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Originators: Transformation and Collaboration in the Production of Original Written Artefacts

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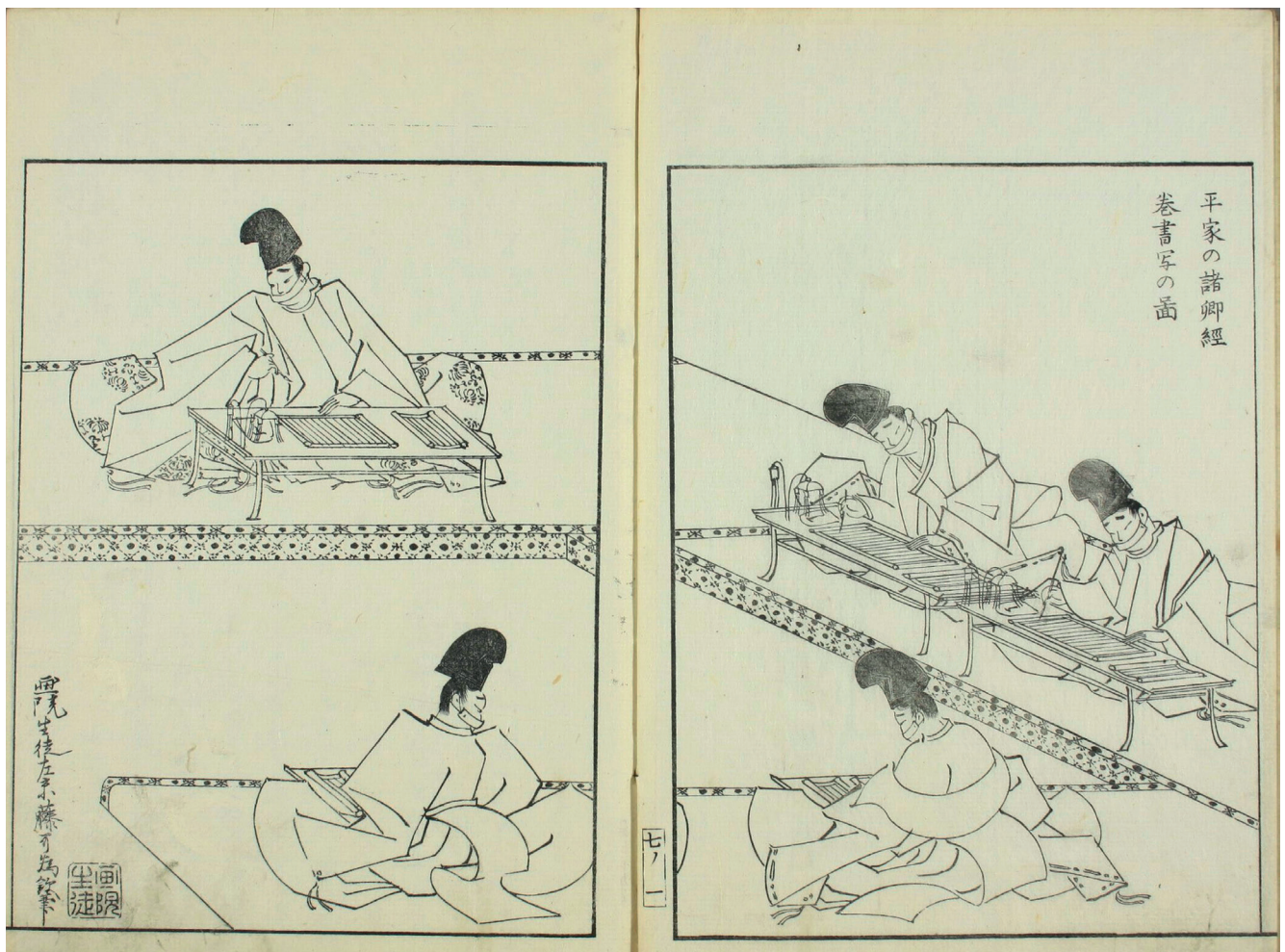


Fig. 1: Members of the Heike clan copying the *Lotus Sutra*, in Okuda and Yamano (1842), *Itsukushima zue, maki no nana*, 7/1^v and 7/2^r.

