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Edited by
Alessandro Bausi, Paola Buzi, Javier Del Barco,
Emiliano Fiori, Marilena Maniaci,
Eugenia Sokolinski

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Preliminary Reflections for a Comparative Analysis of Colophons*

*Marilena Maniaci, Università degli studi di Cassino e
del Lazio meridionale*

The presence in Christian—and not only Christian—manuscript books of information directly or indirectly related to the circumstances of the copy is a common phenomenon for most of the Eastern manuscript cultures. The same observation applies to the Latin context, which is outside the scope of the round table on *Christian Oriental colophons*, but should certainly be included in a comparative vision of the phenomenon.

However, the appearance and diffusion of ‘colophons’ (alternatively called ‘subscriptions’)¹ varies considerably from one tradition to another: recent approximate estimates show peaks of over 60% of the total number of Armenian manuscripts (with the oldest, relatively late occurrence in 887) and, on the contrary, a 10% average for Greek extant codices (at least until the twelfth century) and 7% for Slavic ones.² These figures must be taken with a pinch of salt, given the absence of systematic censuses or, when they exist, of reliable estimates of the original consistency of the manuscript production of a given culture.

The evaluation of diachronic variations within the same manuscript tradition should be, at least in theory, more reliable, but in fact it has been never systematically attempted, apart from the reference to some general tendencies: as an example, the exponential increase not only in the absolute number, but also in the relative incidence, of subscriptions at the transition between the Early and the Late Middle ages is a well known phenomenon. Synchronic variations are also attested: again, in the Latin tradition, subscriptions become much more frequent in German-speaking countries than in the rest of Europe,³ but again, there are no comparable data for other book cultures.

* I am grateful to Paola Buzi for actively involving me in a round table animated by the attentive and lively participation of a large number of colleagues and students. which was not only very rich of interesting data, but also of stimulating reflections and suggestions. The written version of my concluding speech deliberately preserves its colloquial tone; bibliographic references are therefore reduced to the bare essentials. Further bibliography can be found in the collaborative volume by Bausi et al. 2015, and in the contributions to this same journal issue.

1 On terminological issues see *infra*, 203–205.

2 Estimates are taken from the codicological chapter of Bausi et al. 2015.

3 Ornato 2003, 24.

In general, the presence of subscriptions has never been systematically related to cultural-historical and technical factors—such as, for example, the quality of manufacture, the type of content, the commissioners, or the contexts of the books' circulation and use. Even after the decline of a simplistic vision that saw subscriptions as the 'spontaneous' expression of the psychology and humor of single scribes, they have been mostly read and used as a reservoir of valuable information on individual manuscripts, persons, situations, events related to the circumstances of the transcription: most frequently as a source of information about the scribes, with particular interest in their position within society (as in the synthetic but stimulating contribution dedicated by Anthony Cutler to the social status of Byzantine scribes),⁴ or about other individuals related to the layout of the volume (commissioners, patrons, dedicatees, artists, binders, etc.); about the dating; the rhythms and circumstances of the copy; about episodically recorded events of historical or chronographical relevance. In the Latin tradition, a certain attention, of predominantly anecdotal kind, has also been devoted to the question of 'why' some scribes, and not others, decided to state more or less explicitly and precisely the circumstances of their own work—*Pourquoi les copistes signaient-ils leur manuscrits ?*, to quote the title of a contribution proposed by Albert Derolez at a conference devoted to 'Scribes and Colophons' by the Comité international de paléographie latine in 1993.⁵ It is significant that even in the aforementioned conference, specifically dedicated to the topic, the aspects related to the chronology, prosopography and the sociological connotation of the scribes, as well as the (non-simple) analysis of their work rhythms, have largely overlooked and almost completely obscured—with rare exceptions—long-term investigations devoted to the chronogeographic spread of subscriptions and even more to the study of their structure, of the variable ratio between their constituent elements and of the motivations for which the scribes chose to provide the recipient or the reader of the book with certain details concerning the transcription, their own biography or the context in which they worked—or viceversa to omit them. A significant, but isolated exception is the contribution devoted by Carla Bozzolo to the systematic exploitation of the colophons written by Rhenish scribes, which contains a typology—albeit a summary one—of the categories of information obtainable from subscriptions,⁶ which I will return to later in this presentation.

