Abstracts and Titles

IHR Worksop – Colophons and Scribal Cultures across the Early Modern World

**Olly Akkerman (Berlin)**

**Title:** Manuscript Copying as an Act of Jihad: The Politics of Bohra Scribal Culture

Inaccessible to the outside world due to an oath of secrecy, the Bohras, a small but vibrant South Asian Muslim community tracing its heritage to Yemen and North Africa, have an undisclosed Arabic manuscript culture enshrined in royal archives. Based on ethnographic and archival research conducted on one of these communities in Baroda, Gujarat, I demonstrate that the Arabic scribal practices of the Bohra clergy, enshrined in royal secret archives, have been fundamentally shaped by trans-oceanic interconnectivity between Yemen and Gujarat. As Bohra manuscripts are considered the material manifestation of the Ismaili “eternal” esoteric truths, the closed collection of esoteric texts and scripts in Baroda is still manually copied by hand by Bohra clerics today. This secret practice, is considered a *jihād* or spiritual struggle, and can only be carried out according to strict scribal rituals by the highest clerics of the community. I argue that the living manuscript tradition of the Alawi Bohras is of vital importance to the continuing existence of the community.

**Christopher Bahl (IHR, London)**

**Title:** Scribal Travails and learned cultures in early modern North India

Much ink has been spilled on early modern scribal cultures of the South Asian subcontinent. Scholarship over the last decades approached state-formation processes in the Mughal dispensation and beyond by directing the focus to the centralisation of imperial administrations and their bureaucratisation. The interrelated rise of scribal communities and the socio-cultural reconfigurations of political cultures attracted much attention, because these were the groups that fundamentally shaped the historical record for posterity. At the same time, the ‘seventeenth century paper revolution’ which fuelled these transformations created the concomitant phenomenon of an increased circulation of manuscripts in different shapes and colours [O’Hanlon 2013]. Shifting the focus away from the purview of imperial dispensations, I argue that an increased manuscript circulation enabled and was simultaneously shaped by a larger and vibrant field of scribal activity that unfolded across scholarly cultures of seventeenth century Northern India.

In this paper, I will concentrate on the rich collection of Arabic philological manuscripts of the Rampur Raza Library, Rampur, in present-day Uttar Pradesh to explore the socio-cultural history of scribes as a fundamental element of learned communities. Arabic Philological is particularly pertinent in this regard since these texts had a multi-disciplinary purpose, enabling its students to master the canon of Islamicate cultures and refine their proficiencies in Arabic. By studying the manuscript versions of such famous philological treatises and commentaries I will explore the socio-cultural background of the scribes and their professional identity based on historical practices inscribed on the finished products. This will make it possible to historicise paratextual elements such as colophons and transmission notes, their formulae and idioms, to consider the social pasts of scribes as part of a social history of learned cultures.

**Liesbeth Corens (Oxford)**

**Title: TBC**

During the early modern period, the English Catholic community was scattered across England and Europe. The texts that have been transmitted throughout this time period were not merely a reflection of that community but instrumental in sustaining it, despite their dispersal. The significance of women religious in these transmissions cannot be overestimated yet has been overlooked. They were cut off from their country in exiled houses, cut off from the world behind cloister walls, but through their copying they were a keystone in English Catholic community. This paper will look further into the role of these women and the spirituality behind their writing practices. The spiritual nature of copying brings the activity back into the spotlight and helps us to question their position as mere handmaidens, even though their contribution has been faded from cognizance in the interceding centuries. But it also highlights that the writing cannot be cut off from the religious practice. The well-stocked libraries and archives of the English religious houses were more than the words on their pages, they were the result of and arsenal for devotional practices.

