

Research Note

A Case for Multiple Text Manuscripts being ‘Corpus-Organizers’*

This short paper intends to propose a possible understanding of multiple text manuscripts as being ‘corpus-organizers’, and elaborate on the function they may have come to play in a particular manuscript culture. The concept being proposed here—which I dare say is common to many ‘manuscript cultures’, and especially ‘codex cultures’, where ‘multiple text manuscripts’ are widely attested—came to my attention a number of years ago, when in 2002 I happened to be editing the *Acts of Phileas*,¹ a short hagiographical text narrating the trial and martyrdom of the Egyptian bishop of Thmuis (d. 305).

The Ethiopic Acts, probably based on a Greek *Vorlage*, is an interesting piece that, in several places, marvellously integrates a fragmentary Greek text attested by the earlier (P. Chester Beatty XV, dating to 310–350) of the two precious, ancient papyrus witnesses of the *Acts of Phileas* (the latter being P. Bodmer XX, dated 320–350).² The Ethiopic version is attested by several manuscripts known under the traditional labels (used for identification and inventory reasons since the end of the 13th century), which overlap in part, of *Gädlä säma‘tat* (i.e. ‘[Spiritual] Contendings of the Martyrs’) and *Gädlä qəddusan* (i.e. ‘[Spiritual] Contendings of the Saints’). These are manuscripts with hagiographic contents that include several hundred *Acts* of mostly non-Ethiopian martyrs and saints. However, the individual manuscripts of this corpus, even the largest ones, never contain more than a few dozen items. They are usually distributed according to the commemoration days of the saints, but neither the occurrence nor the sequence of the items are clearly fixed, and arrangements according to monthly or yearly liturgical readings often coexist with other organisational criteria that are, as yet, unclear. Over the course of time—following an apogee of this particular type of manuscript in the 14th and 15th

centuries—these criteria and needs shifted, resulting in a radical change and the emergence of different types of texts and manuscripts with quite different types of organization. The codicological and palaeographic evolution of manuscripts during this period, together with the resultant implications occurring in this process, needs to be carefully considered and investigated. These changes are reflected in the ‘material dimension’ of manuscripts (i.e. ‘volume’ as a ‘measure’), varying requirements and needs, the orientation of specific realms of knowledge, as well as transmission processes.

The fact remains, however, that the Ethiopian manuscript culture perceives these manuscripts in a very material and concrete way, according to a concept which is neither that of ‘work’³ nor that of ‘miscellaneous manuscript’. It is notable that Ethiopian literates never hesitated to consistently use the label *Gädlä säma‘tat* to identify manuscripts, thus classifying them and attributing them a precise status on the basis of their textual contents. The term ‘miscellaneous manuscript’, even if classified as ‘homogeneous’ (i.e. not containing unrelated materials), is too generic to use for these *Gädlä säma‘tat* manuscripts.⁴ What is missing is the relational function that links a specific manuscript to others, thus collectively representing and attesting to a corpus of written knowledge and to tools used in a concrete praxis (in the case of *Gädlä säma‘tat*, liturgical readings). Even if perfectly satisfying the atomistic perspective that describes a manuscript as a unicum—a perspective that, not surprisingly, has seen the re-emergence of an actual ‘historical discourse’ that follows the notion of ‘codicological unit’—the term ‘miscellaneous manuscript’ does not fully meet the requirements of a comprehensive manuscriptological approach.

As an alternative, considering a multiple text manuscript to be a ‘corpus-organizer’ seems a better means for defining the exact, concrete intersection between the corpus and

* The context and occasion for this short paper has been a research proposal on Ethiopic manuscripts that lies within the wider framework of a research project on Manuscript Cultures presently being proposed at the University of Hamburg under the directorship of Prof Dr Michael Friedrich. I would like to express my thanks both to him and to Prof Dr Harunaga Isaacson for their stimulating reflections and reactions, as well as for their constructive criticism, remarks and suggestions.

