⁵

As is well known, the notion of ‘colophon’ originally belonged to the phenomenon of early typography, indicating a ‘subscription’ at the end of a book, used especially in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, to provide the title or subject of the work, its author, the name of the printer, and the date and place of publication (or only some of these data).¹⁶ Only later, from the eighteenth century onwards, the term was applied to manuscripts.

To make things even more complex, it won’t be useless to recall that the term ‘colophon’ is not used only in classical—i.e. Greek and Latin¹⁷—and Christian oriental manuscripts studies, but is largely employed also in disciplines that deal with ancient oriental studies, such as Assyriology, Sumerology, Egyptology, Hittitology, and so on, with their related manuscript features.¹⁸

14 A conference entitled *Colophons in Middle Eastern Manuscripts*, organized by Sabine Schmidtke and George A. Kiraz, took place at the Institute for Advanced Study of Princeton University on 2–3 September 2021.

15 See again the contribution of Marilena Maniaci for sharp reflections on the terminological matters.

16 Spencer Kennrad 1902.

17 Reinhout 2006.

18 Leichty 1964, 147–155; Hunger 1968. It is noteworthy that within the scientific activities of the Research group D05–Formatting Contents of the Cluster of Excellence ‘Understanding Written Artifacts’ at Universität Hamburg, a project, coordinated by Szilvia Sövegjártó, is dedicated to *Colophons in Sumerian and Akkadian Literary Manuscripts from 3rd and 2nd Millennium BCE Mesopotamia* and pays particular attention to colophons of literary works. The aim of the project is to investigate the intertwining of literary production and the scribal practice of inserting colophons during the third and second millennium BCE (<<https://www.csmc.uni-hamburg.de/written-artefacts/research-fields/field-d/rfd05.html>>).

If on the one hand it is a widely shared opinion that classical, late antique and mediaeval colophons represent a different phenomenon compared to the ‘ancestors’ of ancient Near East, on the other hand it is undeniable that there are some points of similarities in the construction of colophons of so different (and chronologically distant) traditions that in part justify the use of the same term.

It is a matter of fact that these paratexts were not an invention of the ‘cultures of the codex’ and that the necessity ‘to actualize’ the text, assigning to it some additional coordinates, goes back at least to the second millennium BCE.

To make an example, Ancient Mesopotamian scribes frequently appended a colophon to their copies, above all if the texts were scientific and mathematical (less frequently to literary texts).¹⁹ This practice was more common in the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian periods, but more simple colophons were used also in earlier times (Old Babylonian period, c.2000–1600 BCE).²⁰

In the first millennium BCE, for instance

Mesopotamian scribes used to add highly developed colophons to their works, especially when writing scholarly texts, for example, on medicine, divination or astral sciences. This kind of postscript, often located at the end of the text, provides modern historians with a plethora of information relative to the scribe who wrote the text, the place where he composed it, the content of the composition, the original document copied (if any), and the owner of the tablet. Other writing practices are particularly remarkable, such as noting long compositions on series of dozens of numbered tablets, in the same way as we number the pages of a book. These practices reflect a very specific context of that time: that of the creation, enrichment, management and maintenance of large libraries. Organization into series, the presence of colophons, as well as the existence of catalogues, are considered as the three criteria for determining that a set of documents comes from a library.²¹

19 Colophons added to literary texts are much less common. See Lambert 1957, 1–14.

20 ‘Old Babylonian colophons are much less systematic, codified, and informative than they are in the first millennium. In the mathematical documents, colophons are generally placed at the bottom of the reverse of a tablet, and are separated from the main text by a blank space, a single line or a double line. The colophon can also be located on an edge of the tablet. Some additional information is sometimes included in the text itself. This is the case, for example, for catchlines, incipits, or labels [...] Another important component of colophons is what one might call a ‘title’ or a ‘label’, that is, a key word or short phrase that indicates the content of the text to which the colophon is attached. The label may also be included in the text, as an incipit or as an entry of the items, or noted in a postscript. [...] Other components of the colophons can be the number of items such as lines (m u), procedures (*kibsu*) or sections (i m - šu)’ (Proust 2012, 127). Very frequent are also the colophons from Uruk written between 250 and 150 BCE.