4 Cutler 1981.

5 Derolez 1995.

6 Bozzolo 1994.

Similar considerations may also apply to the numerous conferences and workshops dedicated to the theme over the last fifteen years, on which it is impossible to dwell on here for reasons of space.⁷

If we adopt a resolutely comparative perspective—as it could not be otherwise in this venue—we need to start from a preliminary and only apparently obvious question: what is precisely a ‘colophon’? Should the term be understood as exactly synonymous of ‘subscription’, or they are instead to be interpreted as two distinct entities? On closer inspection both terms—‘colophon’ and ‘subscription’—show margins of ambiguity. ‘Subscription’ (‘sottoscrizione’ / ‘souscription’ / ‘Subskription’), from Latin ‘subscribo’, is etymologically ‘something written under something else’, that is a text placed under another text: this explains the meaning of ‘signature’, derived from documentary practice,⁸ as well as the codicological connotation of ‘formula in which the scribe mentions his/her name and the place and/or date of the transcription’,⁹ common to the round table’s contributions. But the so-called ‘subscription’, which indeed appears most frequently under the text to which it refers, is also—more rarely but not exceptionally—found in the opening section of the text (incorporated in the initial rubric) or even within the text (as in some Glagolitic codices), or in the margins, or even in any other available empty space. The cases of ‘multiple subscriptions’, placed at the end of the individual sections of a single text (or of the each of the texts copied in a single production campaign), with the aim of marking the stages of its execution, are also not rare (at least in the book traditions I am more familiar with... what about the others?).

In a (not fully successful) attempt to resolve the terminological ambiguity, Muzerelle’s *Vocabulaire codicologique* attributes to ‘souscription’ the alternative meaning of ‘formula in which the scribe indicates his name’¹⁰ and refers the term ‘colophon’—on which I will come back soon—to the ‘final

7 See Buzi 2020, in this same issue, 9–13, with an extensive list of the main conferences and collective volumes devoted to the topic.

8 Muzerelle 1985, 128 (423.03): ‘mention autographe d’un nom apposée sur un document afin de l’authentifier, de signifier un accord, d’en revendiquer la propriété’, resumed in Maniaci 1996 (1998²), 207: ‘menzione autografa di un nome apposta su un documento al fine di identificarlo, di rivendicarne la proprietà, di notificare un accordo...’.

9 Maniaci 1996 (1998²), 227: ‘formula finale in cui lo scriba fornisce alcune indicazioni che lo riguardano, ad esempio il proprio nome, il luogo e/o la data della copia, il nome del committente o del destinatario...’; a similar, but less detailed, definition is given for the word ‘colophon’ in Muzerelle 1985, 136 (435.03): ‘formule finale dans laquelle le scribe mentionne le lieu ou la date de la copie, ou l’une et l’autre’ (see *infra*, p. 204).

10 Muzerelle 1995, 136 (435.04): ‘formule dans laquelle le scribe indique son nom’.

formula in which the scribe mentions the place, or date of the copy, or both'. Apart from the limit unduly implied by the qualifying adjective 'final' for the meaning of 'colophon', both Muzerelle's definitions formally exclude the cases in which the scribe manifests himself/herself without mentioning either the place or date of the copy but merely revealing his/her name or celebrating more or less laconically the end of the work, and optionally adding the request for a blessing or a more prosaic 'material reward' (as in Latin formulae such as *qui scripsit scribat semper cum Domino vivat; explicit iste liber sit scriptor crimine liber; explicit explicet ludere scriptor eat; detur pro penna scriptori pulchra puella* and many others¹¹—as well as similar ones appearing in other book traditions). May we speak, in these cases, of 'colophons' or 'subscriptions'? Or should we rather think that formulae of this kind, without explicit reference to the author and the coordinates of the copy, require separate attention, and therefore also a separate designation?

The term of Greek origin 'colophon'—etymologically meaning 'a summit, top, finishing',¹² and by extension 'completion, conclusion'—calls for a further consideration: in the printed book world, it designates, in a specific technical sense, 'a statement usually at the end of a publication giving information about its publication or printing, and in some cases, other bibliographic information, including the title. Particularly in fifteenth-century books, the colophon may give information generally found on the title page in later books';¹³ in earlier prints it usually contains the date of printing and the typographer's mention); when applied to manuscripts the word assumes a more generic connotation, practically as a synonymous for 'subscription'.

This is the reason why in my own *Terminologia del libro manoscritto* I had preferred to abandon the distinction proposed by Muzerelle, and proposed the following definition of 'sottoscrizione / sottoscrizione, colofone / colophon': 'the final formula in which the scribe provides some information concerning himself, for example his name, the name and/or the date of the copy, the commissioner's or recipient's name'¹⁴; and I had also suggested to reserve

11 For a rich choice of examples see Bénédicte du Bouveret 1965–1982, and the national series of the Catalogue of Dated Manuscripts project, sponsored by the Comité international de paléographie latine; a selected number of formulae are analyzed in Reynhout 2006.

