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A heuristic tool for the comparative study of manuscripts from different manuscript cultures

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This model depicts a particular manuscript within a manuscript culture in relation to the various **key factors** which have shaped its content and appearance, and which continue to shape its use. Inspired by Andreas Hepp's schematic rendering of Raymond Williams' model of a culture as a "Bedeutungssystem" (semantic system; Hepp 2010, Williams 1981), it represents a culture in which at least some types of knowledge and actions are preserved, transmitted, organised and performed by means of manuscripts. The model and this accompanying commentary do not, however, aim at being a theoretical foundation for a new, manuscript-specific branch of cultural studies. Instead, the model is designed as a heuristic device a) for the analysis of the characteristics and functions of an individual manuscript within a manuscript culture and, more importantly for the purposes of the CSMC, b) as a basis for a systematic comparison of the characteristics and functions of manuscripts from different manuscript cultures.

1. The manuscript

Since a manuscript is a material artefact that is usually produced in order to preserve and transmit specific contents, its role within a manuscript culture must be considered in a two-fold way: In terms of its **content** and in terms of its **physical**, that is its **material and visual, characteristics**. By content we refer to the information that is encoded in written texts, but also in images as well as other possible sign systems within a manuscript such as musical notation. The physical characteristics comprise anything from the format and measurements of a manuscript, the materials chosen as a writing support and for writing and painting to the visual organisation of a manuscript, its decoration and the style of the script. Content and its concrete physical instantiations can be, and have often been, conceptually distinguished and con-

sidered in isolation from each other. In the production and use of a manuscript, however, they are inextricably interrelated. The intended content of a manuscript is an important factor in determining what physical characteristics the manuscript producer(s) will choose. For instance, a Torah manuscript produced for ritual use must not take any format other than that of a scroll, and must consist of parchment made from the hides of kosher animals; a text with a commentary may require a particular *mise en page* that helps the reader distinguish between the two types of text; meanwhile in Japanese manuscripts, religious texts such as a sutra were written in classical Chinese characters. The physical characteristics of a manuscript, in turn, are the means by which the content of the manuscript, as well as the manuscript itself, are structured and presented to the eyes and hands of the reader or user, signalling to them what kind of content should be expected and enabling and encouraging them to use the manuscript in specific ways. In a culture that uses almost exclusively manuscripts in the codex format, a large parchment scroll will be immediately recognized as a Torah manuscript; on the other hand, a glossed Psalter in which the texts of the Psalms are not visually distinguished from those of the gloss would confuse and irritate a medieval European reader, and a sutra written in a writing system more easily accessible to a Japanese reader than classical Chinese characters, which was, for instance, often used for other genres such as literary texts, would have struck a Japanese reader as unusual. Such interplay between content and physical characteristics is by no means limited to hand-written books (or alternative formats). In contrast to printed books, however, each manuscript is a *unicum* which reflects the choices, preferences, requirements, skills and errors of individual producers, users and owners.

2. The four key factors

In order to locate a manuscript within a manuscript culture, we have identified four key factors that determine or shape a manuscript's contents and physical characteristics: **production**, **use**, **setting** and **patterns**. Inevitably, these factors closely interrelate. Both production and use can be described in terms of the agents and of the practices that the agents employ in making and/or using a manuscript.

a.) Production

Production agency. A manuscript can be, and sometimes is, produced by a single individual. This can, in the cases of autographs, be the author of the manuscript's contents, or someone who performs another form of auctorial agency, such as that of an editor, compiler or translator. A scribe or illuminator, too, will have a degree of auctorial agency insofar as their deci-