Introduction

On the Concept of 'Originators'

Jörg B. Quenzer, with Hanna Boeddeker, Janine Droese, Theresa Müller, Bruno Reudenbach, Ilona Steimann | Hamburg and Heidelberg

1. Introduction

In the autumn of 1164, a select group of Japanese noblemen gathered at the residence of Taira no Kiyomori (1118–1181), at the time the most powerful man in Japan, to copy Buddhist sūtras – including the famous *Lotus Sutra* – in fulfilment of a vow by Kiyomori, the head of the dominant political party (Fig. 1). The resulting set of 33 scrolls, the 'Dedication sūtras of the Heike [family]' (*Heike nôkyô*), is still extant today. Regarded as one of the most precious specimens of religious art in Japan's history, it is now designated a 'national treasure' (*kokuhô*), the highest level of cultural heritage in contemporary Japan. This designation, however, is only the last step within a long process of creating and maintaining the status of an original. The following paragraphs aim to highlight some aspects of this artefact's history from the point of view of the various actors and parties involved, hereafter referred to as 'originators'.

The dedication vow (*hônô ganmon*) states that the copying of the texts involved thirty-two persons in total, consisting of several members of the clan as well as retainers and other relatives. This group included only those who did the copying of the texts itself – i.e., those providing the calligraphy. Professionals would add the elaborate frontispieces (*migaeshi*) and decorations to each of the scrolls. The motifs of the paintings on the frontispieces clearly take up the role of women in the soteriological understanding of the time, suggesting at least an indirect participation of women in the whole project – other semi-historical sources of the time address the active role of women in producing such artefacts more explicitly.¹

We know from similar occasions that all material resources, in particular the core elements of the written scrolls (ink and water, paper, the wooden axis of the scrolls), were specifically produced by specialists or scrupulously selected and imported, e.g. from auspicious places such as

sacred wells (Fig. 2). A striking example of these practices, explicitly reflected in the colophon of the artefact, is the dedication sutra by the famous Buddhist sculptor Unkei (?–1223), which was completed in 1183. The huge copying project by the former emperor Goshirakawa (1127–1192), which took place in 1188 and involved leading members of both the secular and the religious realms, is another example.²

Back to the *Heike nôkyô*. As the last step of the first stage of the object's lifespan, the scrolls in question were subsequently dedicated to the deities of the Itsukushima shrine in Western Japan, the family shrine of the Taira, in a ritual performed by religious specialists. The artefacts' fame spread early in medieval Japan, but the rights of access were strongly restricted – and remain so to the present day.

This short overview illustrates the fact that the production, use and immediate historical perception of the *Heike nôkyô* as an original is not the result of one person alone. Multiple instances at different times and in different localities were involved in producing the artefact and its indisputable status: the anonymous source of the holy text, declaring itself to be the Buddha's words by quoting his disciple Ānanda's famous words 'Thus I have heard' at the beginning; the group of copyists; the craftsmen and artists; the priests; and last but not least the patron of its production and dedication, Taira no Kiyomori.

We must also consider the political powers that, in later centuries, exercised their right to grant access, and also how it became a national treasure in modern times, starting with the first exhibition at the end of the nineteenth century as part of the formation of 'national art', and culminating in the Japanese Agency of Cultural Affairs designating it as unique cultural heritage on the highest level in 1954.

And finally, we must consider the activities and the influence of the academic or semi-academic world via various publications, including popular editions and high-quality reproductions by famous publishing houses. The role

¹ See the chapter 'A Drop of Moisture' in the famous *Tale of Flowering Fortunes* (jap. *Eiga monogatari*), second half of the eleventh century.

² For Unkei see Quenzer 2000, 27–28, for Goshirakawa Quenzer 2018.

