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The Talmud's Genre among Imperial Period/Late Antique Genres

This chapter asks whether and how the Babylonian Talmud could be integrated into the literary culture of the late antique Mediterranean world by looking at the work's genre from a comparative point of view. These questions about the work's genre will be posed with the recognition that they are ahistorical and originate from our contemporary way of classifying books. Accounting for classification is important since it facilitates, but also decisively governs, "the way [we] read a text, the expectations [we] form of it, the questions [we] pose to it, and the sort of information [we] deem it will yield."[1] Discussing the genre of the Talmud will, then, not yield a precise historical answer but will allow us to situate the work in the literary landscape of its time. This, in turn, will support a historical model to answering the seminal question of how the Talmud was produced, and that will be discussed in the next chapters.

Navigating between our present need to classify a text and the fact that ancient texts tend to evade any such classification, this chapter engages a conversation between modern and ancient ways of classifying texts. For this purpose, the chapter first surveys the modern genres mostly associated with the Talmud, namely, the commentary and the encyclopedia, and proceeds to explore the imperial period and late antique structural counterparts of these genres. By adding symposiac literature as an insightful *comparandum* to the range of literary forms usually compared with the Talmud, I will argue that the Talmud is best

[1] Philip S. Alexander, "Using Rabbinic Literature as a Source for the History of Late-Roman Palestine: Problems and Issues," in *Rabbinic Texts and the History of Late-Roman Palestine*, ed. Philip S. Alexander and Martin Goodman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 17.

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classified as a commentary in form, an encyclopedia in content, and a symposiac work in its literary mode.

THE TROUBLE WITH GENRE

The difficulties with defining a "genre" start with the fact that every text contains several characteristics that may prompt its identification with a certain genre, as the assignment may be based on form, mode, or content. Not only do these different criteria already seem confusing and imprecise, but they are additionally "usually understood to be distinct from genre."[2] Still, libraries, bookstores, and their customers seem to be comfortable and successful with the assignment of genres for customers' use. Rather than firm and scientifically explorable categories, genres are social conventions negotiated in mutual, yet time- and culture-bound, agreements between authors and readers.[3]

Today, the major categories into which literary works are divided are poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and drama. In antiquity, Plato distinguished between lyric poetry, epic, and tragedy, while his student Aristotle differentiated between epic, tragedy, and comedy.[4] This alignment of contemporary and ancient genres may imply a certain overlap and continuity. Yet there is a major difference between contemporary and ancient classification regarding the range of texts being classified. While contemporary classification aims to cover every type of text, Plato's and Aristotle's classifications cover only poetry, that is, texts that make use of a metrical language. Metrical language, in its different manifestations, was reserved for texts that related in a different way than others to truth and reality.[5] Ancient Greek taxonomies of texts, then, focused on the mode of a text, its use of language. Roman librarians appear to have made the same basic distinction in that they mostly separated poetry from prose texts.[6] In a certain sense, this division may be compared to the contemporary distinction between fiction and nonfiction. Indeed, in the

[2] John A. Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, see "Genre."

[3] See Cuddon, *Dictionary*, see "Genre Theory."

[4] For these distinctions, see Cuddon, *Dictionary*, see "Genre."

[5] On myths, for example, see Bruce D. MacQueen, "The Stepchildren of Herodotus: The Transformation of History into Fiction in Late Antiquity," in *The Children of Herodotus: Greek and Roman Historiography and Related Genres*, ed. Jakub Pigoń (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008).

[6] George W. Houston, *Inside Roman Libraries: Book Collections and Their Management in Antiquity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 44.

