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Introduction: On the Interplay between Syllabi, Texts and Manuscripts

ekasmiñ jīva ekaṃ śāstram

‘one discipline per life’

(Sanskrit saying)

1 Introduction

Throughout the centuries, *manuscripts* have served as learning and teaching tools in the hands of students and teachers in most learned cultures. It is therefore to be expected that many of these artefacts may reflect – and thus be used to investigate – the educational practices of the individuals and communities by which they have been produced and used. Similarly, if we happen to possess evidence that a particular group of subjects, i.e. a *syllabus*, was deemed relevant and worthy of studying by a certain tradition, we can ask what connection such a set of subjects may have had with the *manuscripts* that were produced by that very same tradition. Predictably, at the intersection between subjects and manuscripts, we find the *texts* that instantiate the contents of the former and are written down in the latter.

The present section of this volume focuses on the interplay between (a) syllabi, i.e. more or less defined groups of subjects, (b) texts that are relevant to teaching and studying those syllabi, and (c) manuscripts that contain those texts. Ultimately, the aim here is to link the work of the intellectuals who established and promoted certain categorisations of knowledge and certain texts to be transmitted from teachers to pupils with the work of those involved in the production of manuscripts (sponsors/patrons and scribes) and use of them (teachers and students, and readers and listeners).¹

¹ One should obviously bear in mind that these various roles could be performed by a single person or a group of people.

2 Syllabi

A syllabus, or course of study, is understood here as a group of subjects that are to be studied and taught and which are selected according to specific educational aims (e.g. literary, grammatical, bureaucratic, scribal, legal, scientific, or religious).²

Since our study adopts a cross-cultural perspective, a few caveats are in order. First of all, only certain traditions overtly address and label the topics forming specific syllabi, one of the most well-known examples being that of the allegorical representation of the seven liberal arts by Martianus Capella in his *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii*.³ However, in many other traditions, syllabi can only be reconstructed from secondary evidence such as the combination of topics dealt with by texts contained in specific manuscripts. An interesting example in this respect is the case of certain Sumerian scribal syllabi that can only be reconstructed for the Old Babylonian period thanks to the evidence provided by the extant clay tablets.⁴

Furthermore, syllabi are mutable entities. Once they have emerged from various complex historical circumstances through processes of knowledge negotiation, they may undergo transformations to different degrees, enjoy an amount of diffusion beyond their place of origin or may even be supplanted by entirely new syllabi. Thus, it is sometimes possible to study the emergence of syllabi in their infancy, such as those pertaining to mediaeval Arabic technical literature, the inception of which is witnessed in the paratexts contained in certain pertinent manuscripts.⁵ On other occasions, one can appreciate the modification of a

² The term ‘syllabus’ is preferred to ‘curriculum’ here. The field of educational sociology has produced a large body of literature attempting to define the term ‘curriculum’, and despite the lack of any agreed definition, its scope is usually perceived as being broader than that of ‘syllabus’. The general trend seems to be that of understanding a curriculum as a guided formative experience led by members of an institution (e.g. a school, a museum, but also more generally a community), which aims at transmitting not only specific contents (i.e. the syllabus), but specific values and qualities that students are meant to possess. For an introduction to the field of curriculum studies, see Kridel 2010.

³ The seven liberal arts are composed of the *trivium*, which includes grammar, logic and rhetoric, and the *quadrivium*, which includes arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music.

⁴ See Tinney 1999 and Section 5.4 below.

⁵ See Raggetti in this volume and Section 5.4 (Case study 1) below. Raggetti’s study offers a critical edition and a detailed analysis of the *Ringkomposition* found in manuscripts containing copies of the *Ḍaḥīrat al-Iskandar* (‘Treasure of Alexander’). This paratext attributes the authorship

syllabus over time, as in the case of the topics that are said to form the field of Tamil grammar (*ilakkaṇam*), the number of which increased from three to six in the course of the second millennium CE.⁶

Finally, syllabi can be of various sizes, ranging from restricted ones, i.e. the study of the topics relevant to a specific discipline such as the lists provided by Isidore of Seville in the *Etymologiae* about each of the seven arts,⁷ to broad ones such as Islamic education, which includes the study of the Qurʾān, the Arabic language, the life and traditions of the Prophet Muḥammad, theology, and law.⁸

3 Texts

Besides oral instruction, the topics that form a syllabus are, of course, engaged with through the study of texts. Sometimes, we have access to historical records that inform us about what texts were studied to cover the subjects of a specific syllabus. In particular, we can encounter prescriptive lists of texts, such as that presenting required reading for advanced students at the *madrasas* of the

of the text, which is actually an anthology of excerpts, to Alexander the Great, thus forging the identity of a new syllabus.

6 See Ciotti in this volume and Section 5.1 (Case study 1) below. From an initial threefold configuration of Tamil grammar, including the study of *eḷuttu* (phonology/orthography), *col* (morphology), *poruḷ* (poetics), throughout the course of time a few disciplines are singled out from the already existing ones and given an autonomous status, namely *yāppu* (metrics), *aṇi* (figures of speech), and *poruttam* (appropriateness [to literary conventions]).

