Peer-reviewed chapter of Christopher Bahl and Stefan Hanss (eds.). *Scribal Practice and the Global Cultures of Colophons, 1400–1800*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, New Transculturalisms 1400-1800 (forthcoming 2022).

2 A Prosopography in Circulation: Advertising Scribal Travails in Arabic Manuscripts across Early Modern South Asia

Christopher D. Bahl (Durham University)

Scribal Communities and the Social Power of Colophons in Seventeenth-Century South Asia

This chapter explores scribes and the written artefacts they created in sixteenth and seventeenth South Asia and the wider Western Indian Ocean region to discuss how scribes made themselves heard professionally in a period of increased textual circulation. Over the last decades, the scribe has emerged as a central figure in historical research on early modern South Asia.[1] Crucial to this trend is the availability of sources to historians, composed, fashioned and perpetuated by these scribes, who shaped and were shaped by larger political and societal transformations in this period. Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam explored the "autobiographical" writings of a seventeenth century *munshī* (scribe), Nek Rai, to shed light on the scribal qualities and skills such as epistolography (*inshāʾ*) and accounting (*siyāqa*) in seventeenth-century North India.[2] Persian literacy came to dominate these pursuits over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and scribes constituted a central audience, among whom a canon of Persian literary writings and advice literature was perpetuated.[3] Rajeev Kinra's study of the works of Chandar Bhan Brahman at Shah Jahan's court (r. 1628–1658) is a formidable example of how scribal acumen translated into memory-making through personal reflections and professional promotion at the Mughal court.[4] Yet, what about those scribal groups, copyists and transcribers who do not feature in historical accounts, who lacked the resources to make themselves heard in the empirical symphony of history, and thereby the chance to develop their "voice" that survives until today? How did scribes feature in the social and cultural processes of early modern South Asia? While marginal voices were often "silenced", I suggest to zoom into their fragmentary written remains to study how they made themselves heard.[5] Scribes and copyists "spoke" to an audience of readers in their own ways and what they said mattered to them personally and professionally.

Narrative texts and normative writings draw a vivid and colourful but one-sided picture of the scribal profession. Elite professional groups such as courtiers, poets and scholars commanded their own prosopographical works, which described and collected people, their characters and careers.[6] They appear in a range of genres from anthologies to autobiographical writings, biographical dictionaries (*tazkeras*) and hagiographical works.[7] However, accounts of day-to-day scribal activities, for example the preparation of documents and the transmission

[1] See, for example, O'Hanlon and Washbrook, 2010.
[2] Alam and Subrahmanyam, 2011: 311–319.
[3] See Muzaffar and Subrahmanyam, 2004.
[4] Kinra, 2015.
[5] Trouillot, 1995.
[6] See, for example, Hermansen and Lawrence, 2000; Balachandran, 2015; Banerjee, 2017. For a historiographical critique of narrative texts, see Hirschler, 2013.
[7] Kinra, 2015; Dudney, 2013.

of manuscripts, are rare.[8] At the same time, Arabic textual traditions which would mirror the professional *esprit de corps* of lower-ranking scribes, are generally absent from this period and region.[9] In order to see those "ordinary" scribes, we need to look at the written artefacts they created such as manuscripts, documents and letters. This professional record of the scribes, who served the reproduction of the written word, is marginalised today, scattered across archives and difficult to trace.[10] Such scribes might be given a passing mention in a newsletter, a poem or an account of another higher-standing peer.[11] Still, as the historical record and current scholarship imply, scribes and copyists did not always control their professional resources independently, and therefore could not showcase their participation in the cultural production of their times to an extent similar to their high-standing peers, *ʿulamāʾ* (scholars), poets and administrative elites.[12]

To comprehend these scribes as historical protagonists, one has to accumulate the fragmentary evidence they left behind and read this empirical cluster along its different "archival grain[s]".[13] Firstly, this means tracing the act of the individual copyist as a meaningful endeavour. Often a "codicological gaze" frames processes of copying and textual reproduction, and thereby focuses on the documentary evidence of the finished written product.[14] Instead of considering the copyist only as part of the created object, one has to look at how he inscribed himself as the subject that shaped the written artefact. This means breaking up the colophons into its different layers of documentation, subjectivity and sociability and analysing these elements in their individual and combined significance. Copying activities can be re-signified in their historical context, analysed in each individual instance and with regard to the larger cumulative importance of these instances.

In line with this volume's focus on studying scribal practice and scribes through their colophons,[15] this chapter puts forward both an empirical and a conceptual argument to present glimpses of a social history of marginalised scribes in seventeenth-century South Asia. Firstly, in order to broaden our understanding of the social world of scribes in this period, this chapter expands the source base to study "colophons" in their cultural variety. Apart from being a mere codicological element, colophons offer crucial insights into how individual copyists pursued their cultural practices. They shaped their colophons as cultural markers of belonging, expressions of social standing and advertisements of professional skills.

Secondly, and more specifically in the present context, colophons need to be studied in larger clusters and in the context of an increasing manuscript circulation—and thereby the spread of textual practices in seventeenth-century South Asia, which will be outlined below. Studying the growth of scribal communities during that period helps reconsidering the cultural significance of colophons and professional signatures.[16] I argue that the seventeenth-century

[8] See the two rather dated exceptions Rosenthal, 1947, on the preparation of manuscripts, and Mohiuddin, 1971.
[9] Arabic as a scholarly language in South Asia remains largely unstudied as well. For a general survey, see Ahmad 1968. See also the discussion in Bahl, forthcoming a.
[10] Bahl, 2018: 24-30.
[11] Pernau and Jaffery, 2009.
[12] The prosopographical record that we know of so far is dominated by these groups. See Kinra, 2015.
[13] For this approach see Stoler, 2009.
[14] For such codicological methods, see Pfeiffer and Kropp, 2007.
[15] For the conceptual framework, see the introduction of this volume.
[16] I am elaborating on Adam Gacek's (2012) formalised remarks and assessments of scribal practices to historicise scribal labours in the context of early modern South Asia.

expansion of scribal communities in the Indian subcontinent granted scribes a new repertoire of scribal practices to experiment with. This empowered scribes to tag and frame their practices of copying texts in different ways.