sions will have an impact on the manuscript's physical characteristics, which in turn determine in part how the manuscript's contents will be read and understood, and how the manuscript itself can be used (see below). More frequently, however, a manuscript is created by more than one person. This is especially the case if one considers the production and preparation of the writing support, pigments, inks etc. as part of the manuscript production. Some types of manuscripts, such as Mesopotamian clay tablets and ancient Greek *ostraca*, are made from ubiquitous and sometimes reused materials that require very little preparation of their writing supports and can be inscribed with simple tools. The production of parchment and paper, and the preparation of palm leaf and tree bark for use as writing supports, on the other hand, are more complex and were (or are) often in the hands of specialists, as were (and are) bindings, covers made from wood and other materials, and pouches and folders. If there are several producers, they can collaborate in different ways. For instance, they can be specialists in different fields (e.g., a parchmener, a scribe, a rubricator, an illuminator, a scribe specializing in musical notation, a corrector, a bookbinder etc.) or they can have the same or similar skills and share the work. Patronage and commissionership, too, is a form of both production agency and auctorial agency, in that the patron or commissioner will not only initiate and fund the production of a manuscript but his or her (or their) wishes and the degree of their wealth and generosity will have direct consequences on its contents and physical characteristics, as will his or her intentions and expectations regarding the commissioning of the manuscript, for instance, securing his or her *memoria*, or flattering a powerful individual by dedicating and presenting the manuscript to them.

Production agency is not necessarily limited to one single campaign after which a manuscript is a finished product. Rather, many manuscripts bear traces that may be considered to be (secondary) production campaigns in their own right. A manuscript containing a previously un-glossed text that is later provided with an extensive commentary in the margins was not incomplete before it was annotated, yet its content has been considerably modified. A manuscript that originally consisted of a few leaves or quires can, at a later point, be extended by adding "guest texts" (Gumbert 2010) on leaves left blank, on any space that remains in the margins, by adding more leaves or quires or even by sewing more material onto the end of a scroll. A manuscript can also be included in a larger multiple-text manuscript or composite manuscript, thus becoming one codicological unit within a newly created manuscript.

Production practices. The production of a manuscript will require some degree of preparation and planning. Choices have to be made in advance regarding both the content and the

physical characteristics of the manuscript. Sometimes, the content of the manuscript is the scribe's original composition. Much more frequently, however, the content of a manuscript will be copied from other manuscripts that already exist; either from a single one or from a number of different ones, e.g. to create a multiple-text manuscript or to use several versions of the same text in order to create a particularly good version of that text. Decisions will be made what contents from the older manuscripts to include and leave out, and whether and how to supplement them, for instance with paratexts and illustrations. If several producers are involved, the details and the logistics of the collaboration have to be worked out. Production practices inevitably vary from one manuscript culture to the other, as well as within a single manuscript culture. One obvious factor is the difference in writing supports and writing materials that are available; but practices regarding the same materials can also vary considerably. While early on in medieval Europe, quires of codices were formed by folding a sheet of parchment, and later paper, several times before cutting along the folds on three sides to separate the pages, the bifolia of medieval Islamic manuscripts were usually cut to size separately, allowing a wider range of page formats. While for most of the Middle Ages European manuscript makers used pin-pricking, rulers and pens or styli to rule pages, Middle-Eastern manuscript makers used ruling boards for ruling paper manuscripts early on. In some manuscript cultures, dictation was considered an effective way of allowing several scribes to write down a text at the same time, while in others, certain texts are copied down from memory. Furthermore, it must be decided how closely the physical characteristics of the new manuscript are to resemble those of the old one. For instance, when a very old manuscript is used as the basis for the production of a new one, outdated conventions may be replaced by new ones (a paper codex is used instead of a palm-leaf manuscript; an old script is replaced by a current one). On the other hand, if the old manuscript or its content is perceived as particularly venerable due to its very age, or has particular value attached to it due to some other reason, archaic features may consciously be adopted to transfer some of the old manuscript's particular dignity onto the new one.

b.) Use

Agency of use. The actual or intended reader / user of a manuscript is usually an individual or a group of individuals. In some cases, the manuscript is considered the property of an individual or a group, in others they are the property of an institution or community such as a monastery, temple, or court. In some cases, supernatural beings (gods, spirits etc.) can be the intended users of manuscripts.