21 Proust 2012, 123–124.

In ancient Mesopotamia the colophon has also the task to order the clay-tablets within a library or an archive, a fact that, due to the book form, is an indispensable necessity, because often the tablet is part of a series, many compositions requiring more than one tablet to be contained.

Even though the Mesopotamian colophons are devoid of the ideological and votive features that are proper of the finalities of a Christian oriental colophon, they contain elements that we can compare to later manuscript traditions:

‘Maximally, a colophon might contain all the following information:

1. The catch-line
2. The name of the series and number of the tablet
3. The number of lines on the tablet
4. The source of the copy
5. The name of the owner of the tablet
6. The name of the scribe making the copy
7. The reason for making the copy²²
8. The course of blessing
9. The date
10. Disposition of the copy

Minimally, a colophon might contain only one of the above categories’.²³

The Mesopotamian colophon, therefore, normally includes the name of the scribe responsible for the copy, together with his title and genealogy, up to the fourth generation.

Another element that frequently appears is the declaration of completeness of the text. Expressions like ‘according to its original, written, checked, and copied’ are quite common, a fact that recurs also in ancient Egyptian colophons, although in this tradition the name of the scribe is seldom mentioned, at least until the eighteenth dynasty.

The extant ancient Egyptian colophons²⁴ date from the Middle Kingdom to the Roman Period—although more than half of them date back to the Ramesside Period and has been found in Deir el Medina (Western Thebes)—and most of them seem to have the main aim to certify the authoritativeness, completeness and therefore reliability of the text.

22 On the terminology of first millennium colophons and the reasons why a text was copied see Pearce 1993, 185–193. According to colophons, scribal training and practice, and reading for a pupil are among the most frequent finalities of a copy of a text. It is possible to follow the carrier of a scribe through the colophons that he has copied. See Verderame 2008, 51–67.

23 Leichty 1964, 147–148.

24 For Egyptian (pharaonic) colophons in general see Lenzo Marchese 2004, 359–376; Luiselli 2004, 343–360.

The *Teaching of Amenemhat I* and the *Tale of Sinuhe*, in some of the manuscripts that convey them, have a colophon that reads ‘This is *finished* from *its beginning* unto *its end*, as it was *found*’.

Not differently, the *Tale of the Shipwrecked*, preserved by one manuscript only, St Petersburg, State Hermitage Museum, *P. Leningrad 1115*, is closed by the following colophon, that also includes an auspice of good health for the scribe because of his merits:

This is *finished* from *its beginning* unto *its end*, as it was *found* in a writing. It is written by the scribe of cunning fingers, Ameni-*amena*; may he live in life wealth and health!

Ancient Egyptian colophons never include references to the total number of lines, the storage location or the provenance of the antigraph. Moreover, they are not necessarily located to the end of a roll. In MS London, British Museum, *P. Anastasi III* the colophon precedes the last three passages:

It has come (at the end) well and with satisfaction. For the benefit of the prince (who is) in his office, much praised by his city, messenger of the king in every foreign country, who commands over the plain and hills, Amenemope, may he be triumphant. Made for him in year 3 [...], on day 28.

In the nineteenth and twentieth dynasties (c.1320–1080 BCE) the Egyptian colophon seems to become more or less standardized, as Giuseppina Lenzo Marchese observes:

Avec l'époque Ramesside, survient une série de changements :

- la souscription finale est désormais *jw=s pw nfr m Htp* « c'est venu parfaitement en ordre » avec l'adoption systématique du suffixe féminin *=s*;
- le nome de copiste est mentionné dans plusieurs exemples ;
- de nombreux manuscrits sont dédiés par des scribes assistants à leur maîtres introduit parfois par *jr n*, il est souvent question de l'auteur de la composition et non du copiste ;
- dans quelques cas, la mention de la date à laquelle le manuscrit a été copié apparaît.²⁵

Lastly, in Demotic literature (sixth century BCE – third century CE) more attention is devoted to the date of the copy and some variants of the above described formula are elaborated.²⁶

This brief *excursus*, beyond reminding us that the use of colophons is more ancient than one may think, allows us to deduce that in the ancient Near East the need to certify the correctness of a copy—by means of the mention of the scribe's name and career (Mesopotamia) or by declaring to have respected a 'model' (Egypt)—was perceived as an important requisite for the reliability of a text, regardless of its typol-

25 Lenzo Marchese 2004, 375.

26 Ibid. 368.

ogy, although other necessities have also their role in the use of colophons, such as the formation of a scribe or the arrangement of a library or an archive (above all in the case of ancient Mesopotamia). On the contrary, the hand of Mesopotamian and Egyptian scribes does not seem to be moved by purely devotional reasons.