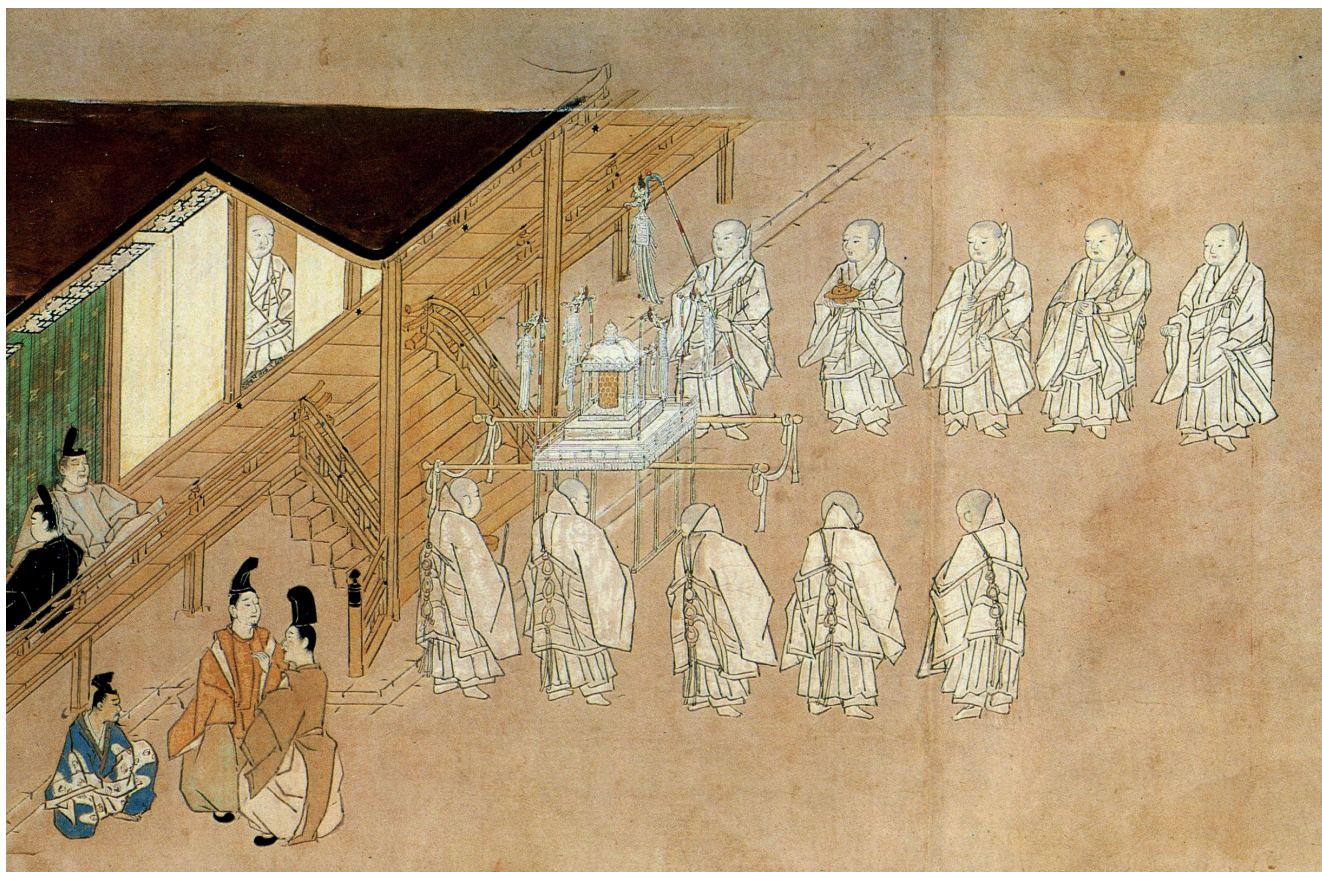


Fig. 2: Transfer of the paper used for a dedication sutra to the place of ritual copying in a precious container, detail from *The Illustrated Life of the Venerable Hōnen* (*Hōnen Shōnin gyōjō ezu*), 1307–1317; scroll kept in Chion'in Temple, Kyōto. Reproduced from *Hōnen Shōnin eden*, ed. Komatsu Shigemi, Tokyo: Chūō kōronsha 1990.

of Komatsu Shigemi (1925–2010) merits particular mention. He devoted his whole life to exploring the making and transmission of this artefact, thus creating a kind of state of the art in dealing with these manuscripts and cementing the status of these scrolls within the academic field.³

All these instances, in their own but indispensable ways, contribute to the making of an original and to maintaining its status.