7 For instance, some of the topics pertaining to grammar are parts of speech (nouns and verbs, pronouns and adverbs), participles, conjugations, prepositions, interjections, letters, syllables, metres, prosodic accent, signs, etymology, rhetorical figures and genres (see Barney et al 2006, 39–67).

8 See Makdisi 1981, 80–91 and Hall and Stewart 2011, 111–112, for example, both of which are discussed in Section 5.3. Also see n. 37 for a similar case concerning the High Middle Ages based on Scrivner 1980. In the context of classical India, one syllabus comparable in size to that of Islamic education is that of Brahmanical education. This is the education that the *brāhmaṇas* are expected to acquire, i.e. the members of the social group traditionally responsible for handling scholarly knowledge that is usually transmitted in Sanskrit. According to several sources (here we quote from *Yājñavalkyaśmṛti* 1.3, ed. Khiste and Hośiṅga 1930, 8), there are 14 *vidyāsthānas* (‘seats of knowledge’) that must be learnt: ‘The [four] Vedas, together with *purāṇa* (“traditional lore”), *nyāya* (“logic”), *mīmāṃsā* (“Vedic exegesis”), *dharmaśāstra* (“the study of ethics and law”), and the [six] *Vedāṅgas* (“Vedic auxiliary disciplines”) (*purāṇanyāya-mīmāṃsādharmaśāstrāṅgamiśritāḥ | vedāḥ* [...])’. Unfortunately, so far no study has tried to investigate whether any direct links exist between such a list and the production of manuscripts or the formation of specific manuscript collections.

Ottoman empire established by a *fermān* ('edict') dated 1565⁹ or the one found in the *Sacerdos ad Altare* (c. 1210) by Alexander Neckam,¹⁰ which is, in fact, no more than a desideratum addressed to potential students. Alternatively, we may possess descriptive sources mentioning texts that were commonly studied, but that were not explicitly associated with an overt syllabus. For instance, both the (auto-)biographies of Islamic intellectuals¹¹ and the reports about traditional Sanskrit education in colonial India¹² provide the titles of numerous texts that were engaged with by generations of students.

In certain traditions some texts can be perceived as belonging together, in our case for example because they are used for a specific educational aim. These texts thus form a corpus that can be more or less canonical, i.e. perceived as closed or open, at different times. In manuscript cultures, manifestations of such corpora are often anthologies of excerpts, such as the *Heptateucon* (c. 1140) of Thierry of Chartres¹³ or digests epitomising the subjects of a specific syllabus such as encyclopaedias, like Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae*,¹⁴ or doxographical treatises such as the *Ṣaḍdarśanasamuccaya* by the Jain scholar Haribhadra (c. eighth century) and many more that present and contrast the views of the six Sanskrit philosophical systems (*darśanas* or *tarkas*).¹⁵

At some other times, the fact that certain texts are – overtly or covertly – perceived by a given culture as belonging together emerges from their being written down in the same manuscript.

4 Manuscripts

The way in which single texts or groups of texts are written down in manuscripts reflects how specific kinds of knowledge were supposed to be transmitted within a given tradition and how certain texts were used and modified in order to pursue

⁹ See Ahmed and Filipovic 2004, discussed below in n. 43.

¹⁰ See Section 5.2.

¹¹ See Section 5.3.

¹² William Adam's three reports dated 1835, 1836 and 1838 (see Long's 1868 reprint) carefully list the titles of the texts studied in the traditional Sanskrit schools of Bengal and Bihar.

¹³ See Section 5.2.

¹⁴ See Barney et al. 2006, 10–17. Note that the label 'encyclopaedia' is here used anachronistically (see König and Woolf 2013, 1–5).

¹⁵ See Gerschheimer 2007 for an account of which systems were included in such sixfold lists at various moments in the history of classical Indian philosophy.

particular educational aims. Thus, numerous single-text manuscripts – and in particular their paratexts – provide evidence that can be used to investigate their links to syllabi and corpora.¹⁶

Furthermore, certain manuscripts can contain a selection of texts – either in full or as collections of excerpts – addressing specific educational fields. Even when syllabi and their relevant texts are overtly mentioned in the sources, it is likely that what is actually found in manuscripts is a series of variants of the recorded list of subjects and texts. In fact, a manuscript will often approximate the number of texts (n) that, as we are informed or can assume from the evidence at hand, are supposed to cover a specific syllabus. It is due to this variance that the value of each manuscript is of historical value, whether it contains n texts, $n \pm 1$, $n \pm 2$, and so on.¹⁷ However, even though information about syllabi and corpora is available, it may not always be sufficient or even relevant for researchers to make sense of the actual arrangement of texts in manuscripts.

Alternatively, a text that is deemed to match an entire syllabus by itself can be parcelled out over different manuscripts, or rather volumes of the same manuscript, thus addressing different stages of the learning process. The *Minhāğ aṭ-ṭālibīn*, an Arabic treatise by Yaḥyā b. Šaraf an-Nawawī (d. 1277) on Islamic Šāfiʿī law, is a relevant case study in this respect: apparently, contrary to all other Islamic manuscript traditions in which the text is studied, its chapters are always transmitted in separate volumes in the manuscript tradition of Harar (Ethiopia).¹⁸

In cases where we have no other source of information about specific educational fields, manuscripts are the only tools available that allow us to glimpse or

16 Concerning syllabi, see Raggetti (already mentioned in Section 2) in this volume, also summarised below in Section 5.4 (Case study 1).