Practices of use. Reading is the most obvious, but not the only conceivable and suitable form of use regarding a manuscript. For example, a manuscript can act as a representative or even a sort of embodiment of that which it contains or of the author of its content, of the commissioner or owner of the manuscript. Accordingly, it may in some circumstances receive the treatment that the work, person or idea which it embodies is considered due (including, for example, ritually kissing or enthroning the manuscript or destroying it, either as an act of aggression against its contents or their author, e.g. in book burnings, or, on the contrary, to honour a sacred manuscript that can no longer fulfil its function by giving it a burial). A manuscript can also be perceived of as an *apotropeion*, as a relic or a work of art, and used and treated accordingly. The arguably most wide-spread practice of use, that of reading a manuscript, can take many different forms. These differences concern aspects of the performance-side of use as well as the purpose for which it is read. A manuscript can be read silently or aloud, and if read aloud, for one's own ears alone, or to a group of listeners, chanting, reciting or murmuring its contents. It can be read from beginning to end, thoroughly or by skimming through it; it can be used to memorize its contents or to look up particular passages and paragraphs. A manuscript can be read for entertainment, instruction, information, devotional, liturgical, legal or magical purposes etc.

All of these practices of use, and many more, can apply to particular manuscripts, and several of them can be appropriate for the same manuscript, but none of them for every manuscript. However, over the course of a manuscript's sometimes considerable lifespan, the practices of its use can change, as can the role that its contents and its physical characteristics play in these practices. A lavishly-decorated, early-medieval Gospel-book can be produced as a manuscript for use in the liturgy, then serve as a missionary's tool to impress non-Christians who are much less likely to be impressed by incomprehensible Latin words than by the beauty and preciousness of what is presented to them as a sacred object; mission accomplished, it may then again serve as a liturgical book until changes in liturgical practices or changes in the types of book used in the liturgy mean that it is no longer used in its originally-intended function. It may, however, remain at the church as a treasured reminder of a long tradition or celebrated founder figure, and finally find its way into an exhibition case.

c.) Setting

The setting covers all those factors that make up the social, economic, cultural, spatial and temporal framework in which a manuscript is produced and used.

Spatial aspects of the setting. Where the production and the use of a manuscript take place is another important aspect of its setting. The spatial setting applies to a very specific, ‘micro’-setting (a lectern / a book shrine or, one step up, a scriptorium / a library), as well as the ‘macro’-setting (a monastery / a city / a region).

Temporal aspects of the setting. Obviously, a manuscript is produced at a certain time, and over a certain period of time. The use of the manuscript, too, is a process that happens at a certain time, and over a certain timespan. In some cases, such as Books of Hours and liturgical manuscripts, particular times are prescribed for particular practices of use.

Social / economic / cultural aspects of the setting. Manuscripts are produced and used by individuals who belong to, or are more or less loosely associated with, a particular social, economic and cultural circle. Manuscripts are an important, but by no means the only way in which knowledge and texts are transmitted within that circle. For example, oral traditions and, in some cultures, printed media play important roles, which may supplement or closely interrelate with the use of manuscripts. In some cases, the setting within which the producer(s) and user(s) of a manuscript operate is relatively homogenous, for instance in the case of a monastery with a scriptorium that provides manuscripts for the needs of that monastery and its members or in the case of a group of scholars who write down their own treatises and circulate the manuscripts among each other. In others, they may differ more in terms of their social, economic and intellectual standing. Members of a Japanese court wrote manuscripts themselves, but also commissioned manuscripts produced by professionally-trained craftsmen, as did the European nobility in the Middle Ages. The European noblewoman and the producers of her manuscript, say, a Book of Hours, may live in the same town, but do not move in the same social circles. Their upbringing and sets of skills are entirely different. It is, however, not merely the commissioning of the Book of Hours by or for the lady that links the two. Rather, both share expectations as to what this manuscript must contain, and how it must be presented. It is the craftsmen’s duty to produce a manuscript that the lady will be able to use as she means to, and one that meets the tastes and fashions of the time. This shared knowledge of what contents and physical characteristics a manuscript should have leads to the fourth key factor of the model:

d.) Patterns

Patterns are structures and conventions that organize the manuscript both in terms of its physical makeup and its content, making the object manageable and the contents both accessible and comprehensible. In that they provide the reader with necessary clues as to how a manuscript should be used appropriately, and how its content should be understood – as a sacred text, a learned text, a recipe – they can be considered as that which Erving Goffman, among others, has called framings or keyings (Goffman 1974). According to Goffman's *Frame Analysis*, these play a crucial part in an individual's making sense of what they experience: framings are markers which trigger the application of a particular cognitive or interpretive frame that is applied in order to correctly interpret a situation, for instance, whether a fight is playful or serious. In order to be effective, such framings or keyings must, on the whole, be recognizable immediately without requiring thorough (or even conscious) analysis, and usually, all participants involved in a given situation must be acquainted with them to avoid misunderstandings. To meet these criteria, keyings must be conventionalised and generally familiar among the individuals that belong to a particular setting.

Patterns in manuscripts act as keyings or framings in that they structure and guide the production as well as the use of a manuscript, enabling, facilitating, encouraging or impeding specific kinds of production and use. They concern both the presentation of the content by linguistic means (or its equivalent in other sign systems) and the way in which these contents are made manifest and organised in the material medium of the manuscript. A manuscript culture usually has a range of different patterns that a producer has at his or her disposal. These patterns will never all be observable within one manuscript; only knowledge of as many other manuscripts as possible within the manuscript culture will reveal the range of available patterns. To correctly understand the patterns within one manuscript, however, it is important to consider the patterns that were rejected.

Patterns regarding content. The contents of a manuscript are most often texts, encoded in script. It can, additionally or alternatively, contain elements from other semiotic systems, such as pictures or other forms of notation. Apart from genres and their specific conventions, a manuscript's contents are shaped by, for instance, paratexts, the choice of semiotic systems (i.e., language and pictures), and the choice of language. One or several different languages can be used; in many manuscript cultures there is a language associated with ritual use and/or a learned elite, such as Ge'ez, Arabic, Sanskrit and Latin, as well as various local vernacular languages. Within one language, one or more of several possible modes can be chosen, for example different rhetoric registers, verse and/or prose etc. Equivalents of and alternatives for

some of these choices can be found in other sign systems, e.g. images. The status of pictorial representations, and therefore their potential functions as patterns, vary from one manuscript culture to the other, and even among settings and practices of use within a manuscript culture. In most cultures, there is some general agreement (and also repeated episodes of disagreement) over what kinds of images are acceptable in particular practices of production and use. Pictures, at least in Christian Europe, can furthermore be considered in terms of rhetorical registers analogous to those taught by ancient teachers of rhetoric and their medieval and modern students (e.g., Suckale 2002). Since their vocabulary is visual and, to some extent, material (in that, for example, the use of precious pigments can have a semantic dimension), however, their consideration crosses the threshold to the second category of patterns:

Patterns regarding physical characteristics. Among the patterns regarding the manuscript's physical characteristics are, for instance, layout, *ordinatio*, the choice of sign systems or combinations thereof, the choice of material writing support, pigments etc., of different scripts and writing / drawing / painting techniques, the degree and type of decoration / ornamentation and the binding.