Yet, this new conceptual approach to empirical variety considers the social importance of colophons beyond the court societies of the period. Thus, thirdly, manuscripts and their colophons have to be studied in terms of their circulation among larger groups of people. By the seventeenth century, South Asian scribes fashioned colophons as a social medium to shape the self-understanding of the copyists as well as their perception across learned sociabilities and bookish pursuits.

This is what I call a "prosopography in circulation": the cumulative social effects achieved by copyists in their advertisement of scribal skills through colophons across textual communities. As previous scholarship has argued, scribes and copyists used colophons not only to state the completion of a text, but also to include biographical information, details about the textual production of the work, to praise readers, seek their personal fortune and express reverence for their loved ones.[17] For the seventeenth century in South Asia specifically, I argue that scribes included such information purposefully and used the colophon strategically to inscribe themselves into valued written objects which they had crafted themselves. More importantly, I suggest that the copyists' and scribes' self-presentations in the colophon were influenced by their knowledge that the Arabic manuscripts they produced for patrons continued to circulate and changed owners. In patronage cultures writing a colophon was a social act.[18] Importantly, the high velocity of Arabic manuscripts during the seventeenth century intensified these effects. Through the skilful and creative experimentation with personalized colophons an increasing community of scribes participated in learned sociabilities and claimed textual visibility among a growing audience as a fundamental element of the circulation and spread of Arabic cultures in the subcontinent. The notion of a "prosopography in circulation" serves as a heuristic to understand the kaleidoscope of scribal activity in its larger social and cultural significance; and it shows that such colophons are neither isolated nor static. They spoke to each other and embedded people into broader group cultures, thereby claiming, shaping and transforming the social worlds in which scribal cultures took place. This chapter, thus, offers a novel perspective reaching beyond the codicological features of the colophon: a social history of scribes' experimentation with colophons as scribal tools brings the fragmentary elements of scribal practices across early modern South Asia into a more profound dialogue.

State Formation and the Use of Paper in Seventeenth-Century South Asia

In one regard, scribal activity maintained larger political formations during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a time when regional states in the subcontinent began to parallel the central Mughal administration in the provinces and claimed a greater share in political power.[19] *Munshīs* and *kāyasthas*, to mention two terms prevalent for scribes in this period, did the leg-

[17] See the scholarship quoted in the introduction to this volume.
[18] Leder, 2011.
[19] For this and the following see Bayly, 1996.

work in the bureaucratisation of South Asia's early modern states, from Mughal Delhi to the emerging regional states of Hyderabad, Bengal and Awadh. Scribes contributed considerably to the cultural production of legitimacy in these polities, since they composed the everyday records that implemented state-formation processes.[20] Over the eighteenth century, scribes facilitated regime-change from the Mughal dispensation to the Company Raj by providing the knowledge, man-power and practical skills that underpinned bureaucracies from Bengal to Awadh and Delhi.[21] Across textual traditions of the subcontinent's "multilingual landscape",[22] scribes played a paramount role: they perpetuated literary canons, ran administrations and thereby shaped, consolidated and transformed their own professional identities.

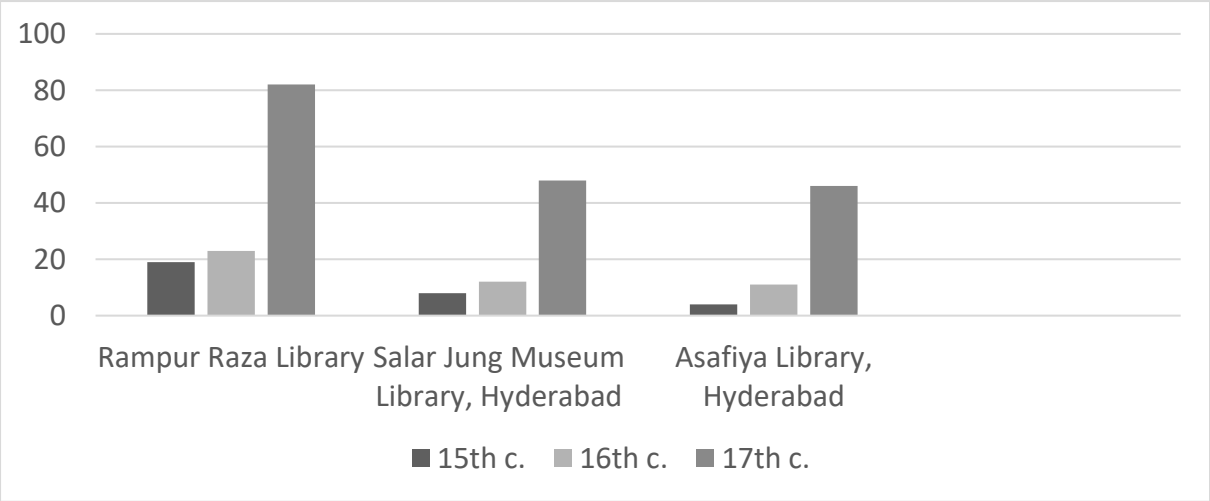
Scribal practices became constitutive for a growing professional class of literati of different sectarian, social, economic and cultural backgrounds. How far professional notions conformed to each other across the subcontinent is difficult to assess. Rosalind O'Hanlon argued that scribal practices helped to establish social identities among scribal communities.[23] Brahmin discussions about the ritual purity of *kāyasthas* ("scribes") signified an increased professional competition among social groups who vied for employment. Thus, while these scribal groups were embedded in vertical political and social hierarchies, there is still room to explore horizontal links among professional copyists that were fostered through the pursuit of a collective practice: notions of a common code of conduct, identification with a profession and sense of personal belonging.