17 This idea reflects that of a ‘corpus organizer’ discussed in Bausi 2010. An important point here is that the relationship between certain multiple-text manuscripts and corpora is a function of the relationship between matter and knowledge. Bausi further states that ‘[i]n its form and contents, a “corpus-organizer” realizes the contents contained in the “projectual intention” of the copyist, or of those who are behind him’ (Bausi 2010, 35). In our terms, such a ‘projectual intention’ would be dictated, or at least heavily influenced, by an existing syllabus. For a specific case-study, see Ciotti in this volume.

18 See Gori in this volume and Section 5.1 (Case study 2) below. Within the domain of printed books, a similar case has been recorded concerning Manuel Álvares’ (1526–1582) *De institutione grammatica libri tres*, which was printed in several volumes in certain parts of Europe, namely Germany (Dillingen), Czechia, and Poland/Lithuania, to match the progressive nature of the local syllabus (see Rolf Kemmler, ‘The Emergence of Divergent Text Traditions of Manuel Álvares’ *De institutione grammatica libri tres* in Sixteenth-Century Europe’, a paper presented at the 14th International Conference on the History of Language Sciences, in Paris 2017).

even attempt to reconstruct the composition of syllabi and their relevant corpora.¹⁹

The types of manuscripts that can be taken into consideration in such investigations are the following, each of which is examined through a case study offered in the essays included in the present section of this volume:

1. Single-text manuscripts [STM], in particular compendia (see Raggetti).
2. Multiple-text manuscripts [MTM], regardless of whether they are the result of a single production act (see Ciotti).²⁰
3. Multi-volume manuscripts (see Gori).²¹

If we were to broaden our view beyond individual artefacts, one could also include the study of collections (e.g. public, personal or institutional libraries). This latter case is not investigated by any of the contributions in this section of the volume, but it is accounted for below, in a brief summary of the results of Hall and Stewart's 2011 study of the collections of Islamic manuscripts in Sahel.²²

5 Interplay

In this subsection I will outline some of the ways in which the interplay between syllabi, texts and manuscripts can be studied on the basis of the availability or absence of sources that inform us about the structure of syllabi, i.e. which and how many subjects they entail, and the texts that can be studied in order to master those subjects. Each section contains illustrative case studies.

¹⁹ See Section 5.4.

²⁰ Also summarised below in Section 5.1 (Case study 1). It is possible to limit the use of the label 'multiple-text manuscript' to manuscripts containing more than one text that were conceived and produced as such in one production act or to which later codicological units (*strata*), which were produced specifically for the same manuscript, were added. This categorisation would set apart 'composite manuscripts', i.e. manuscripts with more than one text that are made of codicological units taken from pre-existing manuscripts (*à la* Frankenstein). This convention is discussed in Friedrich and Schwarke 2016, 15–16, for instance.

²¹ Also summarised below in Section 5.1 (Case study 2). To the best of my knowledge, no literature exists yet that defines what a 'multi-volume manuscript' is or discusses the matter in detail. This label is actually used by scholars involved in manuscript studies, however. Take Alekseev 2015, for example, who writes about manuscripts containing the Mongolian Buddhist canon kept at the library of St Petersburg University.

²² See Section 5.3. See also n. 37 for a similar case concerning the High Middle Ages.

5.1 Sources relevant to manuscripts are available on both syllabi and texts

For certain traditions it is possible to retrieve information on a specific syllabus and the texts that are used for it. Once this information is checked against the manuscripts, it will emerge that at least some of the latter reflect or approximate the arrangement of the former:

Case study 1: The topics of Tamil grammar²³

Information about the syllabus

Numerous sources scattered through the two thousand odd years of Tamil literature provide information concerning the names and number of topics that are said to be part of the field of Tamil grammar. Historically, it is possible to trace the transformation of how such a syllabus is outlined, with the inclusion of a number of topics that range from three to five or even six, the fivefold one (*ilakkaṇa-p-paṇcakam*) clearly being the most popular among the available sources.

Information about the texts

Lists of grammatical texts are only known from sources dating from the eighteenth century onwards. The Jesuit missionary to India and much respected Tamil poet Costanzo Giuseppe Beschi SJ (1680–1742) has provided us with two different lists of texts that are deemed apt for addressing the fivefold syllabus. The first list appears in his Latin grammar of Tamil dated 1730, where Beschi mentions the *Naṇṇūl* for phonology/orthography and morphology, the *Akapporuḷviḷakkam* for poetics, the *Yāpparuṇkalakkārikai* for metrics, and the *Taṇṭiyalaṅkāram* for figures of speech. The second list appears in another grammar composed around 1735, where Beschi adds the *Purapporuḷvenpāmālai* to the same list, which completes the *Akapporuḷviḷakkam* as far as the topic of poetics is concerned, and also includes an unspecified text belonging to the Pāṭṭiyal genre. The inclusion of the latter is

²³ See Ciotti in this volume, which updates the pertinent observations made in Buchholz and Ciotti 2017, in particular Section 4.

of particular relevance since it hints at the recognition of a sixth topic dealt with in Pāṭṭiyal texts, namely that of *poruttam* ('appropriateness [to literary conventions]'). The same list appears in an essay penned by the well-known Tamil Sri Lankan scholar Ārumuka Nāvalar (1822–1879) in 1860 and addressed to students of Tamil, in particular those who adhered to Śaivism.