Relationships between the two categories of patterns

These two categories of patterns can be, and frequently are, interrelated in their common aim to frame the content of the manuscript and the practices of use that are associated with it. For example, particular genres can apparently call, in a certain setting, for the implementation of a particular layout and decorative scheme, for the choice of a particular (verbal and pictorial) rhetoric register, even for the use of a particular language, for the provision of certain paratextual elements etc. Equally, a set of patterns may suggest to the reader / beholder a certain kind of text and a particular way in which it should be used. Verbal and visual / material patterns can also converge and, as a result, complement and amplify each other's functions. Formulaic expressions which structure texts or collections of texts and which, in many cases, can be considered as having a paratextual function, are a case in point. The Basmala, which is recited before each sura of the Qur'an, with the exception of the ninth, and is thus an integral and important part of recitation practices. In Qur'an manuscripts, the Basmala is often visually distinguished from the remainder of the text, thus marking the beginnings of the passages and helping to visually structure the text. Incipit and explicit notes are paratexts that verbally mark the beginning and end of a text in European manuscripts, often including its title and author, which are very often rubricated or otherwise

highlighted, making them visual structuring and finding aids that are particularly valuable in multiple-text manuscripts.

Most patterns are so highly conventionalised that neither the producer(s) nor the user(s) of the manuscript will give them much thought. For instance, reading and writing directions vary from one manuscript culture to the other, but within a manuscript culture, one single reading direction is usually prevalent, and if not, like in ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, there will be easily-discernible indicators that point to the direction which should be chosen. Patterns can also, however, be used to consciously modify the manuscript users' perception of the object and/or its content. For instance, by using a script usually employed for the works of ancient Greek authors for the Byzantine scholar Nikephoros Blemmydes' *Compendium on Physics*, a text that was initially written as a schoolroom introduction to natural philosophy is deliberately associated with the treatises of the most revered authorities of the discipline (Valente 2016).

In manuscript cultures, many patterns, once established, prove to be remarkably stable over time. Reading and writing directions, for instance, once established, rarely change. Many scripts are associated with one particular reading and writing direction. The fact that this direction is entirely arbitrary is highlighted by various exceptions. For instance, Arabic script is written horizontally from right to left almost everywhere in the world, but in some regions of Western Africa (Borno), it is written (and read) from top to bottom, the result looking exactly the same. Some organisational patterns, which were developed for particular production practices, remain in use even when these practices that led to the formation of these patterns change. The European bi-columnar page layout in codices preserves a pattern that was originally designed for the effective presentation of text in a scroll that was held and gradually un- and rerolled horizontally. When paper codices became part of Indian manuscript cultures that had previously produced mainly palm-leaf manuscripts, the format of these paper codices was matched to that of the palm leaves, resulting in long, slim volumes often bound along one of the long edges to create an opening in the style of that of a palm-leaf manuscript. In some paper codices, e.g. in Jain manuscripts, the places where the string-holes of a palm-leaf manuscript would allow a stack of leaves to be bound together continue to be marked by ornamental elements. While in the case of the bi-columnar layout and the Indian paper codices, patterns apparently remain stable, their functions and meaning are no longer the same. In European codices, a bi-columnar layout is used to break up lines of script that would otherwise be too long to read comfortably and is thus often associated with large, prestigious volumes. In the Jain manuscripts, elements of the layout that were once determined by practical

considerations, the string-holes, have been replaced by decorative features. The Torah roll is a particularly striking example of how a set of patterns concerning the format, material and visual organisation of a manuscript that was once extremely widespread has become highly specific to one canonical text corpus and a particular practice of use. This change occurred over many centuries that saw first the replacement of scrolls by codices as the preferred medium for long texts and later the replacement of parchment by paper as the preferred writing support. It is not the initial pattern or set of patterns itself that was fundamentally changed, but the way in which it is perceived and interpreted within the manuscript culture.

3. Relationships between the four key factors

It has already become apparent in the discussion of the four proposed key factors that it is almost impossible to describe the effects of one of the key factors on a manuscript without considering the others, and their interrelations. For instance, asking how a manuscript was produced involves considering the setting in which it was produced: the writing materials and techniques available at a certain time in a certain place, the infrastructure available and the training of the producers vary considerably in, say, a Buddhist monastery in Japan and a Christian one in Ethiopia, or a European monastic scriptorium and a layman's workshop. Asking for what purpose a manuscript was produced draws on both the production and the reception of a manuscript, since the producer's consideration of the user, his or her abilities, expectations and requirements, etc. have to be taken into account – factors that are in turn determined by the specific setting of both the producer and the user. Patterns are directly involved in the production and use of a manuscript, and they are specific to a setting.