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early imperial period, some authors began to criticize poetry as a medium used to impart false truths. Nevertheless, others, such as the anonymous author of the poem "Aetna," tried to preserve the didactic merits of metrical language to describe natural phenomena – a topic which, on account of its content, would be classified today as nonfiction.[7]

Slowly but surely classical poetry went out of fashion in late antiquity. Around 29 BCE, the last classical drama was staged in Rome, thereby introducing the looming turn from poetry to prose onto the theater stage.[8] The ubiquitous use of prose in late antiquity makes the historical analysis of the relationship between texts and reality much more complicated, with the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction often seeming blurred. Plausibility (*verisimilitude*) and implausibility are terms better suited to explain the literary sensibilities of a rhetorically trained and accustomed audience than modern ideas of fiction and nonfiction as a contrast between imagination and fact. Indeed, the creation of plausibility and the detection of implausibility was at the heart of rhetorical education.[9]

Literary plausibility did not refer to a distinction between credible and incredible but to the way in which an argument or story was constructed. In his work of what are obviously not *True Histories*, for example, Lucian of Samosata (second century) could send people to the moon and still remain plausible within the literary fabric of other marvelous adventures described in his book.[10] The same accounts for the fantastic sea voyages of

[7] See Liba C. Taub, "Explaining a Volcano Naturally: Aetna and the Choice of Poetry," in *Authorial Voices in Greco-Roman Technical Writing*, ed. Liba C. Taub and Aude Doody, AKAN-Einzelschriften 7 (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2009). Nicander of Colophon, Servilius Damocrates, Heraclitus of Rhodiapolis, Marcellus of Side, and Quintus Serenus Sammonicus wrote medical recipes in verse.

[8] For the shift from poetry to fictional prose, see MacQueen, "Stepchildren of Herodotus"; for the development of drama in late antiquity, opening up to prose and forms of rhythmical prose, atypical iambics, as well as the *cento*, see Eva Stehlíková, "Drama in Late Antiquity," *Listy filologické* 116, no. 1 (1993). Another transitory form seems to have been the (at-first) indecorous form of the *prosimetrum*, a mixture of prose and verse, known as the "Menippean satire"; see Joel C. Relihan, "Prosimetra," in *A Companion to Late Antique Literature*, ed. Scott McGill and Edward J. Watts (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2018).

[9] George A. Kennedy, *Progymnasmata: Greek Textbooks of Prose Composition and Rhetoric*, *WGRW* 10 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), x.

[10] Karen ní Mheallaigh, *The Moon in the Greek and Roman Imagination Myth, Literature, Science and Philosophy*, Greek Culture in the Roman World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 205, notes that Lucian's "work is … most complex, engaging with the entire preceding selenographical tradition in surprising and sophisticated ways, as well as with complex literary-critical matters in his own society." Through his engagement with previous narrators of trips to the moon (e.g., Varro, Antonius Diogenes), Lucian remains plausible.

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Rabah bar bar Hanah in the Talmud, which, combined with other fantastic stories, biblical proof, and eyewitness markers, remain within the framework of the "plausible implausible" created in this passage.[11]

Catalogues produced by libraries and collectors offer further information on late antique classifications of texts. Apart from the already-mentioned basic distinction between poetry and prose works, they focused on content for additional subclassification; bibliographical information about the function of a text is rare.[12] Ancient readers did not pick their reading by form – such as, commentary, letter collection, manual, and the like – but according to topic.

Apart from the lack of generic terms for literature, Mediterranean languages complicate the matter further in that they do not have an emic term for scholarship, and certainly not for scholarly literature. Historians have, therefore, proposed to use the term "erudition" for activities such as textual interpretation, linguistic inquiry, compilation, annotation, summarizing, investigation, argumentation, and the production of catalogues and lists.[13] The erudite man – indeed, in the imagination of the time and its social reality, erudition was predominantly male – mastered a bookish versatility. The erudite man was able to cite from various works and was able to compose his own rhetorical and literary contributions.[14]

Literary works of systematic erudition are basically the commentary, the encyclopedia, and "works of antiquarian erudition" or "miscellanies."[15] These three forms differ in their organizational principles and their scope, but each is essentially connected to some type of list that serves as a sort of