The term 'originator'

The term 'originators' has been used frequently in the short overview above. The contributions in this special issue are dedicated to it and it stems from a long-lasting discussion within a research field at the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures (CSMC), University of Hamburg. It was chosen as a heuristic starting point in order to define the actual topic of this research field in more detail: the concept of an 'original' as a fundamental approach within the study

of written artefacts. This concept is based on an initially phenomenological observation that many researchers share: even if, in an ontological sense, every handwritten artefact has to be regarded as unique, there is an observable tendency in many manuscript cultures to regard some written artefacts as 'special'. Some artefacts are assigned a special status and a higher value in many different ways: they are meticulously collected, bought and sold at high prices, carefully preserved, treated with respect and even awe; they have great efficacy in legal, religious, economic, literary and other contexts.

Their value can be derived from the materials chosen for their production, the special craftsmanship involved in their production, the person or persons responsible for their safe keeping, or from the power associated with them. Any one of these characteristics may be sufficient to elevate an original above other written artefacts circulating in a given culture, also distinguishing it from oral texts, printed books and digital versions. The numerous types include autographs, art works, legal documents, letters, diaries, notes, test and experiment reports, minutes and proceedings, among many others. As different as these types are, they all share

³ The most detailed study on these artefacts was carried out by the above-mentioned Komatsu, collected in six volumes, published in 1995–1996. For a short overview in English, see Dix 2015.

a specific relationship between the object and the various parties involved in its production, and in particular between the object and the parties involved in its use or reception.

We refer to this group of artefacts as 'originals' in order to distinguish them as subjects of research from other artefacts. Like the term 'originator', this is a heuristic category, not the assignment of an ontological status. This brief outline has already made it clear how closely the phenomenon of the original is linked to the act of valuing the corresponding objects. As a result, this attribution is not only relational, but also dependent on the point of view, and is often only shared by a more or less limited circle of actors. All others might not regard the written artefact as an original. In other words: the question of originals in a manuscript culture thus primarily relates to questions of reception. But, and this is most important to understand, not only as a later process. For example, in art or in the case of the dedication *sūtras* described above, the idea that an original is to be created often already affects all aspects of production. This can be the choice of materials, special precautions during the writing process, or the prominent status of the donor.

The attribution of being an original is not an exclusive characteristic of written artefacts. But the phenomenon is particularly common with such materials. There are two main reasons for this: firstly, the fundamental importance attributed to the (hand-)written word in various cultures, particularly when there is not yet any significant competition with other written media, especially print; handwritten amulets or similar magical artefacts being obvious examples. One of the most notable exaltations of such a connection between written artefact and text can be found in traditional Judaism. It established the practice to gather no longer used or worn-out manuscripts and printed books in a so-called *genizah* (literally 'hiding'), a storeroom or attic, usually in a synagogue. The *genizah* is then emptied regularly and the hand-written or printed material contained therein is ritually buried. This practice is not primarily motivated by the textual contents, but by the sanctity of the Hebrew script as such. Thus, not only holy scriptures but also other kinds of texts were to be deposited in a *genizah*.

The second and perhaps more important reason is the notion of a close connection in many written cultures between the producer, in a narrow sense, and the resulting artefact. Many of these cultures assume that through the act of writing, the existence itself or specific qualities of the writer is reflected in the written artefact on different levels.

These may be aesthetic qualities, moral or religious authority, or simply the existence of the other person, for example in the case of love letters or other personal documents. Many religious traditions, which centre around sacred texts, also draw on this connection, as in the example of the notion of gaining religious merit by the way of individually copying a specific scripture, or at least part of it. This special connection between the scribe and the written artefact also applies to other, more profane areas in which the attribute 'legitimation via original' plays an important role, for example in the field of signatures, right up to variants of the digital signature in the 21st century.