Paper was crucial to all these processes. The "widespread adoption of paper as a medium for communication" fuelled these transformations and created the concomitant phenomenon of an increased circulation of manuscripts across different regions, languages and communities.[24] The increased use of paper also holds true for Arabic manuscripts, which circulated in greater numbers and more widely in courtly contexts and urban learned sociabilities.[25] Arabic philology became a significant intellectual pursuit among Arabophone communities in the subcontinent. Here, I will focus on the emergence of a substantial Arabic manuscript culture by the seventeenth century, created by a growing community of professional copyists in South Asia. Apart from a handful of studies, the importance of Arabic as a scholarly idiom and communicative medium in early modern South Asia has not been studied sufficiently yet.[26] For example, the empirical treasure trove of Arabic manuscript collections in India, from Rampur to Kolkata and Hyderabad has mostly been ignored so far.[27] Based on the study of these thus far neglected archival holdings, this chapter offers a first exploratory assessment of Arabic scribal practices in the early modern South Asia and its connections with the wider Western Indian Ocean region. Beginning this task with the surviving manuscripts offers a bottom-up approach to the sphere of Arabic pursuits in the subcontinent. They provide a rich

[20] Chatterjee, 2010.
[21] Bayly, 1996.
[22] Orsini and Sheikh, 2014.
[23] O'Hanlon, 2010; O'Hanlon, 2015.
[24] O'Hanlon, 2013, who refers to a range of studies which made the argument of a paper revolution for the Middle Eastern contexts as well. See, for example, Bloom, 2001.
[25] Bahl, 2018: 200-207.
[26] Insightful exceptions are Ho, 2006; Ricci, 2011.
[27] Bahl, 2018: 24-30.

perspective on copyists who transmitted the texts, as well as on readers who engaged with them and engendered their further circulation.

The seventeenth century witnessed a considerable quantitative increase in manuscript (re-)production and circulation across the entire subcontinent and its transregional links. This is based on the manuscript collections in Arabic philology in the Rampur Raza Library and in two libraries in Hyderabad (Asafiya and Salar Jung) in the Deccan further south.[28] I chose these libraries because they can be considered among the largest sites of Arabic manuscript collections in the subcontinent. A survey of their Arabic philological manuscripts, i.e. grammar (*ʿilm al-naḥw*), rhetoric (*ʿilm al-balāgha*) and lexicography (*ʿilm al-lugha*), shows that these libraries hold more manuscripts of the Arabic philological disciplines that were copied during the seventeenth century in comparison to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This survey only includes manuscripts that can be clearly dated based on their colophons (see Fig. 2.1). The Rampur Raza Library holds a total of 19 manuscript copies of the philological disciplines dated to the fifteenth, 23 to the sixteenth and 82 to the seventeenth century. In the Salar Jung Museum 8 manuscripts survive for the fifteenth, 12 for the sixteenth and 48 for the seventeenth century. The Asafiya Library collection holds 4 manuscripts dated to the fifteenth, 11 to the sixteenth and 46 to the seventeenth century. The Arabic manuscripts in these collections originated in a range of different places across the subcontinent, the Red Sea region, as well as Western and Central Asia, but in the majority of cases, their place of copying cannot be pinpointed precisely.[29] Courtiers, scholars and scribes had copied these texts. For any assessment in a South Asian context one has to bear in mind the strong transregional background of many specimen. In sum, all these collections show a significant quantitative increase in manuscript-copying processes from the sixteenth to the seventeenth century. Since these collections' profiles cover important socio-cultural contexts of Arabic Islamicate text circulation in South Asia and the wider western Indian Ocean world at that time, the quantitative increase can point to changing qualitative trends in the handling, circulation and use of Arabic manuscripts.[30]



[28] For the following quantitative data, see tables 5 and 6a–d regarding the collections in Hyderabad in Bahl, 2018. On data from Rampur, see Islahi and Nadwi, 2014; Islahi and Nadwi, 2015.
[29] Bahl, 2018: 227.
[30] Shafir, 2016 contains an intriguing discussion of the increase in manuscripts during the seventeenth century with a focus on the Ottoman lands.

Fig. 2.1: Quantitative data based on datable Arabic manuscripts in Arabic Philology shows a considerable increase in manuscript production and circulation across South Asia and the Western Indian Ocean region during the seventeenth century.

Of course, there are important caveats in this quantitative argument. Firstly, many manuscripts in these collections are not conclusively dateable regarding their transcription date. This means that a number of the manuscripts cannot be conclusively positioned onto the timeline of manuscript growth. Secondly, survival rates of early modern manuscripts pose a general problem to such forms of investigation. Since this survival rate is contingent on a variety of different factors, it is also impossible to calculate an error rate that would substantiate existing data. Thirdly, even if a manuscript was copied in the seventeenth century this does not mean that it created any further cultural significances beyond the transcription process, i.e. that it circulated or that it was read, studied or used for a further transcription.

Despite such limitations, the data provide rare insights suggesting broader cultural trends, because they contextualise a cumulative reading of colophons. The slow increase of manuscript reproduction from the fifteenth to the sixteenth centuries compared with the steep increase from the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries, as evident in the numbers of manuscripts in these collections, indicates that something happened in the field of written Arabic artefacts. At the same time, with the increase in manuscript circulation, more scribes had the chance to participate in these changing textual pursuits. Studying this interlinked phenomenon of more manuscripts through more proliferators allows for a radical historicization of colophons and their appropriation by South Asian scribes over the early modern period.

Colophons as Social Acts

With these manuscripts scribes exhibited their professional skills, indicated motivations and stated purposes for their work. Examining the significance of such cultural practices for the social communications of scribal groups embeds an analysis of colophons within the broader social history of early modern South Asia and the Western Indian Ocean region. By doing so, the analysis further strengthens what has been suggested above: a significant transformation of seventeenth-century scribal cultures. By turning the writing of colophons into a social act, scribes transformed these paratexts into crucial tools for navigating through their societies.