Information from the manuscripts

Tamil libraries have numerous multiple-text manuscripts and a few composite ones, the content of which matches either Beschi's or Ārumuka Nāvalar's lists of texts to various degrees. The selection of texts in a significant number of these manuscripts clearly reflects the emergence of the sixfold syllabus during the nineteenth century – the century in which most of the extant manuscripts were produced – with the inclusion of Pāṭṭiyal texts. What is also conspicuous is the fact that many of these artefacts contain copies of literary texts, indicating that grammars were propaedeutical to an engagement with *belles lettres* in traditional Tamil education.

Case study 2: The *Minhāḡ aṭ-ṭālibīn* in the Harari manuscript culture²⁴

Information about the syllabus

Islamic jurisprudence – in particular Sunni – acknowledges the existence of four branches of substantive law (*furū' al-fiqh* 'branches of jurisprudence'). These deal with rituals, sales, marriage and injuries respectively. Such a fourfold division is clearly mentioned by aṣ-Ṣa'rānī (1493–1565) – an Egyptian scholar, mystic, and Ṣāfi'ite jurist – in his *al-Mizān al-Kubrā*, for instance.²⁵

Information about the texts

Many legal texts focusing on substantive law cover the four branches mentioned above,²⁶ although in a variety of sections, called 'books' (*kutub*), which far exceed the total number of four. The Ṣāfi'ite *Minhāḡ aṭ-ṭālibīn* by an-Nawawī (1234–1277) is a notable example of the genre, which is well known throughout

²⁴ See Gori in this volume.

²⁵ See Hallaq 2009, 551–552.

²⁶ Hallaq 2009, 551–552.

the Islamicate world: it contains 71 ‘books’, many of which are divided into ‘chapters’ (*abwāb*).²⁷

Information from the manuscripts

The *Minhāğ aṭ-ṭālibīn* is one of the standard educational texts for Islamic law in Harar (Ethiopia), where manuscript copies of the text are always distributed over four volumes, thus forming what can be called a multi-volume manuscript. As Gori observes, ‘[it] is easy to see that each of the four quarters corresponds to one of the main branches of Islamic law according to the classification currently applicable in the Šāfi‘ite school’.²⁸ In this case, the arrangement of the text in the manuscripts not only reflects the fourfold interpretation of juridical matters acknowledged by the Šāfi‘ite tradition, but it also represents an educational tool shaped around the expected progression of law students – step by step through the four topics.

5.2 Sources relevant to manuscripts are available on syllabi, but not on texts

A different scenario is that in which the actual distribution of texts in manuscripts does not reflect the prescribed or described selection of texts that is available from overt information that can be found in a given culture about a specific syllabus and its corpus. There may be no list of texts mentioned in the sources for studying a given syllabus that has a statistically relevant connection to the selection of texts in manuscripts, for instance. Each manuscript can thus be understood as the result of the personal preference or educational intent of individual scholars and students, in the same way as the lists of texts can be understood as educational desiderata of individual scholars.

Nevertheless, it may be possible to extrapolate statistics about the frequency of the combination of certain texts in order to trace trends in the constitution of corpora:

²⁷ See Howard’s 1914 translation. For a study on the *Minhāğ aṭ-ṭālibīn*, see Calder 2010, 99–106.

²⁸ See Gori in this volume, p. 366.

Case study: The seven liberal arts in the Early and High Middle Ages

Information about the syllabus

The list of seven liberal arts (*artes liberales*), further divided into a *trivium* and *quadrivium*,²⁹ forms a syllabus that has been used in the West ever since the Early Middle Ages. This list has been most notably epitomised by the work *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* by Martianus Capella (end of the fifth century), the *Institutiones divinarum et saecularium litterarum* (in particular book two) by Cassiodorus (late sixth century), and the *Etymologiae* by Isidore of Seville (early seventh century), which were all widely circulated during the Early and High Middle Ages.³⁰

Information from the manuscripts

Bernhard Bischoff has already discussed a few manuscripts that address most of the syllabus of the seven arts.³¹ Two Carolingian manuscripts that are now lost were part of the library of the Abbey of Reichenau in Germany. One is described in the catalogue from 821 (or 822) and contains texts about arithmetic, geometry, rhetoric, astronomy and medicine, the latter being a discipline that Martianus Capella discusses in his *De nuptiis*, but which, like architecture, is not actually included in the list of the seven arts. A second manuscript is described in the catalogue prepared by the librarian Reginbert between 838 and 842, in which one would have found sixteen texts about 'history, grammar (including metre and elementary reading texts), arithmetic, music, astronomy, geometry, rhetoric, dialectic and geography, and [...] the architecture of Faventinus and the herbal of Pseudo-Apuleius'.³² A later manuscript, part of which is supposed to have survived in Paris, BnF, lat. 2974, is described in the eleventh-century catalogue of the collection of Le Puy (France) as containing works on dialectic, rhetoric, music, arithmetic, geometry and astronomy, all of which – curiously – attributed to Alcuin.³³

²⁹ See n. 3.