In the course of discussions, it has been suggested that the term 'creator' be used instead of originator. However, this term does not quite fit, as the term 'to create' is – and should remain – closely associated with the material production of the given artefact. In other words: every original has a genuine creator in a physical sense, but it also always has at least one originator, who is sometimes but often not identical to the creator. This is precisely what allows us to differentiate, for example, between the scribe as one instance and all the other instances that might provide the written artefact with its actual status for the recipients at a given time.

However, the concept 'to create' is important in a different sense. It allows us to relate the concept of originators to the name and thereby to the main perspective of the research field within the CSMC from whose discussions it derives: 'Creating Originals'. The perspective of the originators directs our attention to the acts that make an artefact an original, and in many cases allows us to shift our perspective away from an overly isolated – and sometimes dangerously essentialistic – focus on the artefact itself.

The following discussion of the concept takes place in two steps: First, a phenomenological introduction to various instances that can bestow the status of an original on a written artefact in a specific tradition. The second part presents the model of an operationalisation of the term within the framework of a general scheme. This section also serves to highlight comparable aspects of the subsequent individual contributions in this issue, and thus allows to emphasise the comparative potential of our approach.

2. Originators as Actors

Creating an original written artefact involves, often in a very concrete sense, different hands or entities, endowed with different qualities and skills. Certainly, the awareness of

these conditions is nothing new. For example, the Franciscan monk Bonaventura (1217/21–1274) already discussed a four-tier hierarchy of originators, ascending in originality from scribe to author.

There are four ways of making a book. Sometimes a man writes others' words, adding nothing and changing nothing; and he is simply called a scribe [*scriptor*]. Sometimes a man writes others' words, putting together passages which are not his own, and he is called a compiler [*compilator*]. Sometimes a man writes both others' words and his own, but with others' words in prime place and his own added only for purposes of clarification; and he is called not an author but a commentator [*commentator*]. Sometimes a man writes both his own words and others', but with his own in prime place and others' added only for purposes of confirmation; and he should be called an author [*auctor*].⁴ (Bonaventura, *In primum librum sententiarum, proemii quaestionis 4 conclusio*)

For Bonaventura, the different contributions of each instance to a book establish a hierarchy with the author at the top. However, not only the author but all these types of originators (as well as others not mentioned by Bonaventura) can be responsible for the characteristics of a written artefact, so that it is given the status of an original, depending on different situations and contexts. And although Bonaventura's description contains more than a few vestiges of an essentialist understanding, it may serve as a good example of the awareness of the difficulties to define the special quality of a given written artefact.

In the following, the term 'originators' designates those individuals or instances involved in the making of written artefacts which – right from the start or by later changes – hold the status of an original within a certain manuscript culture. In this sense, 'originators' is meant to be a relational term, referring to a model or something else against which it is measured. As already mentioned, the term should be understood as a heuristic concept helping us to understand the various processes leading to the establishment of such a status, but precisely not as an essentialist attribution. In other words, not all scribes should be considered as originators, but a scribe can fulfil this role in specific cases; for example, author manuscripts (autograph), or, in the case of a master, calligraphy.

Having this caveat in mind, the different acts and stages by which originators – intentionally or unintentionally – create the status of an original can be categorised by using the following typology:

- a) Those taking part in the *material creation* of an object, including scribes, stonemasons, and other craftsmen. Often these are people with special abilities of a technical, spiritual or aesthetic nature; in other cases, only their de-facto status is decisive.
- b) Those taking part in the *creation of the content* – the author of the text or image, or whatever is being written or drawn – in some cases (for example, religious texts) even non-human beings may be ascribed the role of actual originators.
- c) Sometimes the *planning or conceiving* of a written artefact plays the most important role in this respect (for example, head of a workshop).
- d) In other cases, those who *enable the production* are triggering the special status, such as donors, patrons and the like. Artefacts of this kind are often accompanied by specific paracontent stating these instances, whether these references are firmly integrated into the actual artefact (for example, via colophon or through enclosures).
- e) In the case of institutional originators, *authenticating or authorising* written artefacts also has to be considered (for example, by institutions that issue legal documents, such as passports).
- f) During later stages in the lifetime of an object, the mere *possession and/or distribution* can be identified as the main reason. The range here extends from individuals such as rulers to institutions such as museums, which by owning it distinguish an artefact from a larger group of comparable objects.
- g) Last but not least, the group of experts whose *scholarly or academic expertise* is decisive for a change of status of the artefact should be mentioned.