[11] b. Bava Batra 73b. See Dina Stein, "Believing Is Seeing: A Reading of Baba Batra 73a–75b," *Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature* 17 (1999). In their concealment of "verifiable, historical and factual accuracy," that is, date or precise location, these stories adhere to what Koen De Temmerman labeled "fictiveness" in order to do justice to the aspiration of *verisimilitude*, which is inherent in these narratives; see Koen De Temmerman, "Ancient Biography and Formalities of Fiction," in *Writing Biography in Greece and Rome: Narrative Techniques and Fictionalization*, ed. Koen De Temmerman and Kristoffel Demoen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 5.

[12] Houston, *Inside Roman Libraries*, 113; see also 44 and 44n14.

[13] See Robert A. Kaster, "Scholarship," in *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Studies*, ed. Alessandro Barchiesi and Walter Scheidel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); and James E. G. Zetzel, *Critics, Compilers, and Commentators: An Introduction to Roman Philology, 200 BCE–800 CE* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 3–5.

[14] This is the bookish ideal described, in various ways, in Athenaeus's *The Learned Banqueters* (*Deipnosophistai*); see Christian Jacob, "Athenaeus the Librarian," in *Athenaeus and His World: Reading Greek Culture in the Roman Empire*, ed. David Braund and John Wilkins (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000).

[15] Zetzel, *Critics*, 6; and see Teresa Morgan, *Popular Morality in the Early Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 331–332, for a description of miscellanies.

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index or aid for better orientation within the text. Thus, the commentary is built around the "systematic glossographical analysis," the scholion; the encyclopedia relates to a thematic glossary; and the miscellany is generically connected to the inventory lists of book collections.[16] These relationships are, of course, in no way linear or evolutionary, moving from list to corpus. Rather, as will be discussed in more detail below, the list and its more elaborate forms each represent distinct and conscious approaches to textual knowledge. Interdependencies exist in that a list may lead to an elaboration of its entries (commentary or encyclopedia), which, at some point, may be summarized into another list again, or in that the list comes to represent the logical structure of the flow of knowledge adopted by other genres.

The literary methods favored by, and characteristic of, late antique erudite authors were "epitomizing, abbreviating, compressing, paraphrasing, anthologizing, excerpting, and fragmenting."[17] Rather than focusing on independent writing projects, authors concentrated on already-written texts, generating new insights from different arrangements, adding their own conclusions, opinions, and observations. To produce new compositions by way of old texts, they used principles that allowed for "mobility within and between the topics," such as "rules of analogy, of complementarity, of digression, [and] of metonymy."[18] While aiming at a compression of knowledge, these techniques simultaneously fostered a comparatively rapid production of bulky multivolume works. In addition, due to these methods, late antique literature is generally highly self-referential and text focused, with the texts' learning "more from each other than from experience, and despite the claim of *usus*, [they] may owe more to literature than to life."[19]

An example will serve to illustrate how the same story is consciously and plausibly reworked and used to make different points in different contexts. Aelian (second/early third century), in his paradoxographical work *On the*

[16] Raffaella Cribiore, *Gymnastics of the Mind: Greek Education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 207. For examples of inventory lists, see Houston, *Inside Roman Libraries*, 39–86.

[17] These methods were collected by Katerina Oikonomopoulou from a collection of essays on condensing texts in (late) antiquity; see Katerina Oikonomopoulou, review of *Condensing Texts – Condensed Texts: Palingenesia, Bd 98*, ed. Marietta Horster and Christiane Reitz, *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 38 (October 2012).

[18] Jacob, "Athenaeus," 104.

[19] Holt N. Parker, "Love's Body Anatomized: The Ancient Erotic Handbooks and the Rhetoric of Sexuality," in *Pornography and Representation in Greece and Rome*, ed. Amy Richlin (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 96. (Parker was imprisoned in 2016 for the possession of child pornography.) See also Zetzel, *Critics*, 4, on self-referentiality.