³⁰ Copeland and Sluiter 2009, 9.

³¹ Bischoff 2007, 106.

³² Bischoff 2007, 106.

³³ Bischoff 1967, 80–81 mentions two more pertinent manuscripts from the eleventh century. The first one, which is dealt with in detail, is Munich, BSB, Clm 14272. It hailed from St Emmeram (Regensburg, Germany) and, as Bischoff writes, contains works 'von Boethius, Cicero, Hucbald, Adalbold von Utrecht, Adalbero von Laon, Priscian und verschiedenes Anonyme über Musik, Metrologie, Arithmetik und Logik, also Lehrbücher aus nahezu sämtlichen Artes liberales' ('by Boethius, Cicero, Hucbald, Adalbold of Utrecht, Adalbero of Laon, Priscian and various [other] anonymous [authors] about music, metrology, arithmetic and logic, i.e. textbooks from almost all of the liberal arts'). The full list of its texts can be found in the catalogue of the Bayerische

Possibly the most ambitious of these projects was the *Heptateucon* (c. 1140) by Thierry of Chartres, which was the first attempt at collecting all the fundamental texts of the seven arts in their original form in a single anthology (*in unum corpus voluminis*, ‘in a book forming a single corpus’), i.e. not in the form of summaries or personal re-elaborations, as in the case of Martianus Capella, Cassiodorus and Isidore of Seville, for instance, and many more who came after them.³⁴ The *Heptateucon* is known through its only – albeit incomplete – copy, which fills two volumes, namely manuscripts 497 and 498 at the Bibliothèque municipale in Chartres (France). Both volumes were destroyed during a bomber raid in 1944, but fortunately they were microfilmed before the disaster.³⁵

Information about the corpus

Apart from the *Heptateucon* by Thierry of Chartres, there only seems to be one text with a prescriptive character that lists works that should be studied in order to engage with the seven liberal arts. This is the *Sacerdos ad Altare* (‘A priest who is about to approach the altar’, c. 1210) by Alexander Neckam (1157–1217), which ‘moves from the rudiments of grammar to the classical literary canon to the other elements of the *trivium* and *quadrivium*, and to medicine, canon law, and civil law, ending with the sacred knowledge of the Scripture’.³⁶ However, one should bear in mind that both these texts only exist as single exemplars, pointing to the

Staatsbibliothek (BSB) in Munich (Helmer 2011, 34–42). A further manuscript, namely Vienna, ÖNB, cod. 2269, is only mentioned in a footnote (Bischoff 1967, 81, n. 26). However, according to the online description (<manuscripta.at/m1/hs_detail.php?ID=11444> accessed on 15 Oct. 2020) it contains 26 works on topics such as rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, music and astronomy. Another interesting example is Sankt Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, 855 (first half of the ninth century), which contains a selection of texts that link grammar to rhetoric and astronomy – in a way thus representing what can be defined as an approximation of the syllabus, which was probably a response to a specific educational aim. In fact, it not only contains the *incipit* of the *Ars Major* by Donatus, the *De metris* by Mallius Theodorus and the *Ars rhetorica* by Alcuin, but includes a work entitled *capitula de diversa miracula quae sunt super terra* (derived from the *De cursu stellarum* by Gregory of Tours), *De natura rerum* (Chaps 39, 43, 46 and 47) by Isidore of Seville, and *De eclipsi lunae* by Sisebut. Finally, there is also a copy of book two of Cassiodorus’ *Institutiones*, i.e. the book where the seven liberal arts are discussed, which can be seen as a *trait-d’union* that links the other texts in the manuscript to the grand narrative of the liberal arts. Codex *Sangallensis* 855 is described here: <e-codices.unifr.ch/en/list/one/csg/0855> (accessed on 15 Oct. 2020); also see Meeder 2018, 141.

³⁴ See Bischoff 2007, 106; Evans 1983; Copeland and Sluiter 2009, 10, 374, 439–440; and Copeland 2013, 87–88.

³⁵ The full content of the *Heptateucon* is described in Evans 1983.

³⁶ Copeland and Sluiter 2009, 10, 531–536.

fact that they may have been the result of a personal elaboration rather than a record of widely attested instruction in the seven arts. Hence, to the best of my knowledge, one can assume for the time being that these two lists had virtually no impact on the actual selection of texts for the compilation of further manuscripts. In other words, scholars had much leeway in assembling pre-existing texts, parts of them, or personal summaries and re-elaborations. Trends no doubt existed and one can imagine obtaining statistics concerning the diffusion of certain clusters of texts.³⁷