12 *LSJ Lexicon*, online edition, s.v. κολοφῶν, <<http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/lsg/#eid=60514>> (this and other URIs last accessed 10 November 2022).

13 Quoted from IFLA 2006, 3.

14 Maniaci 1996 (1998²), 227: 'formula finale in cui lo scriba fornisce alcune indicazioni che lo riguardano, ad esempio il proprio nome, il luogo e/o la data della copia, il nome del committente o del destinatario'.

the term ‘colophon’ to printed books (a distinction that, apparently, has not established itself in use).¹⁵

The literature on colophons / subscriptions also records other composite expressions, whose conceptual and (consequently) terminological ambiguity would need to be cleared, such as—by way of example—‘scribe’s subscription’, ‘author’s subscription’, ‘corrector’s subscription’ (referred to the so-called *subscriptiones* preserved by some famous medieval copies of classical authors, which testify to the philological commitment of well-known exponents of the late Roman aristocracy, aimed at reiterating the literary and ideological-political superiority of the declining pagan culture)¹⁶... Single authors also employ a wide range of expressions, in order to qualify the colophon / subscription according to some of its formal or visual characteristics: for instance ‘multiple colophons’ (referring to those that appear in manuscripts divided into several tomes, or at the end of different sections of the same text); ‘composite colophons’;¹⁷ ‘false’ or ‘manipulated colophons’ (where, for instance, the date or the name of the recipient has been changed); ‘posthumous colophons’ (added at a later time in order to commemorate the scribe of the text); ‘incorporated’ or ‘nested colophons’ (including the extreme case of mentions of scribes corresponding to words highlighted in the text, as in some Hebrew manuscripts, but also at least in one Latin case of my knowledge, the cassinese Ferro’s Bible);¹⁸ ‘fossil colophons’ (transcribed in a later copy of the text); ‘subjective’ or ‘objective colophons’ (written in first or third person); ‘expanded colophons’; ‘poetic’, ‘prosimetric’, cryptographic, ‘enigmatic’, ‘acrostic’, ‘visual’ or ‘figurative colophons’, and so on (without pretence of completeness).

To further complicate the state of current terminology, the improper use of the term ‘explicit’ must also be evoked, indiscriminately employed to qualify the final words of a text, or a statement announcing its conclusion (practically a ‘final title’),¹⁹ or a stereotyped formula, such as an invocation celebrating the text’s ending, which may ultimately be incorporated into the subscription.

15 Maniaci 1996 (1998²), 227, note to the previous definition: ‘[Nota: Il termine ‘colofone / colophon’ andrebbe riservato alle formule che si trovano alla fine degli incunaboli e delle cinquecentine]’. Gacek 2012, 258 refers the term ‘subscription’ to ‘the final expression ‘*tamma(t) al-kitāb*’ that often introduces a colophon’.

16 Pecere 1984 (2003).

17 See, in this same journal issue, the contribution by F. Valerio, 21–74.

18 On the so-called ‘Ferro Bible’, see the contributions by E. Unfer Verre, esp. Unfer Verre 2010.

19 ‘Intitulé final’, Muzerelle 1985, 132.

Already in the light of these summary remarks, the subscription / colophon may, in short, be regarded as ‘a phenomenon without a name’ (as it was defined in a recent contribution on Islamic manuscript by Rosemarie Quiring-Zoche).²⁰ We lack an unequivocal and comprehensive term to define the formulation containing one or more data related to the contextualization of the copy (who? where? when? for whom or on impulse / committance / financing of whom? ...), but also the pure and simple attestation that the work is finished, whether or not connected to the request for material or spiritual reward; and we also lack more specific terms for unambiguously designating the various aspects of this complex phenomenon.²¹

As always happens, terminological ambiguity is a clear indication of conceptual ambiguity. We are therefore back to the original question: what actually is a ‘subscription’, or a ‘colophon’?