**Arthur Dudney (Cambridge)**

**Title:** Some Thoughts on ​(Arabic, Persian, Urdu) ​Schoolbooks in Mughal and Colonial India

The treasures of Persian literary culture, that is, richly illustrated, painstakingly calligraphed, large-format volumes, are comparatively rare in the tradition. Most participants in Persian literary culture worked with less finely made textual materials, of which some of the most disposable were schoolbooks. This presentation will consider what the characteristics of schoolbooks were in Mughal and Colonial India. What is the material history of this genre and what can we say beyond the fact that such books were produced cheaply? Is it true, as British colonial officials argued, that they were full of mistakes? The Delhi Persian collection at the British Library is an especially rich trove of these unloved books. Why did some many copies make their way into the former library of the Mughal Emperors?

**Stefan Hanß (Cambridge)**

**Title:** Lines of Loyalties, Corporeal Colophons and Early Modern Cultural Diversity

**Abstract:** In early modern Europe, moments of personal transition manifested in written documents that had to be signed by officials, testimonies and the persons who were affected by it. The material enactment of such manuscripts relied on the cultural significance of the colophon, here defined as a scribal practice that aims at the (a) identification, (b) authentication, (c) signature, and (d) the sociocultural positioning of manuscripts. The embodied notion of early modern signatures established the everyday cultural relevance of such written documents. I take these observations as a starting point in order to reflect on the broader cultural role of colophons in scenarios of cultural transition in early modern Europe, the Mediterranean and the Atlantic world. I wish to reconsider the role of scribal signatures as an early modern means to reflect upon, comment on, and personally inscribe into cross-cultural encounters. In the early modern period, signatures gained significance as symbolic substitutes of people that represented an individual and its social ties. The relevance of signing practices, however, went beyond mere textual symbolism and aimed at an embodied enactment of materials. Signatures allowed scribes to make their personal background partaking at the production and reception of manuscripts; it was a chance to bodily inscribe into texts. As writing and signing were considered an embodied practice in the early modern period, the colophons’ identificatory dimension will be studied in regard to anthropologists’ conceptual approaches to lines and archaeologists’ reflections on corporeality and material enactment. In the early modern world, protagonists used signing practices as means to negotiate cultural boundaries and to embody cultural belonging.

**Laurenz Kern (Berlin)**

**Title:** Book publication and the function of commendatory statements (*taqārīẓ*) in Middle Eastern manuscript cultures

**Abstract:** It was a common practice among writers in the late medieval and early modern Middle East to give their latest book to fellow scholars as soon as they had finished it, along with a request that the colleagues issue a commendatory statement (*taqrīẓ*). These statements would then be appended to the manuscript, constituting a parade of prestigious names proclaiming their support of the author and his book. Commendatory statements usually feature their own colophons. Thus, for the historian they document the very inital stages of book publication in a manuscript context - a property which has hitherto been neglected. In the first stage as well as during the further transmission process, scribal agency is well visible, as the commendations are collected - sometimes choosing only a few while omitting others - and copied into a single manuscript. Furthermore, collectors regularly add to them subtle, technical remarks which allow conclusions about the transmission process. By closely examining the manuscript corpus of a particular work, including the various other types of paratext, we are able to reconstruct how commenders interacted with books as they inscribed themselves into them - as well as how these inscriptions were dealt with during further transmission processes. Ibn Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Dimashqī's (d. 1438 CE) *Radd al-wāfir*, a multiform compilation in support of the controversial theologian Ibn Taymiyya, will serve as a case study that exemplifies how we can put commendatory statements to use when trying to understand the inner workings of manuscript publication in particular and the respective late medieval and early modern scribal culture in general.

**Hannah Murphy (King’s College, London)**

**Title:** Crafting scribal signatures: names, copying, ownership, and writing in and on sixteenth-century calligraphy manuals

We tend to think of colophons as scribal 'signatures', imprinting subjectivity on works where modern ideas of authorship - tied primarily to composition - cannot be attributed.