5.3 Sources relevant to manuscripts are available on texts, but not on syllabi

In yet another possible scenario, information may be available on texts, but not on syllabi. This happens, for instance, when (auto-)biographies of scholars or colonial reports name the texts that were studied. The information extrapolated from these sources can be compared with the frequency with which certain works are found together in individual manuscripts or even library collections. It is then possible to attempt to reconstruct the list of subjects in a particular syllabus on the basis of the topics touched upon by the most frequently combined texts:

distribution of texts in mss ↔ texts
↓
syllabus

³⁷ A further source of information about the emergence of corpora could be found in lists of library holdings. However, these lists are descriptions of a *status quo* and do not have any prescriptive value or active educational intent – contrary to the intentions of Thierry of Chartres and Alexander Neckam and their lists. In other words, they are the product of presumably consistent attempts at collecting all the available texts on a particular subject or list of subjects and unique historical circumstances, with manuscripts and books coming into the collection from all walks of life. See Scrivner (1980) on the potentials and limitations of using library catalogues from the High Middle Ages in order to link manuscripts and their texts to more or less overt syllabi. Scrivner's analysis describes a broad syllabus, which includes at least the Scriptures, patristics and a combination of grammar, rhetoric and Latin classics. Other associations also exist 'between works concerned in various ways either with time (history, the computation of time, the observance of time through liturgy) or with law (civil law, canon law, monastic rules)' (Scrivner 1980, 436). In a way, such a broad syllabus, or rather syllabi, emerging from the study of library catalogues is quite similar to the outcome of Hall and Stewart's 2011 outline of Islamic education in West Africa (see Sections 2 and 5.3).

Case study: Islamic knowledge in manuscript collections in the Sahel region³⁸

Information on the texts

Plenty of (auto-)biographical sources – descriptive in nature rather than prescriptive – inform us about the texts studied by illustrious scholars throughout the history of Islamic knowledge.³⁹ Hall and Stewart particularly list sources that are relevant for studying Islamic knowledge in the Sahel region:⁴⁰

- 1 ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān as-Sa’dī’s (died after 1655/56) *Ta’rīkh as-Sūdān*;
- 2 aṭ-Ṭālib Muḥammad al-Bartilī’s (d. 1805) *Faṭḥ aš-šakūr fī ma’rifat a’yān ‘ulamā’ at-Takrūr*;
- 3 Abdallahi dan Fodio’s (d. 1829) *Īdā’ an-nusūḥ man akhadhtu ‘an-hu min aš-šuyūḥ*;
- 4 al-Ḥājj ‘Umar Tall’s (d. 1864) *Bayān mā waqa’a baynanā wa-bayn amīr Māsina Aḥmad b. Aḥmad b. aš-Šayḥ Aḥmad b. Muḥammad Lobbo*.

Information from the manuscripts

There are two criteria that Hall and Stewart 2011 followed to reconstruct what they call the ‘core curriculum’ (i.e. the fundamental range of topics to master in Islamic education in the Sahel region): first of all, the distribution and number of copies of specific texts held in libraries (as documented in the West African Arabic Manuscript Database, WAAMD), and secondly, the mentions of such texts in the works of the above-mentioned West African literati (‘chosen to represent a chronological and geographical cross-section of Sahelian scholarship’).⁴¹

³⁸ See Hall and Stewart 2011.

³⁹ See Makdisi 1981, 80–91 and Sobieroj 2016, 53–82, for example.

⁴⁰ Hall and Stewart 2011, 113–116.

⁴¹ Hall and Stewart 2011, 115. The two scholars also add a couple of caveats to their investigation. In particular, they specify that ‘[...] not all titles mentioned in these West African sources are widely distributed in libraries today, and conversely, there are many works that are widely attested in the AMMS [i.e. the Arabic Manuscript Management System, now known as WAAMD (<https://waamd.lib.berkeley.edu/home>) – GC] data that are not mentioned by these West African authors’ (Hall and Stewart 2011, 116). Furthermore, Hall and Stewart also acknowledge that their methodology is limited in that it does not take into consideration the implications of oral education or the memorisation of texts fully into account (Hall and Stewart 2011, 113–114, n. 13).

Information on the syllabus

A general consensus seems to exist in the secondary literature concerning the fact that within the institutions of Islamic knowledge – both *madrasas* and one-to-one educational settings – there was no fixed syllabus.⁴²

Apparently information about the syllabus (or ‘core curriculum’ in Hall and Stewart’s wording) is not provided by the tradition of Islamic education in the Sahel and can thus be extrapolated from the cross-reference of collections and (auto-)biographical texts that are relevant to educational practices. In this respect, Hall and Stewart write:

[There are] six clusters of the Islamic sciences that reappear with regularity in accounts of subjects studied across the breadth of the Sahel and over several hundred years: Qur’ānic studies (recitation, abrogation, exegesis), Arabic language (lexicons, lexicology, morphology, syntax, rhetoric and prosody), the Prophet Muḥammad (biography, devotional poetry, ḥadīth and history), theology (tawḥīd), mysticism (taṣawwuf) and law (sources, schools, didactic texts, legal precepts and legal cases/opinions).⁴³

42 In his study of the Islamic institutions of learning, Makdisi, for instance, writes that ‘[...] the sequences of courses found in the biographical notices of professors, either in reference to the courses they taught or to their own careers as students, indicate the lack of a prescribed pattern’ (Makdisi 1981, 80). Similarly, in his survey of some selected Arabic multiple-text manuscripts, Endress concludes by stating that ‘[i]f we were to point out a characteristic trait of Arabic Islamic book culture, resulting from the scholarly activity in the medieval institutions of learning we focused upon in our short survey, it is the intellectual identity of the individual compiler and reader of these “one-volume libraries” [i.e. the multiple-text manuscripts – GC] emerging from many of these codices. Not a standard syllabus or *cursus studiorum* is documented in these collections, but a library growing under the hands of dedicated students who, rather than single-minded “nerds”, will spare no effort when enticed by the name of a reputed author or the title of a rare and sought-for text in order to secure new resources of learning. Not complete works or “best of” collections, nor corpus sets [...], are united in such volumes, but treasure troves resulting from months, or even years, of activity’ (Endress 2016, 203–204). Much the same observation is made by Brentjes 2018, 161–168 concerning the teaching and learning of sciences.