¹ Cf. Bausi 2002.

² Two small parchment fragments of a previously unknown Coptic version — confirming the dating of the martyrdom to 4 February 305, as in the Ethiopic version—have recently (2010) been identified by Schenke in the Kölner Papyrussammlung (Inv. 20838e).

³ This term has been used for *Gädlä säma‘tat* and the like in handbooks on Ethiopian literary history and in manuscripts catalogues. Disregarding other considerations, it may suffice to say here, however, that the term ‘work’ only refers to fixed contents and a precise sequence.

⁴ These terminological problems have been brilliantly examined by several authors: cf. Gumbert 2004, 2010; Maniaci 2004; Andrist 2006; and Crisci and Pecere 2004. They have come up with various proposals, dealing with descriptive problems, however, primarily from a strictly codicological perspective. Further reflections, I believe, could reveal a substantial link underlying these descriptive problems as well as a better understanding of ‘knowledge organization’.

the actual realization of these manuscripts as material objects. Here, the corpus represents a range of a ‘homogeneous continuum’, including possibilities implied by traits that are ‘mentally’ and ‘culturally defined’ (including praxis such as liturgical needs, but also aesthetic and artistic appreciation, literary affinity, etc.).⁵ These traits give a set of manuscripts a precise status (i.e. which makes it a corpus from the internal perspective of a given manuscript culture),⁶ while the actual realization of the manuscripts include its format as well as its actual editorial and textual interventions. The structural and mutual interrelationship between the various manuscripts, and between each of them and the ‘corpus’, is fundamentally one of ‘matter’ to ‘knowledge’ as a function of its organization. In its form and contents, a ‘corpus-organizer’ realizes the contents contained in the ‘projectual intention’ of the copyist, or of those who are behind him.⁷ The ‘homogeneous continuum’—determined by culture and praxis—is intercepted by sets of ‘corpus-organizers’, in that they provide the necessary ‘slots’ for hosting ‘modules’ of written knowledge. Knowledge, in turn, has the function of filling up the ‘slots’ of the ‘corpus-organizers’. This is determined by balanced compromises between habits and innovations, needs and material constraints. Assumed to be units that are serially interchangeable or substitutable, the ‘modules’ provide very concrete evidence for—and prevent circularity in the definition of—the relationship between a corpus and a ‘corpus-organizer’. This systemic and synchronic view—abstract and theoretical as it is—must be contrasted against the diachronic

⁵ The limits of this are unclear, although it is well defined by the entire ensemble of ‘corpus-organizers’. In this sense, the manuscripts materially attest the boundaries of the corpus in which they obtain, but also define them. This, I believe, is a concept complementary to that of the manuscript as a ‘corpus creator’, which has been proposed by Prof Dr Harunaga Isaacson. In my opinion, this should be applied to corpora that prelude a tendentially canonical transmission.

⁶ The term is also used to denote artificial ‘research tools’ used to investigate a particular literary genre, or a variously searchable and utilizable set of texts.

⁷ For the relationship between ‘corpus’ and organization, cf. some hints in this direction that can be found in Gumbert 2004, 37 (‘this sample shows a scribe wrestling with his material and only gradually coming to see how he wants to organize it’); and Petrucci 2004, 3: ‘perché a me sembra che il nocciolo del problema... consista proprio nel rapporto, mutevole e a volte drammatico, fra corpus di testi diversi e corpo materiale del libro contenitore, che il codice miscelaneo comunque propone ed impone...’; *ibid.*, 4: ‘i codicologi, rivolgono la loro attenzione soprattutto a quello che ho definito il ‘corpo’, cioè la struttura materiale dell’oggetto contenitore; gli altri, i filologi, altrettanto naturalmente al ‘corpus’, cioè alla successione dei testi disposti nel medesimo contenitore’; *ibid.*, 6: ‘Nel caso di veri e propri corpora organizzati secondo un preciso piano di ordine e di successione dei singoli componenti testuali si è però di fronte ad una involontaria pianificazione dei rapporti infratestuali, che può trasformarsi in tradizione perpetuata nel tempo e prefigurante un ordine di lettura corrispondente a quello stesso dei testi’; *ibid.*: ‘compito ‘degli ordinatori’ testuali’.

developments, as well as the historical and contextual conditions of any given manuscript culture.