The cultural profile of the manuscript corpora discussed here is diverse. Courtly copies with decorations and a highly representative execution of elaborate scribal skills stand out for aesthetic reasons. Yet, this finesse can often be contrasted with many work-in-progress versions, which appear visually less appealing but come with traces of scholarly use and learned engagement through an abundance of notes. This rather simplified assessment of the functional range of manuscripts can be further developed and fine-tuned.[31] In reality, manuscript cultures are much messier than that. Colophons themselves differ in shape, content, location and, if we look more closely, also in purpose. They document a diverse way of meaning-making and communicate the labours of a variety of copyists, who had different

[31] Hirschler, 2019.

resources available and whose social standing was embedded in complex societal hierarchies. A close reading of colophons, and their contextualization with other manuscript notes, complicates our understanding of the social and cultural purposes of manuscripts and their reproduction. By suggesting this conceptual approach, I present an analysis of how a heterogenous community of scribes participated in and thereby contributed to processes of Arabic philological knowledge transmission in South Asia, and what this meant for them.

In the subcontinent, scribes did not consistently tag their work with their name but often preferred to remain anonymous. Many manuscripts in the collections of Hyderabad and Rampur do not provide the name of the respective scribe at all.[32] Some manuscripts simply end with a compositional colophon, i.e. a colophon used to document the manuscript's completion by the initial composer with whom the title of the work and its main text (*matn*) became identified. This cultural pattern can be observed in a number of works of particular prominence in their fields. Copyists of the *al-Qāmūs al-muḥīṭ* ("The all-encompassing Ocean"), a widely circulated Arabic dictionary by the fifteenth-century scholar Muḥammad al-Fīrūzābādī (d. 1414), often decided to remain anonymous.[33] The same can be said of the commonly adopted commentary of Arabic rhetoric, the *Sharḥ al-muṭawwal* ("The elaborate commentary") by Saʿd al-Dīn Masʿūd al-Taftazānī (d. 1390).

It is important to treat such textual omissions as what is often called conscious "epistemic gaps" with a social meaning, thus, as choices made by those writing them. What were the motivations behind such decisions? Did they pertain to books of special popularity? A survey of famous works in manuscript collections of South Asia shows that they belonged to the stock-in-trade of royal libraries, reading circles and personal book collections.[34] They would have been incorporated into learned sociabilities and educational settings of *madāris* (sg. *madrasa*), and mosques across the board, and thus constituted textbooks and reference works.[35] It is possible that such books represented run-of-the-mill versions, which learned people copied in great numbers and often for themselves. Since scribes made them available in a wide range of sociabilities, it is reasonable to assume that the majority of such manuscripts were not always intended to circulate widely. The more localised purpose could have made scribes decide not to include their names into the colophon at the end of such texts.

This is not to say that popular works did not serve the promotion of scribal labour and skill. Scribes employed other famous texts to advertise their scribal persona effectively**.** A particularly telling example comes from a scribe from the northern Deccanī town and courtly centre of Burhānpūr.[36] The scribe decided to append the colophon on the last folio of the manuscript. In terms of the information provided in the colophon, this is a rather detailed case. What is important here is how he divided the colophon into two parts and thereby arranged the information. The colophon comes in the common triangular form and reads as follows (see Fig. 2.2):

[32] See, for example, Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad, MS Nahw 2049, final fol.; Rampur Raza Library, Rampur, MS Nahw 504, final fol.
[33] See, for example, Rampur Raza Library, Rampur, MS 4658.
[34] Loth, 1877 on the royal library of Bijapur; Ashraf, 1993.
[35] Smyth, 1993.
[36] For this and the following, Andhra Pradesh Oriental Manuscript Library, Hyderabad, MS Nahw 19.

The rough draft of this exalted and blessed manuscript of the glosses, which are connected with the glosses of Mawlāna ʿAbd al-Ghafūr [al-Lārī]*, may God grant him a pardon, of the writings of Wahīd al-Dīn […] al-ʿaṣr fahhām Mawlāna ʿAbd al-Ḥakīm* [al-Siyālkūṭī]*, Nūr Allāh, resting place until the day of religion, was finished on Wednesday the 7th of the month of Ramaḍān in the year 1075 h.*

By the hand of the beggar in need of God, the affluent, the weak servant of Allāh, Ḥabīb Allāh b. Shaykh Yūsuf b. ʿAbd Allāh ʿAbbāsī, resident of Burhānpūr.

Fig. 2.2: Colophon divided into two sections in MS Nahw 19, APOML, Hyderabad.

The first part contains the information regarding the framework of the manuscript's transmission, its title and author, as well as the date of copying. The manuscript is a copy of a famous supra-commentary in Arabic Grammar by the Mughal courtier and scholar ʿAbd al-Ḥakīm al-Siyālkūṭī (d. 1067/1657) on ʿAbd al-Ghafūr's commentary of al-Jāmī's *al-Fawāʾid al-Ḍiyāʾiyya* ("The Shining Abundance"), which in turn was a widely sought-after fifteenth-century commentary on the foundational grammar treatise *al-Kāfiya* ("The Sufficient"), by Ibn al-Ḥājib (d. 646/1249).[37] Al-Siyalkūṭī composed several commentaries on popular works in

[37] Ed. 2019.

Arabic grammar and rhetoric while serving at the court of Shāh Jahān (r. 1628–1658), and his works in turn continued to be copied after his death. The copyist of this version transcribed the commentary in the month of Ramaḍān 1074/1664.