None of these cases are mutually exclusive, but different types of originators may collaborate in creating such a written artefact. In some cases, two or more types even fall together,

⁴ Burrow 1982, 31.

as in the case of author manuscripts. At the same time, the entities involved can cover a range from individuals – including God or other transcendent entities – to groups to abstract institutions (for example, states). And, even more importantly, as many examples in the following show, the reasons for being considered an original may arise at a later date or may change during the lifetime of a written artefact.

3. Operationalisation

These findings call for a set of arguments helping to analyse the acts and interactions of persons, the social organisation of collaboration, and the various functions they provide. In other words: How can acts and interaction be operationalised in the field of written artefacts?

The following scheme is loosely based on a general scheme often used in the context of the analysis of written artefacts, a heuristic tool for the comparative study of manuscripts from different manuscript cultures. It centres around the four following key factors: production, use, setting and patterns; they 'determine or shape a manuscript's contents and physical characteristics'.⁵

Inspired by these factors, we identify first the different acts (3.1) mentioned above. They require further specification in order to be made fruitful as a heuristic approach, mainly regarding the respective socio-cultural settings (3.2) in which these acts are localised. In many cases, the socio-cultural settings also demand certain qualifications (3.3) of the individual participants, which can range from practical craftsmanship to certain spiritual qualities. As the typological overview suggested, many of these actions are temporally related (3.4), e.g., a group of originators may come into play only after other phases in the lifespan of a written artefact have been completed. And, last but not least, originators may reflect on their own role and explicate or define their self-understanding as originators (3.5).

3.1 Acts

We have already seen which different actions can be attributed to an originator. The temporally first one would be the involvement in the production, meaning the selection and preparation of the writing material and, of course, the writing itself; in this case, that said artefact is written or inscribed by the originator's own hand – a fact that possibly increases its monetary, cultural, religious, and/or legal value.

However, the act of writing does not necessitate the creation of the content but may rather focus on the production of the material object. It is also not always the case that all of the writing in the production of an artefact is done by the same originator. For instance, one originator may only sign – and therefore authenticate – a manuscript while the rest of it is produced by a scribe. In the preparation of a written artefact we may even observe complex groups of specialists such as scribes and illustrators at work, but the process of production is finalised by, indeed culminates in, an authenticating signature. The following concept takes this even further: The monogram of the ruler on medieval documents in Europe was nearly always written by a scribe. Only a small part was left out, which the monarch personally completed: this 'Vollziehungsstrich' defined or confirmed the validity of a manuscript.

Affixing seals is another act of authentication. In contrast to signing, the entity who holds the power to validate the artefact does not automatically execute the act physically. Late medieval clerks in Europe, for example, were sometimes commissioned by a ruler to seal a manuscript. Considering artist seals in traditional China, one can rightly assume not only the identity of the artist and sealing person, but even the production of the seal itself. Cases in which the seal does not represent a singular person but rather an institution – like a monastery or even a state – imply the possibility of an originator being not an individual but an abstract entity such as an association or a government.

As indicated above, originators may also be conceived as being involved in the production of the material for the writing surface of said artefacts. However, the acts defining an originator do not only take place during an artefact's initial production but may occur any time within its lifespan. The consecration and veneration of religious objects mark the moments in which a mere physical object is attributed special significance and transcendental power. Therefore, originators may also act by authorising, using, collecting, or possessing artefacts possibly, but not necessarily, produced by their own hands. Post-production acts such as these also have the potential to define the original. In other words, the acts of the originator primarily differentiate a written artefact from others and afford it the status of an original.