43 Hall and Stewart 2011, 111–112. Notably, Makdisi 1981, 80 extrapolates a similar list of topics from the various educational accounts he consulted: ‘The sequence of courses appears to have proceeded in the following order: Koran; hadith; the Koranic sciences: exegesis, variant readings; the sciences of hadith, involving the study of the biographies of the transmitters of hadith; the two usuls: usul ad-din, principles of religion, and usul al-fiqh, principles, sources and methodology of the law; madhhab, the law of the school to which one belonged; khilaf, the divergences of the law, within one’s own school, as well as between schools; and jadal, dialectic’. A further (similar) list was produced by Subtelny and Khalidov 1995, 222–225 based on their study of some *iğāzas*, i.e. teachers’ written authorisations granted to students who had studied a specific corpus and were then allowed to pass their knowledge on to new students. Another configuration of an even broader syllabus emerges from the study conducted by Robinson 1997, who

5.4 Unavailable sources on both syllabi and texts

Manuscripts are the only source we have for reconstructing possible configurations of both syllabi and texts when pertinent information is otherwise unavailable. Scholars may be able to resort to paratexts, for instance, which can help interpret the content of the manuscripts and link it to its broader educational environment, or statistical accounts of the frequency with which certain texts occur together, thus providing an indication of the topics they cover. This situation clearly implies unidirectionality in the analysis:

distribution of texts in mss → texts → syllabus

investigated three lists of books arranged according to subject headings. These lists belong to the Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal milieus and are dated to the late sixteenth century, the 1930's (but reflecting the post-1700 period) and the early eighteenth century, respectively. Similarly to what emerges from Scrivner's 1980 study on library catalogues from the High Middle Ages (see n. 37 above), Robinson's study shows the existence of a very broad syllabus, or rather, syllabi, which reflect the twofold subdivision of knowledge of Al-Ghazālīan memory (see Bakar 1998, 111) into *al-'ulūm an-naqliyya* ('transmitted science') and *al-'ulūm al-'aqliyya* ('rational sciences'), i.e. sciences of a religious nature (including those that are propaedeutical to religious studies, such as grammar) and sciences that are produced by the human intellect (e.g. mathematics). On the other hand, a narrower configuration of the Islamic syllabus emerges from a close-up of 'the highest course of study' at the *madrasas* of the Ottoman empire 'in accordance with the decree of the Padishah' in Ahmed and Filipovic 2004; the two quotations are from pp. 188 and 186 respectively. These two researchers analysed a single sheet of paper dated to 1565 (item number E/2803/1 in the Topkapı Sarayı Arşivi [Topkapı Palace Archive, Istanbul]) containing a list of books to be studied by advanced students. It is possible to infer from this prescriptive list that the syllabus included Quranic exegesis, the study of Hadiths, and law (both *uṣūl al-fiqh* and *furū' al-fiqh*); topics such as grammar and logic were probably already mastered at lower levels of the educational training. Here it needs to be mentioned that recent studies have put into question the strong religious focus that has been ascribed to the Islamic syllabus by the secondary literature. In particular, Hirschler 2016, 103–104 is very vocal in stating that 'Middle Eastern history has certainly moved away from the idea that the madrasa necessarily had a narrow and restricted curriculum, as was expressed in the words of George Makdisi that "neither the madrasa nor its cognate institutions harboured any but the religious sciences and their ancillary subjects" and in those of Heinz Halm that "teaching at the madrasa was always limited to religious knowledge. The instruction and study of medicine or astronomy, algebra or geometry, took place elsewhere" [...]''. Among others, in depth studies on library collections, such as that of Hirschler 2016 on the Ašrafiyya *madrasa* library in Damascus, reveal a different situation.

Case study 1: The *Ringkomposition* of the *Ḍaḥīrat al-Iskandar* in its single-text manuscripts⁴⁴

The *Ḍaḥīrat al-Iskandar* ('Treasure of Alexander') is a compendium of texts about the 'sciences of nature', the sources of which are only partly retrievable today. The manuscripts of this compendium contain an introduction plus conclusion (a 'cyclic composition' or *Ringkomposition* in German) that lends consistency to the textual ensemble by means of a fantastic narrative concerning its authorship, which is attributed to Alexander the Great. This represents a particularly elaborate strategy for justifying the emergence of a new syllabus of technical knowledge by assembling texts that are, at least in part, covertly in a dialogue with the – very open – corpora of Hermetic and Pseudo-Aristotelian texts.⁴⁵

Case study 2: Old Babylonian scribes and Sumerian literature

Primary sources on how Akkadian-speaking scribes-to-be familiarised themselves with Sumerian and its literature are available, but of questionable historical reliability.⁴⁶ It is, however, safe to assume that students copied lexical lists as far as elementary exposure to the language was concerned. In contrast, the picture is much less clear in the case of more advanced levels of instruction, when literary texts were first encountered.⁴⁷ Specialists seem to have successfully found a way to investigate this later stage using a combination of codicological and textual features, which are pedagogically relevant when taken together.