The copyist used the second part of the colophon for presenting autobiographical information about himself. He thereby removed it from the statement of documentary details. Below the markers of textual soundness and authenticity shaped in a triangle, he appended another short paragraph in a different layout (Fig. 2.2). Common formulae of humility state that the copied version was finished by the hands of a certain Ḥabīb Allāh b. Shaykh Yūsuf b. ʿAbdallāh ʿAbbāsī, who was a resident (*sākin*) of Burhanpur. While the colophon often contains all the data in a triangularly shaped text block, this division immediately catches the eye, and draws the reader's attention towards the scribe. The textual layout suggests that the scribe wanted to stand out at the end and advertise his persona and the completion of the work by his hand. With the personal inscription at the end of the text the copyist demonstrated that he mattered. He was the proliferator of the text. Just as the beginning of the colophon introduced parts of the commentarial genealogy of the copied text, so too did the copyist become part of the social genealogy of the text's transmission. Patrons, Gods and other relations provide the cultural resources in this process.[38]

Simultaneously, the formulaic also emphasises the specific. While each phrase of a colophon appears similar and repetitive, the scribe re-signifies it by adding his own name and cultural background. The formulaic makes the individual scribe stand out. A manuscript version of the grammar work *Ghayat al-Taḥqīq* ("The Utmost in Competence"), a commentary on the previously mentioned *al-Kāfiya* of Ibn al-Ḥājib by Ṣāfiy al-Dīn b. Naṣīr further exemplifies this.[39] Here, the copyist divided the different aspects of the colophon into separate textual segments (Fig. 2.3). First of all, the main text finishes with a discourse on the time and mode of completing this work, shaped in a triangular arrangement of the text. This is followed by a longer section which starts out with lines of praise and also states 1092/1681 as the date when the copyist finished the version. The following section begins with lines of humility and builds up to the name of the copyist, who identifies himself as Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. ʿAbd Allāh Ḥāmid.[40] The subsequent section is then reserved for the more common lines of praise for Allāh, the prophet and his family. They finish with supplications for the *Ṭayyīn* ("the concealed") and the *Ṭāhirīn* ("the virtuous"), both terms which hint at a Shīʿī background and milieu of the copyist.[41] Given the presence of Shīʿī communities in the Deccan and especially in Hyderabad—assuming a Deccani provenance of the manuscript copy—this is nothing out of the ordinary for this time and place.[42] The observation exemplifies points made in the introduction of this volume: even such seemingly formulaic and standardised lines can nonetheless, in their subtle variation, serve as a space to express one's cultural and religious belonging.[43]

[38] For the significance of social relationships in writing practices, see Jancke, 2002. I thank Stefan Hanß for pointing this out to me.
[39] For this and the following, see Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad, MS 2013, Nahw 66, final fol.
[40] The composition of his name already hints at a Shīʿī affiliation. See Gacek, 2009: 239.
[41] Gacek, 2009: 239.
[42] Cf. Fischel, 2012, who traces these various Muslim communities in the Deccan.
[43] See the introduction of this volume.

South Asian copyists also invested time and energy to inscribe themselves into a thorough transmission process. They strove towards textual accuracy since they contributed to a future reader's scholarly resources. A range of different textual operations feature in these contexts. The scribe meant to guarantee a sound transmission of knowledge. The copy of the *Ghayat al-Taḥqīq* is constructive in this regard. Apart from the visual differentiation of the details regarding the transcription process, the copyist Muḥammad added a collation note in the margins of the colophon. It stated that the manuscript copy was derived from another manuscript copy and both of them had been transmitted through listening (*samiʿtān*) in 1094/1683, thus around two years after the initial completion of the work. Since he himself constituted one chain in this process and thus an element in the continued formation and perpetuation of Arabic philological knowledge, aspects of textual authenticity and their means to achieve it appear in the colophon. Furthermore, the time span of two years gives an additional sense of dedication that the scribe invested into the manuscript.

Fig. 2.3: Divided colophon with references to the mode of transmission and collation, the copyist and supplications. MS 2013, Nahw 66, Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad, last folio.

Colophons of Arabic manuscripts in South Asia also conveyed a personal touch. In his work on Armenian manuscripts of the medieval period, David Zakarian has shown how scribes used colophons to record their ancestry, remember their family and place themselves within a genealogy of kinship that expresses a sense of personal belonging.[44] The onomastic details they provided is markedly different from a common practice in the early modern Arabic manuscripts from South Asia (and in Arabic Islamicate texts more generally).[45] Here, scribes often referred to future readers, parents, brothers or even Muslims in general in their supplications and prayers at the end of the colophon. However, I could not find a single manuscript in the surveyed collections, which would identify these different acquaintances of the scribe or copyist with a specific name. In comparison to Zakarian's case, I suggest that this renders the written artefact and its colophon even more of a personal matter. While these colophons, in a manner similar to other manuscript notes, put the scribe and his wider sociable background on the map for readers to acknowledge, they do not record protagonists for their own sake.[46] The scribe's references to his personal entourage and readers remains decipherable only to himself or the people who know him. It is a deeply personal note mirrored in the fact that the reference to the anonymous future readers expresses the desire for a wide circulation of the book.[47] While such colophons partly function as a biographical note of the scribe, similar to a *tarjama* (biographical entry), which would often include details about a person's family background, descent and the affection for his loved ones, it puts the spotlight only on the scribe, his background and written creation. Still, in the end the scribe represents himself through anonymous kinship relations but also inserts himself into imagined bonds with readers.

Such personal expressions make the cultural importance of copying manuscripts tangible. A sixteenth-century manuscript version of the *Sharḥ al-Kāfiya* ("Commentary on the Sufficient") by Raḍī al-Dīn al-Astarābādī (d. 1287 or 1289) shows how a scribe expressed his personal affection towards his finished written artefact.[48] Towards the end of the colophon, the copyist ʿAbd al-ʿAlī b. Muḥammad b. Ḥusayn writes first about himself and then also about others: "[…] may God pardon him and his parents and the one who reads the book and the one who looks at it […]".[49] His wishes of praise for future readers show that he was conscious of his professional position in the field of manuscript production. He provided the central object for the pursuit of reading practices. At the same time, the scribe differentiates between the "one who reads the book" (*li-man ṭālaʿa hādhā l-kitāb*) and the "one who looks at it" (*wa-naẓara fīhi*). He was aware of the habits of the different parties interested in the book and of the latter's visual appeal. What is significant though is that both are important to him to fulfil the purpose of his scribal production. The transmitted book either had a highly symbolic aura or represents a precious object in circulation.[50] Yet, it only reaches its conclusion in the dialogue with the readership.