The many examples proposed in the course of the round table confirmed that it is an entity that can take a huge variety of forms. What do very dissimilar texts by extension, content and structure have in common, such as the lapidary ‘1453’, written by the scribe’s hand on the last page of a Latin Humanistic codex (the example is fictitious) and certain Armenian colophons extending for several pages, that Anna Sirinian has repeatedly identified as a ‘real literary genre’²² (a definition parallel to that of ‘small literary works of a hagiographic and celebratory character’ coined by Alessandro Bausi, in the same occasion)?²³

In order to try to answer this essential question, the subscription cannot be considered as if it were a monolithic block: an effort is needed—not yet effectively accomplished—to identify within it a series of ‘information blocks’, which appear with different frequencies (according to traditions, eras and contexts) and assembled in a changing range of combinations. This information can be classified into different sets / categories and therefore organized around some ‘functional poles’.

As a first (and perfectible) contribution to the definition of a grid of analysis I propose the following structured list of fields—based on my own

20 Quiring-Zoche 2013.

21 Attempts to disambiguate include the expression ‘nota in calce’ (footnote), proposed by Bausi 2016, for instance 241; also ‘testo in calce’ (‘foottext’), *ibid.* 238. It would also be highly interesting to investigate the terms used to define the phenomenon in different traditions: as Sirinian 2016, 14 notes, the Armenian term *yišatakaran* means ‘memoriale’ (‘memorial’) or ‘luogo del ricordo’ (‘place of remembrance’), a much less technical connotation than that of ‘final text’ discussed so far.

22 ‘Un vero e proprio genere letterario’: Sirinian 2016, 13 and n. 2.

23 ‘Piccole opere letterarie di carattere agiografico e celebrativo’: Bausi 2016, 246.

experience—which will have to be verified in relation to the different book traditions:

I. *The scribe*

- name
- age
- origin
- social status
- profession
- parents and family members
- self-representative epithets
- other personal details (physical characteristics, age, fatigue...).

II. *The date(s) and place(s) of the transcription*

- date or dates (expressed through a variety of elements and modes, including the mention of political or religious authorities);
- geographical place or places of the transcription (nation, city, village...);
- institutional setting (monastery; *scriptorium* or writing school, office, private home, jail, etc.).

III. *The physical and/or moral persons surrounding the scribe* (‘restricted’ and ‘enlarged’ context and ‘co-protagonists’ of the copy)

- commissioner/donor;
- recipient/dedicatee (sometimes coinciding with the commissioner);
- professors, spiritual masters...;
- other individuals personally related to the scribe;
- other contemporaries of the scribe, personally unrelated to him/her.

IV. *The content of the book* (a block of textual, philological and book-technical information indirectly connected to the book as an object through its contents, with reference to both the abstractly understood work and its concrete manifestation in a given copy)

- the object of the transcription (that is its textual and non-textual contents);
- the circumstances that led to the definition of the specific text version represented in the manuscript (correction or collation, mention of the model, etc.);
- information on the transcribed work (author, translator, commissioner, dating, etc.);
- other data specifically related to the text type.

V. *The material circumstances of the transcription*

- duration (explicitly stated or derived from specific calculations);
- information on the making of the manuscript and the scribe’s working practice;

- other details related to the context and contingencies of the copy (adverse weather conditions, help or hospitality obtained by the scribe...);
- mentions (of mostly problematic interpretation) on the cost of writing materials and the transcription and/or decoration of the text.

VI. *Other circumstances external to the transcription*

- diaristic, biographical and sociological annotations on persons or events related to the scribe (happy or mournful family events, masters and learning curricula, readings, personal moods, etc.);
- historical or chronical data of greater or lesser importance (from a contemporary perspective);
- events of an exceptional nature (epidemics, methereological or astronomical phenomena, etc.).

VII. *The formulaic component* (a set of more or less stereotyped elements, clearly distinct from the rest of the subscription—at the beginning or at the end of it—or combined with the other sections)

- admonitions, formulae of humility, requests to the reader, blessings, eulogies, dossologies, invocations, guesswork, calembours, divertissements, requests for spiritual or materials rewards (with more or less rethorical and stereotyped formulations sometimes called ‘refrains’, common to different traditions—such as the Syriac, Arabic, Greek, and Coptic ones);
- mentions concerning the material and spiritual value of the book (as a treasure, garden, food for the soul, key to heaven...).

These theoretically distinct ‘blocks’ of information are not always visually separated—through layout devices to which I will return briefly later (white spaces, graphic, chromatic, decorative hierarchies ...)—and they may often be intertwined with each other. In the perspective of a systematic analysis, however, an effort is needed to distinguish them conceptually (and terminologically).

Among them, a ‘central’ and characterizing nucleus stands out, containing the elements that express the essential historical coordinates of the transcription: name of the scribe, date, place of the copy (blocks I and II). I cautiously propose not to consider ‘subscriptions’ the texts that do not contain at least one of these elements, such as the laconic formulation *feliciter*, with its variants *explicit feliciter*, *lege feliciter*, *scripsi feliciter*, etc.) added by the scribe by (or also by later readers or correctors) in some late antique Latin manuscripts.