4. The manuscript culture and its domains

In many instances it may be helpful to distinguish between aspects of a setting, sets of patterns and aspects of manuscript production and use that are exclusive to a narrow circle of producers and users of manuscripts and those that this small group shares with a wider culture. For example, the scriptorium of a Western-European monastery of a particular order will have much in common with those of other monasteries and other centres of learning and literacy in the Latin world at the same point in time; there will be contents and patterns that it shares only with the scriptoria of the monasteries belonging to the same order, or the same region; and there will be some that are unique to this particular scriptorium. It may therefore make sense to introduce into the schema a domain within the manuscript cul-

ture (which could reveal itself as containing several different domains), with its own subset of setting, patterns, and aspects of production and use. The domains are rarely isolated from each other. A manuscript culture does not usually exist in perfect isolation from others, either. For example, paper, first produced and used as a writing support in China, was gradually adopted first by various manuscript cultures in Asia and reached Europe through trade routes with the Arab world in the 12th century, some thousand years after the earliest preserved paper manuscripts in China were produced. Around the same time, European Christian scholars started to translate Arabic philosophical treatises in large numbers, adopting the complex, multi-level structure of these texts as a pattern for their own treatises. Such exchanges between manuscript cultures can take the form of adaptations, matching newly introduced patterns to patterns already extant. Indian paper codices produced in the dimensions of palm-leaf manuscripts are a case in point. Similar dynamics are at work among different sub-cultures within a manuscript culture, for instance when patterns used in Latin scholarly works made for members of the universities were adapted for manuscripts containing texts in the vernacular for members of the court. In other cases, new patterns can, partially or entirely, replace old ones. For instance, scribes of Greek manuscripts introduced minuscule script in the 9th century, thus abandoning the older practice of writing entire texts in majuscule script. In the Gandhāra Buddhist culture, the Karoṣṭhī script, which was written from right to left on birch-bark scrolls, was replaced with the Bāhmī script, which was written from left to right on palm leaves.

5. The schema as a heuristic tool

The potential of the model as a heuristic tool for a comparative study of manuscripts from different manuscript cultures lies in its very simplicity. The key factors identified by it may serve as a point of departure and reference for this endeavour. To take an example that is relevant to the research plans of the CSMC for the next years, when comparing manuscripts that contain texts that were used for teaching, a comparability of the factor **use** is taken as a point of departure for what must be a detailed analysis of how these teaching practices differ in detail; how the setting and the production practices differ among the respective manuscript cultures and how these factors may account for the formation and application of patterns within the manuscript. These patterns are of particular importance both for analysing each individual manuscript and for a comparative purpose. Our knowledge regarding the production and, in particular, the actual use of manuscripts for teaching situations, which inevitably involved oral communication, is limited for many historical manuscript cultures. An analysis of the

patterns within a manuscript may offer important clues about how the manuscript could be used; whether it is, for instance, a well-structured book fit for reference reading; whether it shows traces of use such as annotations or doodles; whether the glosses it contains are sophisticated scholarly commentary or serve as aids to a basic understanding of a text that is challenging or in an unfamiliar language. Such indicators of use must, in turn, be checked against what we know about the key factors of our model. A comparison of the patterns in manuscripts used for teaching in different manuscript cultures will then lead to a more thorough understanding of the different roles which manuscripts – as opposed to or in relation to practices associated with oral transmission or printed materials – play in teaching practices in different manuscript cultures. On the other hand, the model may also help to avoid hasty conclusions regarding similar patterns in manuscripts from different manuscript cultures, offering the other key factors as correctives.

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