[44] See the contribution of this volume.
[45] Gacek, 2009.
[46] For the use of manuscript notes as a prosopographical source, see Hirschler, 2011. For a broad survey of manuscript notes for one particular library and the readership of its books, see Liebrenz, 2016.
[47] Davis, 2013. I thank Stefan Hanß for pointing this out to me.
[48] For this and the following, cf. Raza Library, Rampur, MS 4830.
[49] Raza Library, Rampur, MS 4830, final fol.
[50] For related scholarship, see Kooria, 2018.

The formulaic character of colophons can easily lead one to assume that scribes remained impersonal and hid behind idiomatic expressions. Combining a close reading of colophons with their social environment, however, shows the contrary. It is important to read the restrictions to a repetitive set of phrases and modalities of composing a colophon as an adherence to a professional comportment, the *adab* of the scribe, similar to a "scribal etiquette" as Adam Gacek phrased it.[51] The two manuscript copies MS Nahw 59 and MS Nahw 77 SJM from the Salar Jung Museum in Hyderabad are in different handwriting and contain recurring short versions of colophons, as follows respectively: "[…] *Tamma al-kitāb bi-ʿawn Allāh al-Malik al-Wahhāb* […]' and '*tammat al-kitāb bi-ʿawn Allāh al-Malik al-Wahhāb*".[52] It translates as "the book was completed in the face of Allāh, the King and Giver". Although the copyist does not identify himself in these cases, this style of crafting a colophon is reflective of a common code of practice. In its recurrence it hints at a shared understanding of scribal professionalism.

In social terms, observing a code of conduct or *adab* associates the scribe with a larger transregional group of copyists and thereby a community which participated in forms of Arabic knowledge circulation. Ronit Ricci identified several "citation sites" in manuscripts from Southeast Asia, as well as common formulae of phrases to which scribes adhered.[53] She thereby argued for a shared cultural understanding among those who used these vocabularies which created "an elusive sense of belonging". For the medieval European context, Martin Irvine advanced arguments on the shaping of a "textual culture" of grammatica.[54] While grammatica initiated novices into the field of Latin literacy, their foundational texts performed a larger "social function" in the perpetuation of an entire cultural complex.[55] The wider institutional practice around these texts defined the terms of access to the written word as well as its interpretation and structured the matrix of sociabilities in learned encounters. Analogously, the copyists of philological manuscripts discussed in this chapter regulated the access to the Arabic written word in South Asia. They located themselves at crucial nodes of textual transmission. Their reproductive activities ultimately contributed to the perpetuation of Arabic philological knowledge. From a cumulative perspective, their handling of manuscripts, collating of texts and documenting of scribal labour, made them a professional group constitutive of Arabic philological culture. The significance of scribes becomes visible as the real proliferators of such changes in the context of an increase in manuscript circulation.

[51] Gacek, 2009: 235f.
[52] Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad, MS 1996, Nahw 59, final fol.; MS 2015, Nahw 77, final fol.
[53] For this and the following, see Ricci, 2012a.
[54] Irvine, 1994.
[55] Irvine, 1994: xiii.