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Nature of Animals, tells the story of the guard of a castle who observed a hoopoe nesting in a crack in the wall.[20] Upon seeing this, the guard covered the nest with mud. The bird fetched a certain herb and placed it on the mud, and the mud dissolved. The guard took the herb and found many treasures with it. The Palestinian midrash Leviticus Rabbah (fourth/fifth century) tells the story of Rabbi Shimon ben Halafta observing a hoopoe building a nest in a tree in his garden.[21] Upon witnessing this, the rabbi (Aram. for teacher, [land]lord) takes a plank and nails it on top of the nest. After finding out, the hoopoe flies away, fetches an herb, and places it on the nail, which breaks apart. Seeing this, Rabbi Shimon b. Halafta decides to conceal this herb lest someone use it to harm others. The Babylonian Talmud, again, tractate Gittin, recounts how King Solomon's servant tricked a hoopoe into fetching the mythical *shamir*, a stone with which to carve and break other stones, by placing a glass plank on the bird's nest.[22] In the anonymous *Syriac Book of Medicines*, the same motif is part of a cure: One who suffers from an eye disease is advised to blind the young of a dove and put it back into the nest. The patient is instructed to wait until the mother fetches a certain root to cure the eyes of her young. He should then go and find the same root.[23] We see how the plot has been adopted by several authors, each extracting from it the lesson of their interest: the guardian finds treasures with the herb; Rabbi Shimon b. Halafta hides it to prevent harm; King Solomon will use the "treasure" (*shamir*) to build the temple in Jerusalem; and the recipe book extracts from the story the practical aspects of how to obtain a healing root. With small twists, the excerpt, whichever it may have been, is turned into an original and seemingly new story. This was quite an efficient way to produce text. Then again, the challenge was to remain plausible in every detail when introducing a story into a completely new literary or even cultural context.

[20] Aelian, *De natura animalium* 1.3.26. Paradoxographical works are generally concerned with noteworthy, wondrous, and hence paradoxical phenomena.

[21] Lev. Rab. 22:4. The bird's name, *dukifat* (דוכיפת), is Hebrew. It appears in the Bible in the list of unclean birds in Lev. 11:19. The translation "hoopoe" is supported by the Septuagint and Vulgate; see Emil G. Hirsch and Immanuel M. Casanowicz, "Lapwing," in *The Jewish Encyclopedia: A Descriptive Record of the History, Religion, Literature, and Customs of the Jewish People from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, ed. Isidore Singer (Saint Petersburg: Brokhaus and Efron, 1906), www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/9636-lapwing. For the dating of Lev. Rab., see Günter Stemberger, *Einleitung in Talmud und Midrasch*, 9th ed. (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2011), 323.

[22] b. Gittin 68b.

[23] See Ernest A. W. Budge, *The Syriac Book of Medicines: Syrian Anatomy, Pathology and Therapeutics in the Early Middle Ages with Sections on Astrological and Native Medicine and Recipes, by an Anonymous Physician* (London, 1913; repr., Amsterdam, 1976), 2:662.

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The genre of the Babylonian Talmud has so far been characterized from the point of view of modern genres as a "commentary plus," an "encyclopedia (minus)," and a "modest form of anthology." The obvious reason why the Talmud is associated with the commentary is its form of organization, which follows the textual sequence of the Mishnah, a Palestinian work from about the second century. The fact that the Talmud hardly ever does what the modern reader expects of a commentary, namely, explain the mishnaic text, gives reason for the "plus."[24] Comparisons of the Talmud with the encyclopedia were generated by the work's variegated nature, associative structure, and scientific interest.[25] The notion of anthology, again, was evoked on account of the Talmud's display of linguistically and stylistically different texts, which makes the work look like an eclectic collection.[26] In light of the fact that the anthology is a form of the miscellany, the proposed genres all fall into the realm of erudite works and the particular methods applied for their production. A closer look at the forms and makeup of these genres in the imperial period and late antiquity might, therefore, also shed new light on the Talmud's purpose and nature as a late antique work. Actually, the fact that none of the modern taxonomic straitjackets of "commentary," "encyclopedia," or "anthology" really fit the Talmud is a feature shared by its ancient cognates and is a decisive link to the literary production of its time.[27] In what follows,