Four texts share a particular set of characteristics, namely *Lipit-Eštar hymn B*, *Iddin-Dagan hymn B*, *Enlil-bani hymn A* and *Nisaba hymn A*. These present a variety of grammatical forms, which made them suitable pieces for students who wanted to practise reading texts and, to a lesser degree, provided eulogistic content, which was a useful topic to master in the scribal profession.⁴⁸ These four works have been found inscribed on lenticular tablets, which usually witness the uncertain hands of beginners, both in Nippur and Uruk, thus 'suggesting that the use of at least these four compositions early in the curriculum was not an isolated

⁴⁴ See Raggetti in this volume.

⁴⁵ For more information about the Arabic *Hermetica*, see van Bladel 2009.

⁴⁶ Note that Sumerian was already a classical language for Akkadian speakers in the Old Babylonian period (the twentieth to sixteenth century BCE). Concerning primary sources in Sumerian in which students describe their life at school, see George 2005, for instance.

⁴⁷ See Waetzoldt 1989 discussed in Veldhuis 1997, 40.

⁴⁸ See Tinney 1999, 162–168 and, in particular, Vanstiphout 1979.

local phenomenon'.⁴⁹ More to the point, we know of four six-faced prisms, each of which contains one of the four texts.⁵⁰ Since the four prisms all share the same colophon, it can be assumed that they originally formed a single set of manuscripts – in other words, a multi-volume manuscript. Furthermore, we also have one tablet written by a beginner's hand, containing an anthology of four texts, three of which belong to our fourfold corpus.⁵¹

Other groups of texts that, presumably, were used in educational contexts are known from catalogues – in our current working frame, they are primary evidence of the corpora. A fourteen-fold corpus is described by Robson 2001 and a tenfold one is described by Tinney 1999.⁵² The latter is of particular interest to us because it is partly attested in two multiple-text manuscripts, namely IB 1511, which contains texts 6 to 10 (according to Tinney's numbering), and the prism UR 89-14-1, which contains texts 2 to 4 in its present damaged state, but possibly texts 1 to 5 originally, if one takes certain features of its layout and format into account.⁵³

6 Conclusions

Within educational settings, manuscripts serve to produce and reproduce particular modes of knowledge organisation, reflecting various stages in a continuum that ranges from the creation of new links among previously disconnected subjects to cases of fully fledged compartmentalisation of knowledge, as is the case in the establishment of closed corpora, for instance.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Tinney 1999, 162.

⁵⁰ *Lipit-Eštar hymn B* in AO 8863, *Iddin-Dagan hymn B* in AO 8864, *Enlil-bani hymn A* in W-B 160, and *Nisaba hymn A* in YBC 13523 (see Tinney 1999, 162).

⁵¹ The manuscript in question is tablet H 156+ containing *Lipit-Eštar hymn B*, *Iddin-Dagan hymn B*, and *Nisaba hymn A* (see Tinney 1999, 163).

⁵² See Tinney 1999, 168–170. The ten texts are: *Šulgi A*, *Lipit-Eštar A*, *Song of the Hoe*, *Ninmešarra*, *Enlilsuraše*, *Hymn to Keš*, *Enki's Journey to Nippur*, *Inanna and Ebih*, *Nungal Hymn* and *Gilgameš and Huwawa*.

⁵³ See Robson 2001, 52 on the actual archaeological distribution of the evidence of the tenfold corpus described by Tinney 1999.

⁵⁴ Cf. the idea of the 'hardening of the categories' in education (e.g. in Postman and Weingartner 1969, 80). Note that such compartmentalisation may even correspond to forms of social control. As Bernstein (2003, 156) remarks: 'How a society selects, classifies, distributes, transmits and evaluates the educational knowledge that it considers to be public reflects both the distribution of power and the principles of social control'. Although Bernstein refers explicitly to forms of public knowledge, it is not hard to imagine that the same consideration befits cases in which access to knowledge is reserved to restricted communities.

In this respect, manuscripts can be appreciated as educational tools. They are produced and used by individuals who are involved in negotiating the definition of knowledge and its categories – a process that is essential to the transmission of knowledge itself – and who are also involved in selecting and reading texts that are representative of their own intellectual tenets and those of their milieu, as well as in devising and making use of the ways of transmitting those texts in writing (via forms, formats, layouts and suchlike).

In conclusion, although secondary literature on topics as broad as the classification of knowledge or as narrow as the description of individual manuscripts is definitely vast in all fields of the humanities, studies that openly look for connections between the broad and the narrow are rare, in particular when it comes to investigating the interplay between syllabi, texts (and corpora), and manuscripts. The literature discussed in this introduction and the case studies contained in the current section of this volume will hopefully trigger the reader's curiosity to make those connections in their own fields of choice.

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