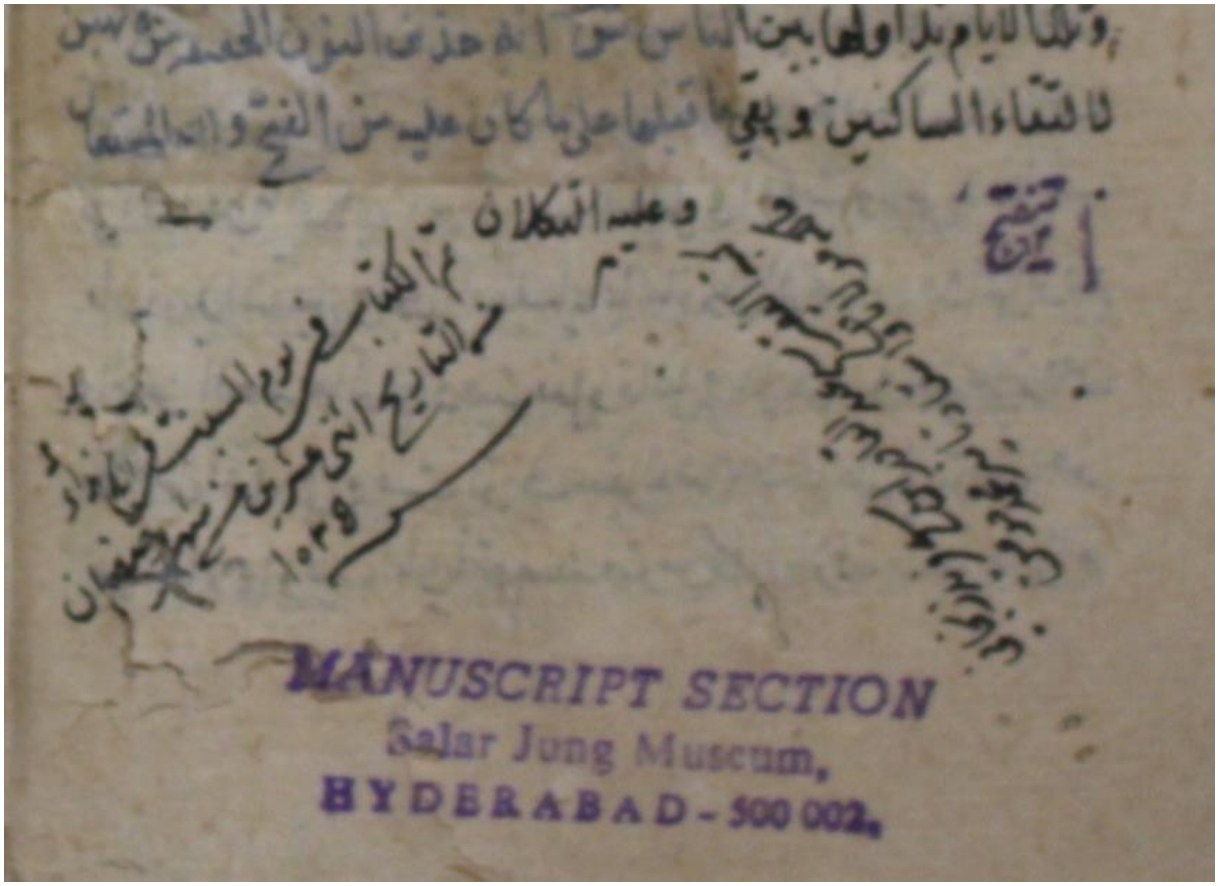


Fig. 2.4: Colophon of MS 2012, Nahw 36, Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad with a turned triangular arrangement of the scribal information.

Beyond the scribal community, copyists secured relationships with learned figures and thereby managed to share important scholarly networks. The identification with the entourage of a Sufi Shaykh or a specific studying circle, for instance was a way for the copyist to cater to a specific intellectual cause and make his textual skills stand out. Although this is often hard to trace in detail, it is more than likely that scribes did so in order to benefit from foregrounding such personal connections. In a 1035/1626 copy of ʿĪsa b. Aḥmad al-Sūdānī's (probably sixteenth to seventeenth centuries) glosses on the grammar commentary *al-Muwashshaḥ* ("The Adorned"), the copyist Shaykh ʿAbd al-Qadīr b. Shaykh Farīdzinjānī prepared the version for the future owner and master and teacher (*mālikahu mawlānā wa-ustādhunā*) Mīr Muḥammad Muʾmin (see Fig. 2.4).[56] Contributing a manuscript to a studying circle could enhance the visibility of the written artefact and its creator, since such texts were shared by students, or preserved in a mosque's library or a scholar's book collection. Here again, scribes inserted themselves into real and imaginary relationships to express a sense of personal and intellectual belonging.[57]

Apart from relating to a specific person or network, copyists in South Asia also related to a place. However, as the evidence of the Arabic manuscript collections in the Deccan indicates, such references were only made selectively. This sparks the question of the broader

[56] Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad, MS 2012, Nahw 36.
[57] See Nur Sobers-Khan's contribution in this volume.

motivations that made scribes of all ranks chose to mention (or omit) the place of transcription in the first place. Based on the three manuscript corpora from the Deccan, including the collections of the Royal Library of Bijapur, in addition to the aforementioned Salar Jung Museum and the Asafia Library,[58] I argue that such explicit geographical references are significant since they explicitly mark instances where scribes used the opportunity to locate themselves in a larger political, socio-cultural and geographical context. Since ultimately it was the choice of the scribe to include a geographical reference or not, the reference to a particular site of manuscript reproduction has to be considered for its broader social and cultural implications.

Putting together such geographical references visualises a partial cultural landscape of manuscript reproduction and scribal travails on a map—and yields those locations that were considered to be important by scribes. Scribes and copyists marked a variety of places in the larger subcontinent as sites of manuscript transmission and reproduction. They copied Arabic philological texts in Ahmadābād and Cambay in Gujarat, from Rampur to Fātehpūr Sīkrī to Qannauj and Patna in the East, across the Deccan from Burhānpūr in the northern part to the town of Lāsūr near Dawlatābād, to Aḥmadnagar, Bijapur and Hyderabad further south.[59] These were places of political, economic and cultural importance, including powerful courts, vibrant port cities, sites of shrines and pilgrimage, centres of learning and scholarly prestige. The fact that Deccani collections absorbed manuscripts from all over the subcontinent and beyond again underscores that some of these manuscripts also travelled wide distances and made scribes visible among new owners and in different places.

[58] For the collections of the Royal Library of Bijapur see Loth, 1877.

[59] Loth, 1877; Ashraf, 1993. Cf. respectively Andhra Pradesh Oriental Manuscript Library, Hyderabad, MS Naḥw 4; MS Naḥw 19; British Library, London, MS B 253; MS B 260; MS IO B 3; MS IO B 223; MS IO B 256; Salar Jung Museum, Hydarabad, B&M 43; MS Fal 106/3; MS Lughat 8; MS Lughat 13; MS Naḥw 27; MS Naḥw 47; MS Naḥw 48/1; MS Naḥw 108.

Map 2.1: Places of manuscript reproduction as stated by scribes in colophons of early modern Arabic philological manuscripts in South Asia (based on collections of the Asafiya Library, the Salar Jung Museum Library, the Royal Library of Bijapur, today housed in the British Library, London). Map by Olaf Nelson – chinooktype.com.