[24] E.g., David C. Kraemer, *Reading the Rabbis: The Talmud as Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 7; Richard Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia between Persia and Roman Palestine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), viii; Shai Secunda, *The Iranian Talmud: Reading the Bavli in Its Sasanian Context*, Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 1–2; Eliezer Segal, "Anthological Dimensions of the Babylonian Talmud," *Prooftexts* 17, no. 1 (January 1997): 33–34.

[25] On the Talmud's encyclopedic traits, see Wout J. van Bekkum, "Sailing on the Sea of Talmud: The Encyclopaedic Code of Early Jewish Exegesis," in *Pre-Modern Encyclopaedic Texts: Proceedings of the Second COMERS Congress, Groningen, 1–4 July 1996*, ed. Peter Binkley (Leiden: Brill, 1997); Dagmar Börner-Klein, "Assoziation mit System: Der Talmud, die 'andere' Enzyklopädie," in *Archivprozesse: Die Kommunikation der Aufbewahrung*, ed. Hedwig Pompe and Leander Scholz, Mediologie 5 (Cologne: DuMont, 2002); and Lennart Lehmhaus, "*Listenwissenschaft* and the Encyclopedic Hermeneutics of Knowledge in Talmud and Midrash," in *In the Wake of the Compendia: Infrastructural Contexts and the Licensing of Empiricism in Ancient and Medieval Mesopotamia*, ed. J. Cale Johnson (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015). En passant see also Samuel J. Kottek, "Concepts of Disease in the Talmud," *Korot* 9, nos. 1–2 (1985): 7.

[26] On the Talmud as anthology, see especially Segal, "Anthological Dimensions," esp. 34–37.

[27] I borrowed the terminology "taxonomic straitjacket" from Geoffrey Greatrex's introduction to *Shifting Genres in Late Antiquity*, ed. Geoffrey Greatrex and Hugh Elton (Ashgate, UK: Routledge, 2015), 4 (discussing the incommensurability of late antique and modern genres).

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the forms that commentaries, encyclopedias, and miscellanies took in the imperial period and late antiquity will be discussed in more detail to generate a comprehensive understanding of their potential and aims. This understanding will then be compared to the form of the Talmud, and based on commonalities, it will be inferred what the work had to offer to readers/listeners and what the aims of its composers might have been.

THE COMMENTARY IN LATE ANTIQUITY

Much of the literary output of late antiquity revolves around exegesis and/or a text's transformation according to the personal understanding of another author.[28] One of the most obvious literary forms in which exegesis occurs is the commentary. This makes the commentary "the primary facet" or even "a metaphor of the literary system" of late antiquity, a time predominantly concerned with its antecedents' literature.[29] Commentaries as elaborative explanations of other texts can be found within every literary form, including stories (see Chapter 4). The commentary under discussion here is, more precisely, a text that follows the structure of another text in some way.

The foremost intellectual work of commentators was the fragmentation of their chosen base text into meaningful lemmas, or line references.[30] This operation may have been assisted in some cases by already-existing scholia, that is, lists of linguistically problematic instances in a text. In other cases, the crafting of such a list may have been the first step in the process of writing a commentary. Dissection of texts thus appears closely related to the grammarian and grammatical training, which focused on "the parts of speech and their correct inflection."[31] This training thereby provided future authors with literary tools and trained their eyes and ears for the dissection of language. A certain standardization in education resulted in authors applying the same grammatical and rhetorical

[28] See also Ilaria L. Ramelli, "Late Antiquity and the Transmission of Educational Ideals and Methods: The Western Empire," in *A Companion to Ancient Education*, ed. W. Martin Bloomer (Chichester, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2015).