3.2 Situations

Situations refer to the specific settings of the originators' activities in regard to oral-performative, temporal, and

⁵ Wimmer et al. 2015, 2.

spatial aspects. It is our underlying assumption that the setting of production and use impart special qualities to a written artefact and contribute to its status of an original.

Oral-performative acts and writing go hand in hand in many scribal cultures. The individual or collective ritual performances centred on the artefact aim at enhancing its supramundane qualities in religious contexts; such are prayers and rituals that belong to the process of copying and using holy texts. Jewish scribes, for instance, visit a *mikvah* (ritual pool) before they start copying a Torah scroll, and they recite blessings during copying and when it is finished. Purification rituals were also found in the production of handwritten sutras throughout East Asia. The process of the collective production of Japanese *renga* (linked verse) also involves oral-performative elements – even during the creation of the poem, or as part of a ceremony by which the written artefact is dedicated to the deities of a shrine as the decisive act. In the legal sphere, the performers, the witnesses, and the audience of legal actions validate documents by reciting fixed formulas and oaths. The oral-performative aspects, in such cases, are part and parcel of the binding qualities of the documents and their authenticity.

The specific timespan in which the originators operate often corresponds to calendrical events that endow the work of functionaries and official scribes with solemnity and special significance. Some medieval European city councils, for instance, set aside particular days for issuing documents. Time also plays a profound role in religious practices and imparts hierarchical qualities to the activities of originators. Byzantine monks perform scribal activities specifically during the seven weeks of Lent, considering the sacrality of this time to be essential for the qualities of the texts they copy. For the same reasons, collective veneration of and private devotion to written artefacts in various traditions take place in accordance with the corresponding events of the liturgical calendar – a fact best exemplified by the genre of the books of hours.

The effectiveness of the originators' work may depend upon the spatial settings, both macro and micro, of their acts. Especially remarkable in the public sphere, (macro-)spatial forms of symbolic significance such as temples, churches, courts, city halls, parliaments, and museums serve as locales for the production and, more frequently, the use of written artefacts. The originators' acts in such loci may extend the sacral, formal, official, or expert qualities of the institutions to the artefacts, imbuing the latter with the merits necessary

for their functions. Visitors of museums acknowledge, and perpetuate, the special status of the artefacts by virtue of having been established by experts and being exhibited in the museum.

The choice of place, time, and performance associated with the activities of originators thus may be motivated by functional, procedural, social, cultural, and religious concerns. Interacting with each other and complementing one another, the oral-performative, temporal, and spatial aspects provide a framework in which originators may effectively create originals.

3.3 Qualities

The qualities defining originators are manifold and most often relate to the production of an original as well as its use. These qualities range from specific knowledge and skills involved in producing and using the artefact to more status-related qualities like religious authority and political or symbolic power. Sometimes such skills and knowledge were unique to the originators. Writing charms and magic amulets in an encrypted form, for instance, suggest originators in possession of secret knowledge, and it was this knowledge that guaranteed the artefact's efficacy.

Such qualities appear more or less obvious in the case of an originator's role as scribe, author, patron, owner, collector, or keeper. Since the status of an original is the result of negotiation and ascription, i.e. is based on a particular setting and group consensus, the qualities defining originators, in fact, turn out to be rather elusive. Multiple originators with specific qualities may be needed for the production of *one* original, as is the case of the dedication sutras mentioned in the beginning, or, to draw on an example of modern times, with parliamentary shorthand protocols: not only the technical skill of the stenographer but also the validation of the deputies is required. Because these qualities are diverse and context-related, and because a written artefact typically is the product of several originators, the whole lifespan of the artefact needs to be taken into consideration.