For the specific case in point, the Ethiopic *Acts of Phileas*—probably based on a Greek *Vorlage* dating to the Aksumite period, but transmitted within a corpus that also includes other items translated later which were based on other models—is evidence for the on-going role of these manuscripts as ‘corpus-organizers’ and mediators in the transmission of written knowledge within the Ethiopian manuscript culture from late antiquity to the medieval period. In the case of this corpus, clues to understanding the actual function of each manuscript as a ‘corpus-organizer’ can be found in internal, external and material elements, marginalia to the liturgical readings, colophons and subscriptions, as well as the relative sequence of the texts.

Far from being conceived as an autonomous and well-defined witness of texts (as it would appear from a purely philological perspective), each of these ‘corpus-organizers’ acquires its full significance only in mutual relationship to the others. Each manuscript organizes an implicit, but nevertheless also quite material and concrete, evolving knowledge. From this perspective, not only including components is meaningful, but also excluding them.

The concept of the manuscript as a ‘corpus-organizer’ outlined here seems to open up further reflections on the material organization of written knowledge in manuscript cultures. It links material (codicological) and textual (philological) reflections and problems that lie beyond the simple understanding of the manuscript as a ‘text carrier’. Indeed, it seems that other labels and terms—to start with, that of ‘anthology’ (whether authorial or not)—might benefit from fresh theoretical rethinking.

Alessandro Bausi | Hamburg

REFERENCES

- Andrist, Patrick (2006), 'La descrizione scientifica dei manoscritti complessi: fra teoria e pratica', *Segno e Testo. International Journal of Manuscript and Text Transmission* 4: 299–356.
- Bausi, Alessandro (2002), *La versione etiopica degli Acta Phileae nel Gadla samā'tāt* (Napoli: Istituto Universitario Orientale; Supplemento agli Annali dell'Istituto Orientale di Napoli, 92).
- Crisci, Edoardo, and Pecere, Oronzo (eds.) (2004), *Il codice miscellaneo. Tipologie e funzioni. Atti del Convegno internazionale. Cassino 14–17 maggio 2003* (Cassino: Università degli Studi di Cassino) = *Segno e Testo. International Journal of Manuscript and Text Transmission* 2.
- Gumbert, J. Peter (2004), 'Codicological units: Towards a Terminology for the Stratigraphy of the Non-Homogeneous Codex', *Crisci and Pecere* 2004: 17–42.
- (2010), 'Zur Kodikologie und Katalographie der zusammengesetzten Handschrift', in Crisci, Edoardo, Maniaci, Marilena, and Orsini Pasquale (eds.), *La descrizione dei manoscritti: esperienze a confronto* (Cassino: Università degli Studi di Cassino, Dipartimento di Filologia e Storia; Studi e ricerche del Dipartimento di Filologia e Storia, 1), 1–18.
- Maniaci, Marilena (2004), 'Il codice greco 'non unitario'. Tipologie e terminologia', *Crisci and Pecere* 2004: 75–107.
- Petrucci, Armando (2004), 'Introduzione', *Crisci and Pecere* 2004: 3–17.
- Schenke, Gesa (2010), 'Ein koptischer Textzeuge der Acta Phileae', in Knuf, Hermann, Leitz, Christian, and von Recklinghausen, Daniel (eds.), *Honi soit qui mal y pense. Studien zum pharaonischen, griechisch-römischen und spätantiken Ägypten zu Ehren von Heinz-Josef Thissen* (Leuven: Unitgeverij Peeters and Department of Oosterse Studies; Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta, 194), 609–615.