[29] Marco Formisano, "Towards an Aesthetic Paradigm of Late Antiquity," *Antiquité Tardive* 15 (2007): 283.

[30] See Steven D. Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary: Torah and Its Interpretation in the Midrash Sifre to Deuteronomy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 1–2.

[31] Zetzel, *Critics*, 15.

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principles.[32] These left a characteristic imprint on the time's written output. Thus, as Marco Formisano noted, "It is just this ability to read a work analytically and decode it – be it Virgil, the Bible, or 'scientific' texts – that presents a characteristic of Late Antiquity."[33]

The ancient genre that actually meets the expectations of modern readers regarding the genre "commentary" as a straightforward clarification of a text are auxiliary lists, the "marginal notes (*paratithesthai*), clarifying notes (*scholia*)," or the slightly more expansive *scholia vetera*, with their indications of grammatical inconsistencies, rare and foreign words, and so on.[34] The more elaborate, exegetical form of the late antique commentary, which I will call the "erudite commentary" to distinguish it from said lists, departs from these linguistic and text-based concerns. Late antique commentators themselves distinguish "between the explication of words (*lexis*) and the explication of points of doctrine (*theōria*)."[35]

Erudite commentaries were not written in the margins or side columns of the text with which they were concerned. In fact, "not before the fifth century is there any sign of books being organized with wide enough margins to hold more than occasional notes."[36] Consequently, the text was not "physically tied" to its base text; this offered considerable freedom to the commentator, who could dwell on or skip certain passages, paraphrase or summarize, and cover a text selectively or continuously.[37] The erudite commentary was foremost a monographic and independent work, unrestricted in its own size or scope, with or without distinct links to the base text. These links could take the form of clear or

[32] Grammarians benefitted from priviledges from the first century onward, and publicly sponsored schools followed; see Noel Lenski, "Searching for Slave Teachers in Late Antiquity," in "Ποιμένι λαῶν: Studies in Honor of Robert J. Penella," ed. Cristiana Sogno, special issue, RET Supplément 7 (2019): 133–135.

[33] Formisano, "Aesthetic Paradigm," 283.

[34] Han Baltussen, "Philosophical Commentary," in *A Companion to Late Antique Literature*, ed. Scott McGill and Edward J. Watts (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2018), 306. On *scholia vetera*, see Cribiore, *Gymnastics of the Mind*, 207.

[35] See Philippe Hoffmann, "What Was a Commentary in Late Antiquity? The Example of the Neoplatonic Commentators," in *A Companion to Ancient Philosophy*, ed. Mary Louise Gill and Edward J. Watts (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2006), 616. Origen, for example, pointed out that "some problems cannot fit into a running commentary and would require specially dedicated treatises" (Marie-Pierre Bussières, "Biblical Commentary," in McGill and Watts, *Companion to Late Antique Literature*, 315, and see references there).

[36] Zetzel, *Critics*, 126.

[37] See Zetzel, *Critics*, 126–127; Baltussen, "Philosophical Commentary," 302–303.

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embedded references to lines or words in the base text (lemmas), which connected the two texts and provided orientation for the reader.[38]

Contemporary scholarship still struggles to find the appropriate terminology with which to describe and explain the erudite commentary.[39] Across late antique disciplines they are described as something like "a jumping-off point to develop his [i.e., the philosopher's] own philosophy."[40] The matter becomes more lucid if the Greco-Roman curriculum for students who mastered basic grammar is considered: the *progymnasmata*. These "preliminary rhetorical exercises" prepared students for subsequent training with a rhetor.[41] As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4, the *progymnasmata* are an indispensable point of reference for the analysis of late antique literature on any topic, since they provided the basic literary methods underlying all literary enterprises. These curricula describe the intellectual framework of authors. Generally, rhetorical training appears to have become increasingly widespread and standardized in late antiquity, and its standards have been observed in technical, juridical, monastic, and private texts, including commentaries.[42] Commentaries, by the very fact that they are concerned with another literary text, attest to their authors' completion of the *progymnasmata* stage.