It is surprising to observe the total absence, in the literature about subscriptions, of statistics concerning the frequency and combination of these various structural components, particularly with regard to the main core, concerning the date, place and author of the transcript. The lack of investigations

on the subject seems even more singular if we consider the not irrelevant quantity, or even the abundance, of data available at least for some book traditions (such as the Greek one—for which the choice made by the authors of the *Repertorium der griechischen Kopisten* not to provide the full transcription of the subscriptions is difficult to understand—but also the Hebrew or Armenian ones).

Further aspects to which it is worth drawing attention—which have received little attention to date—are those relating on the one hand to the literary and linguistic characteristics of the colophons, and on the other to their palaeographic-codicological aspects, in particular the strategies adopted by scribes to emphasize them and distinguish them from the texts they are joined to—intervening on the writing, the decorative elements and the layout.

The characteristics to be considered include, by way of example:

- the form of the text (prose or verse);
- the language;
- the stylistic register and any literary ambitions;
- the graphic typology and its relationship with that of the text;
- the colour of the ink(s);
- the presence and function of decorative elements;
- the use of separators (of single lines or sections) or fillers;
- the position of the colophon with respect to the manuscript (on the final leaf/page, at the beginning or inside the book, but also inside or outside the writing area);
- the position with respect to the text (more often at the end of it, but also at the end of single sections);
- the layout (from one end to the other of the page or column width, or in more sophisticated forms, aimed at achieving particular aesthetic effects ...).

These and other aspects can be observed systematically and appreciated much more easily and comprehensively than in the past thanks to the increasing diffusion of high quality full color reproductions.

With these first sparse, partial and basic reflections I hope to have shown the interest of a systematic and comparative approach to the study of subscriptions, both from the ‘internal’ viewpoint of individual book traditions and in a comparative perspective, aimed to analyzing:

- the structures attested and their constituent elements;
- the material features of the subscriptions (layout; use of the same or a different script than the one employed for the text, position, size and decoration, etc.) and their distribution in space and time;

- the linguistic features of the subscriptions (use of a specific lexicon or stylistic register);
- the chronological (and geographic) evolution of the different ‘models’ of subscriptions and their correlation with other factors related to the book’s manufacture and the context in which it is rooted;
- the chronological and geographical distribution of the formulaic elements (and their possible ‘specialization’);
- the circulation of commonplaces or *topoi* (formulae, images, or concepts), for instance in the various circummediterranean manuscript cultures—as in the known case of the formula ἡ μὲν χεὶρ ἡ γράψασα σήπεται τάφῳ, γραφή δὲ μένει εἰς χρόνους πληρεστάτους (‘the hand that has written gets rotten in the grave, but the writing remains for the plenitude of times’), with its parallels in the Eastern Christian world, or *sicut navigantibus portus* (‘such as the harbor for the sailor’) with its equivalent in Greek, ὡς ἡδὺ τὴν θάλασσαν ἀπὸ τῆς γῆς ὁρᾶν... (‘how sweet to watch the sea from the land...’), but also in the Syriac and Slavic languages, etc.;
- the relationship between the presence or structure of the subscriptions and the contents of the manuscripts;
- the correlations between the presence of a subscription and other internal and external characteristics of the manuscripts (codicological details, production environments, potential recipients of the manuscripts—on parchment or paper, sumptuously or currently prepared, by professionals or amateurs, lay or religious men, etc.);
- the connection with the social status of the scribes;
- the relationship between colophon formulae and formulae used by other craftsmen, such as lapicides, sculptors, engravers, painters, etc.;
- the possible reference to textual models (epigrams, documents, patristic or biblical literature...).

The goal of drawing a clear and complete picture of—Christian and non-Christian—colophons in the individual book traditions (including a history of their structural evolution and a geographical mapping of the essential components and their association in manuscripts of different content and quality), but also the task of highlighting and explaining their differences and similarities depends, as for many other aspects of the material study of the manuscript book, on the availability of sets of information extracted systematically, with shared approaches and protocols, from extensive corpora of manuscripts, suitably diversified geographically and chronologically. The increasing availability of reproductions can offer, in this perspective, a valuable support to the collection of reliable data, although not observed on the original manuscripts. The colophons present themselves, in this perspective, as an ideal theme for the

building of a comparative and international project in a new and promising research area.

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