In the sixteenth century, Italian and German scribes began to author writing manuals, which explicitly set out to articulate the professional subjectivity inherent in writing and copying, distinct from the work of composition. These manuals inspired further copies, both by other aspiring scribes and by patrician, mercantile and even noble collectors, who sought by copying to master the craft. Both the authors of calligraphy manuals and their owners developed practices of inscribing the work with their name - sometimes on covers, sometimes as a colophons, often in paratext. This paper examines such "signatures" on manuscript copies of printed writing manuals, particularly those written by non-scribal owners. In doing so it explores the boundaries between authorship, ownership and the practice of copying and argues for the subjectivity not just of 'signature' but stemming also from the increasingly delineated early modern art of writing.

**Nur Sobers-Khan (British Library, London)**

**Title:** Scribal culture as knowledge production in the Delhi Collection manuscripts

Research on scribal culture, codicology, and manuscript circulation often neglects the question of the content of the manuscripts that are circulating, and the study of the paratextual elements of a manuscript can at times obscure the study of what forms of knowledge were being adapted and reproduced by scribes and why. Through a study of the scribal practices in colophons of the early modern manuscripts of the Delhi Collection, the remnants of the Mughal library consisting in roughly 1957 volumes of Arabic manuscripts, 1550 Persian, and 157 Urdu, this paper will seek to reconstruct scribal practice as knowledge production, by using the information about the scribes in the colophons in tandem with the content of the manuscripts to examine the origins, identities, biographies, patronage connections and intellectual genealogies (where possible) of the scribes and to attempt to outline the intellectual motivations that caused them to copy the texts to which they have attached their names, which may allow us to identify the some of the intellectual trends of the early modern period that shaped the contents of the Mughal library. In summary, beyond the codicological analysis of the colophons of these manuscripts, my paper will examine how the colophon and the information contained therein about the scribe sheds light on Islamic knowledge production in early modern South Asia, using the remaining manuscripts from the Delhi Collection/Mughal library as a microcosm for the copying and production and texts.

**Torsten Wollina (Beirut)**

**Title:** Beyond the colophon: Strategies of "signing" a compiled manuscript

**Abstract:** The position of the colophon in manuscripts appears quite contrary to that of similar bibliographical information in most modern print books. It concludes the book and thereby vows for its completeness whereas the same information on a print book's production would be found at the beginning of the book. While the importance of the colophon's positioning at the end seems obvious to the manuscript scholar, there were alternatives that conveyed aspects of a manuscript's historicity as well as completeness.

The paper presents a case study based on the Egyptian Dar al-Kutub manuscript MS 21201 bāʾ (=tafsīr), a collection of four short treatises by the 16th-century Damascene author Muḥammad Ibn Ṭūlūn. Although all of these are autographs, the manuscript bespeaks the interaction of other scribes with both the object and its content. Instead of colophons, it carries added titles, library stamps, and, most importantly marginal notes. Through these, the paper traces the manuscript's history of compilation and recompilation. I argue that these acts of transmission were not purely documentary but also devotional (both in terms of ʿ*ilm* and *baraka*). Whereas in full copies the scribe's handwriting would remediate an author's text, in cases like this they would seek proximity of handwriting alone. This could lead to the inclusion of texts of their own or take the form of a signature right next to the original text.

**David Zakarian (Oxford)**

**Title:** A Path to Salvation: Remembering the Living and the Dead in the Colophons of Armenian Manuscripts

**Abstract:** The dominant theme that emerges in the colophons of Armenian manuscripts is the passionate and repeated plea from scribes urging their readers to remember in their virtuous prayers a number of people, both living and dead. The list, often quite a long one, usually includes the names of not only the scribes themselves but also of the members of their extended family, of the sponsors of the manuscript and their kin, of their colleagues, of people who in one way or another assisted them in their work and so on. Thus, the colophons become a means for the scribes to perpetuate the memory of people whom they hold dear and to show their genuine appreciation for the support they received. This paper explores the common features in the narratives patterns of such colophons with regard to the function of remembering and attempts to reveal some aspects of the mentality of scribes and their milieu, which are related to the concept of salvation.