One of the last exercises in this curriculum was inquiry (*thesis*), which is described by one author, Aelius Theon, as follows: "Thesis is a verbal inquiry admitting controversy without specifying any persons and circumstance" (*Progym.* 120).[43] Although Theon refers to the thesis as a verbal inquiry, "verbal" refers only to the purpose of the exercise, its final oral delivery: The speeches themselves were composed in writing. Extant orations and sermons by orators and church fathers testify that

[38] For examples, see Zetzel, *Critics*, 127.

[39] See, e.g., the collection of essays in Glenn W. Most, ed., *Commentaries–Kommentare*, Aporemata: Kritische Studien zur Philologiegeschichte 4 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1999), and basically in most essays on the topic, e.g., Bussières, "Biblical Commentary," 313–314.

[40] Baltussen, "Philosophical Commentary," 301, regarding the commentaries written by the Neoplatonic philosopher Plotinus (third century).

[41] More information on the *progymnasmata*, their influence, and their scope is provided in Chapter 4.

[42] See Marco Formisano, "Literature of Knowledge," in McGill and Watts, *Companion to Late Antique Literature*, 491–504; Charles N. Aull, "Legal Texts," in McGill and Watts, *Companion to Late Antique Literature*, 417–430; Lillian I. Larsen, "School Texts," in McGill and Watts, *Companion to Late Antique Literature*, 471–491; and Bussières, "Biblical Commentary."

[43] Kennedy, *Progymnasmata*, 55.

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they were first written and only then memorized.[44] Indeed, as Theon specifies in the sequel, *thesis* is a means for every citizen to persuade any audience, not just the one in a law court. As examples he mentions the audience of an assembly or lecture.

The inquiry is generally introduced as an investigation into a topic that concerns a broader audience, as opposed to the argumentation of a juridical case. The topic can be theoretical, philosophical, practical, or political, but it should be raised by doubt, not by agreement, as would be the case with the exercise called *topos*.[45] Theon further distinguishes between the theoretical and the practical inquiry: The theoretical inquiry focuses on arguments alone, while the practical one may find support in the evidence from "famous men, poets and statesmen, and philosophers."[46] As theoretical examples, Theon's *progymnasmata* suggest topics such as "whether the gods provide for the world" and, for a practical one, "whether one should marry."[47]

Regarding the composition of such an inquiry, Theon suggests that the proem should consist of a saying, maxim, or *chreia* in support of the inquiry. The *chreia* was an important and fundamental stylistic device consisting of an action and a saying, or a speaker and a saying. Alternatively, the inquiry could also begin with praise or rebuke of a topic.[48] It is especially this suggestion – namely, that the *thesis* take its departure from the snippet of a preexisting literary text (i.e., a saying, maxim, or *chreia*) – that links it to the commentary and its lemmas. According to the procedure of the *thesis*, whatever had been written

[44] On the orations of the fourth-century Athenian orator Himerius, teacher of the bishops Basil (Caesarea) and Gregory of Nazianzus (Constantinople), see Robert J. Penella, *Man and the Word: The Orations of Himerius*, The Transformation of the Classical Heritage 43 (Berkley: University of California Press, 2007). On Themistius of fourth-century Constantinople, see Robert Penella, *The Private Orations of Themistius*, The Transformation of the Classical Heritage 29 (Berkley: University of California Press, 2000). Many of Libanius's orations are extant as well; see Raffaella Cribiore, *Libanius the Sophist: Rhetoric, Reality, and Religion in the Fourth Century*, Cornell Studies in Classical Philology (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); or Apuleius's (second century CE) Latin orations collected in his *Florida*.