Moreover, these were urban areas inhabited at that time by a variety of communities. Including these places in the paratextual profile of Arabic philological manuscripts also puts them on the map as sociabilities for scribal groups. It thereby adds another layer of cultural activities to this landscape of political, social and religious prestige. While a few places of lesser importance feature in this survey as well, the accumulative view is one of imperial and regional centres. In courtly centres such as Ahmadnagar and Bijapur, scribes probably faced a higher competition amongst their colleagues, a situation that might have been rather different in more remote places such as Lāsūr, a village near the military fort of Dawlatābād. Since most textual transactions and reproduction processes are not specified with reference to a place but were constitutive because of the people involved, the deliberate decision to add a place name in the colophon suggests a choice of individual personal importance to the scribe. Mentioning a place next to one's own name at the end of a text showed that one was professionally significant in

that particular location and maybe, as European examples suggest, to create demand and advertise one's own copying services for interested customers.[60]

Prosopographies in Circulation

Scribes could never fully control the future circulation of their finished manuscripts. Still, when they copied a text for a patron, they could presume a potential recognition from his or her side. In the previous cases, scribes referred to possible readership audiences in the colophon themselves. Readers, family members, people who would hold the book in their hand, but also teachers and shaykhs could be the intended audience of a manuscript. Crafting a manuscript for a courtly library guaranteed a place on the shelves that readers might take note of.[61] Sufi disciples transcribed texts that would be handed around and preserved in the libraries of their Shaykhs or Sufi convents.[62] Manuscripts also changed hands among different owners. Seals, ownership notes and transmission statements document such social trajectories in local and transregional contexts.[63] An increase in manuscript reproduction in seventeenth-century South Asia and beyond probably created an awareness among scribal groups that their written products now circulated among larger communities. The fact that many manuscripts of the Deccan corpus hailed from places across the Western Indian Ocean world and were eventually preserved in collections of South Asia, highlights the mobility of these manuscripts.

It is in the different and repeated acts of circulation that the memory of a scribe was kept alive, his skill advertised and his contribution to Arabic philological knowledge production documented. Book exchanges, reading and preservation are all acts constitutive of a "prosopography in circulation". It is beyond the scope of this contribution to show each individual case. In the aforementioned manuscript copy transcribed in Burhanpur (Fig. 2.2), for example, there is a seal beneath the colophon which indicates one aspect of its future readership. The seal is not fully legible and not all its details can be gauged. Royal titles and terminology thus suggest that at some point after the completion of the copy, it was received in a courtly context.

In reality, the afterlives of manuscripts in their circulation could be very different. Many books never changed hands even though scribes hoped they would; some might even never have been read by anyone other than the scribe who copied it. Several manuscripts in the Deccani collections come without any markers of ownership. Other books had a high velocity in circulation and their readers transferred them amongst each other for various reasons: because the copy was particularly well-executed, it was a prominent text or the marginalia inscribed by readers were of special significance to later interested parties.[64] Many Arabic manuscripts travelled widely through the movement of courtiers and scholars. They disseminated philological works across a cultural landscape of different learned sociabilities in

[60] I thank Stefan Hanß for this suggestion.
[61] See, for example, the decorated colophon of the *Gulistan* from the Mughal court in Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, London, Ms. Pers. 258: fol. 128b.
[62] For a study of the use of books in this context, see Green, 2012.
[63] Overton, 2016; Hirschler, 2019.
[64] For an example from the Mughal context, see Bahl, forthcoming b.

South Asia.[65] Arabic manuscripts in the Royal Library of Bijapur, for example circulated among librarians and readers of the court.[66] Moreover, manuscripts often circulated over many generations, since they were precious objects. Notes on the title pages of these manuscripts record the instances in which this happened: when, how and among whom ownership of a manuscript version changed. These provide a record of the more formalised instances in which a book was circulated. It is in the nature of the more "informal practices" that it remains impossible to trace such forms of book circulation. But we can assume that readers scrutinised manuscript without necessarily documenting their engagement with the text.

When books and manuscripts changed hands, this transaction created a temporary gathering of individuals—a sociability of book exchanges—and thus a moment in which a new reader scrutinised the features of a book. How this happened is not always possible to track down. When it happened in a more formalised way, it was recorded on title pages and fly-leaves of manuscripts.[67] These indicate a larger sphere of book circulation, be it book markets, the home of a scholar or another place of sociable gathering. The book transmission constitutes a form of dialogue between a manuscript and its new reader. Paratextual elements feature prominently in this moment because of their highly visible location at the beginning and the end of a text—the "threshold" a reader crosses to access the text of a book.[68] The colophon is among these paratextual elements. Some colophons were erased by new owners for different reasons.[69] Yet, other colophons remained intact over the centuries. Such crucial markers of textual authority at the end of the text continued to advertise the creator of the manuscript to generations of future readers, in book exchanges, among different owners, in madrasa settings and on the shelves of libraries at courts.

To conclude**,** I consider the colophon in combination with other forms of social documentation on manuscripts—ownership notes, transmission notes and seals—as a mobile element of the prosopographical record that existed in a world of sociable bookish pursuits. Colophons were at the forefront of social manoeuvring and embedded in the socio-cultural worlds of manuscript production. Scribal communities were made up of a diverse range of individuals. While some of scholarly rank had developed their own media of scholarly promotion, social prestige and cultural memory, others were marginalised and excluded from the prosopographical archive.[70] So far, I have not come across biographical works which mention the more common scribes discussed in this chapter. At the same time, it is safe to assume that the majority of scribes never appear in the often rather exclusive biographical dictionaries across Islamicate communities. A focus on colophons in circulation shows that marginalised scribes were nevertheless inscribed in a mobile world of human and textual circulation, similar to their more famous and powerful peers. Foregrounding their skills made the social acts of scribes visible. Through a focus on colophons historians can detect shifts in their worlds and grant the scribes visibility in the stories they tell. In such mobile social and textual worlds, scribes made use of colophons in order to showcase their expertise and skills,

[65] Bahl, 2018.
[66] Overton, 2016.
[67] For a study of such notes in the Ottoman context, see Liebrenz, 2016.
[68] For a more detailed discussion of Genette's concept of the paratext see the introduction of this volume.
[69] This phenomenon comes up repeatedly in the secondary literature. See, for example, Gacek, 2009.
[70] Gacek, 2009: 43–47, 119 refers to Ottoman calligraphers authoring works, e.g. Ḥamd Allāh al-Amāsī (d. 926/1520).

relate to a larger community of scholars, readers and other scribes, as well as to show their cultural and professional belonging and scholarly aspirations in a “prosopography in circulation”.