3.4 Stages

The flexible character of a written artefact's status as original and the various possibilities for originators involved in its transformations amply illustrate the importance of time. Generally, if, during its lifespan, a written artefact changes the status and becomes an original, the contribution of specific originators will differ according to place (cf. 'situations')

but also to time. It might be reasonably assumed that the categories of the originators correspond to the general timeline or stages of the artefact and accord with patterns within a given manuscript culture. In the case of a holy manuscript or a personal letter, one important instance may be observed at a very early stage, whereas collected artefacts tend to change in status much later in their object biography. This leads to a second fundamental difference, namely whether the status change involves the artefact in a direct manner (for example, by processing it), or only in indirect ways (for example, by change of ownership). Examples of the first kind include all processes of refinement or transformation, i.e. a material manipulation of the artefact itself such as the application of precious materials, the rebinding, or the addition of decorative elements. Sometimes the mere combination of written artefacts will trigger the status change, as in the case of a famous collector binding manuscripts together. Indirect ways, on the other hand, often involve a change within the settings. The status of an artefact may derive from the fact of its being collected by an authority and being marked by his or her seal or signature. A rumour about a personal relation alone may already be enough to change the value of an object significantly; art history can tell many stories of changing appreciation.

In the final stages of a written artefact's biography, we have to consider modern institutions like museums, imparting authenticity to the object by adding it to its collection, or the impact of modern scholarship.

3.5 Self-Understanding and Reflection

In many cases, the originators seem aware of the importance of their own role wherever the performance of specific rituals or a certain mindset are regarded as a prerequisite for the written artefact that is being produced to be considered original. The same applies wherever the originators make efforts to ensure that the resulting original is forgery-proof. Also, in the case of a unique written artefact being produced consciously, one may assume the involved parties' awareness of their own role. This applies to the production of originals at great expense, possibly using valuable materials, as well as to individual compilations of material, for example in diaries or albums. Scribal colophons and signatures are especially useful sources reflecting the self-awareness of the originators, and some of them are highly particular regarding the personal role of the scribe in the production of an original, reflecting not only the different steps during production and

its respective choices, but also the very notion of creating an original. Presumably, an originator's self-awareness is also present where certain licenses and rare skills are a prerequisite for the participation in the production process.

In each case, the perception of the individual role varies. Where, for example, God or other supernatural beings are assumed to be the first originator, the human being who produces the written artefact may understand himself or herself as a medium – and may be viewed by the surrounding society as such. A striking example can be found with the *letters from heaven*: God was believed to be the originator of these documents, which were thought to protect the owner from evil and danger and were still used (and newly produced) until well into the twentieth century. But in order to create such an efficacious artefact, someone had to copy the text of the amulet for the person supposed to own the *letter from heaven* and profit from its protective power. It is documented that the scribes believed to act as a vessel for God's word and that they saw themselves as a tool necessary for the production of a written artefact originated by God.

On the other hand, we should be aware that in other cases those factually involved in the making of an original do not see themselves as originators. We may even conceive originators initially unaware of their role, although they may have been consciously active as originators in other contexts. It may only be another's evaluation of – initially trivial – written artefacts as originals that makes their writer aware of their status as originators and subsequently lead them to give away autographs, notes, or sketches as originals, and thus as objects of – also material – value.

4. Final remarks

The aim of this special issue is to provide the reader with a series of case studies, thereby showing the heuristic benefits of the concept of originators. Nevertheless, it goes without saying, that this issue does not dare to claim to provide a comprehensive explanation of the phenomenon.

Having said this, some points for future studies should be raised here: Which other instances of originators with which functions can be identified? Are there special kinds of originals for which no instance of an originator can be identified? Could we identify certain cross-cultural patterns by which changes in status occur? What about cross-cultural changes, when a rather ordinaire artefact is removed from its original setting and then becomes a representative of the former culture? And, related to this field, what about

the respective motivation(s) of the various originators? The relationship between duplicates, i.e. several originals (such as contracts), and the respective originator(s) also must be further clarified, for example by differentiating between 'versions of an original' versus 'copies of an original'. And, last but not least, the interest of any of these originators in creating an original has to be approached systematically.

As a final note: These texts by members of the research field are deliberately not subject to standardising rules, neither as regards the length or detail of the contributions, nor the exact provenance of the written artefacts. It is precisely the diversity of the examples discussed below that is intended to demonstrate the heuristic value of our concept and, in the best case, to inspire the reader to use it themselves.

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