Differently from these ancient examples, most of the colophons of Christian oriental manuscript traditions normally do not seem to include, within their structural elements, the ‘seal of guarantee’ of the respect of the length of the antigraph. In the Coptic manuscript tradition, for instance, and in particular in Bohairic biblical manuscripts, this task is accomplished by another paratext, that is the title, that specifies the length of the copied text (and therefore the respect of its authoritativeness).²⁷

On the other hand, expressions of devotion, prayers in order to safeguard the soul of the copyist or the commissioner (or both), eulogies, and invocation to the Trinity are among the recurring elements of Christian oriental colophons, although each tradition has also developed its own motives and combination of patterns, that may also include the date and/or place of the copy, the name of the commissioner, the destination of the manuscript, the name of the patron, and so forth.

Particularly interesting is the motif of the *excusatio* for the supposed corruption of the model, that determined the quality of the copy—an element that recurs in Greek, Coptic, Armenian, Ethiopic, Georgian and Christian Arabic manuscripts²⁸—or the use of metaphors like the conclusion of the work of copying compared to the arriving of a ship in a safe harbour.

Rarer seems to be the presence of ‘technical terminology’ that identifies the book and its constitutive parts (quires, chapters, etc., including the colophon itself),²⁹ the rhythm of copy, the place of work, and so on.

Lastly, sometimes colophons, from copy to copy, weld to the text (for instance, in the Georgian tradition), losing the function of paratext and transforming into part of the work, a phenomenon which however is not infrequent also in the ancient Egyptian manuscript tradition.

27 Buzi 2017, 15–16.

28 Other forms of *excusationes* are of course possible. Particularly interesting is the formula ‘It was written in Jerusalem in the winter season and in a hurry, so the letters mostly appear actually arranged in a disordered way’ of the Coptic tradition. See the contribution of Agostino Soldati.

29 For one of the few exceptions see the Greek MS Athens, Ethnikē Bibliothēkē tēs Hellados, 56 (Gregory-Aland Minuscule 773, von Soden A¹⁴), tenth century, Constantinople, whose colophon reads: ‘This venerable and divine book of the Gospels contains in all 36 quaternions’ (f. 1r). For more details, see the article of Francesco Valerio below.

Next Desirable Steps toward an Effective Structural Analysis of Colophons

While it is evident that, despite their differences and cultural specificities, several—if not all—manuscript traditions have felt the necessity to equip their literary (and sometimes documentary) texts with additional data, in a way or another related to the act of copying (data arranged in recurrent ‘information blocks’, which in turn were organized in ‘functional blocks’, to use Marilena Maniaci’s effective definitions in her contribution), what is still missing is a shared terminology, that represents the *conditio sine qua non* for a real and efficacious comparative structural analysis.

The task of defining such a shared terminology is so challenging that only a long-lasting collaborative project, involving specialists of different disciplines, would likely permit to reach this ambitious goal.

At the same time, it would be necessary to have, for each manuscript tradition, a systematic and easily searchable collection of the respective corpus of colophons, which should include the complete text with the related translation, and the marking-up of meaningful textual elements, such as the name of scribe, the commissioner, the donor, the date of copy and any significant recurring formula. Geographical references, prosopography elements and technical terms related to the manufacture of the book should also be ‘isolated’, so as to contribute to the codification of the structural elements of a colophon, at least within a specific tradition.³⁰

Much remains to be done in this respect, but hopefully the articles that follow—and the round table from which they derive—represent a first step toward a real and systematic study of the colophon’s structure.

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30 For the complete census of Coptic colophons, see the sections ‘Colophons’ <<https://atlas.paths-erc.eu/colophons>> and ‘Persons attested in colophons’ <<https://atlas.paths-erc.eu/persons>> of the *Archaeological Atlas of Coptic Literature*.

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