[45] Hermogenes (25) distinguishes between political topics and those referring to physics, e.g., "whether the sky is spherical, whether there are many worlds, whether the sun is made of fire" (translated in Kennedy, *Progymnasmata*, 87).

[46] *Progym.* 122. Translation follows Kennedy, *Progymnasmata*, 57.

[47] *Progym.* 121. Translation follows Kennedy, *Progymnasmata*, 56; for the Greek text on "Thesis," see Aelius Théon, *Progymnasmata*, ed. and trans. Michel Patillon with the assistance of Giancarlo Bolognesi, Collections des Universités de France (Paris: Les belles lettres, 1997), 82–94.

[48] See Kennedy, *Progymnasmata*, 55–56.

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about the subject of the "snippet" in prior works was collected and juxtaposed. These excerpts were alternatively treated as arguments or evidence by famous philosophers, poets, and other authors, from which the orator distilled a conclusion. The training in *thesis* seems, therefore, to have been the decisive device in the development of the erudite commentary, in that doubtful terms or sentences were treated as subjects of an inquiry.

Although this was neither the origin nor necessarily the purpose of this exercise, *thesis* trained students to understand that they could make a case for a certain argument if they found enough text witnesses in its support. The original basis of this exercise in the court is still obvious: it is a text-based dry run for a court hearing. Applying the same method to their inquiry into the subject matter of a lemma, commentators searched for support in other texts according to availability and preference. As authors provided a full-blown *thesis* for their chosen lemmas, it follows naturally that "commentaries often deployed a huge documentation, and we know that ... commentaries abound with quotations and paraphrases of philosophers."[49] In the middle of all these arguments, then, the author-composer of a commentary could choose his role, assuming, for example, the role of the trenchant advocate, in which case the a commentary took a polemical tone in favor of certain opinions. Or he could take the role of the defender and turn the commentary into an apology. Or he could take the role of the neutral judge, weighing the arguments against one another in pursuit of truth. These roles could vary from lemma to lemma or from one work to the next.

The different roles assumed by commentary-composers are well observed and discussed in a Neoplatonic commentary from the late sixth century ascribed to a – perhaps fictional – Elias.[50] This Elias writes that the exegete "must not sympathize with a philosophical school, as it happened to Iamblichus, who out of sympathy for Plato is condescending in his attitude to Aristotle and will not contradict Plato in regard to the theory of ideas. He must not be hostile to a philosophical school like Alexander [of Aphorisia was]."[51] Rather, as Elias noted beforehand, the exegete needs to be like a judge, that is, in pursuit of truth:

[49] Hoffmann, "What Was a Commentary?," 616.

[50] See Baltussen, "Philosophical Commentary," 308.

[51] Translated by Christian Wildberg, "Philosophy in the Age of Justinian," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian*, ed. Michael Maas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 327, cited in Baltussen, "Philosophical Commentary," 308.

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> The commentator should be both commentator (*exēgētēs*) and scholar (*epistēmōn*) at the same time. It is the task of the commentator to unravel obscurities in the text; it is the task of the scholar to judge what is true and what is false, or what is sterile and what is productive .... He must not force the text at all costs and say that the ancient author whom he is expounding is correct in every respect; instead he must repeat to himself at all times "the author is a dear friend, but so also is the truth, and when both stand before me the truth is the better friend." (Elias, *Cat.* 122–123)[52]

Erudite commentaries offer inquiries into the selected lemmas of a certain text, provide an assessment of what has already been said about this topic, and provide fair judgement. Next to truth or fairness, an inquiry's goal can also be the harmonization of different standpoints, as increasingly became the case in Neoplatonic commentaries. Harmonization of arguments is also a distinct feature of inquiries in the Babylonian Talmud, in contrast to those in the Palestinian Talmud.[53] I would therefore suggest that the erudite commentary be seen not primarily as an antiquarian work that seeks to preserve a society's intellectual heritage and keeps it updated by way of new arrangement – what is sometimes referred to as the "actualization of a text" – but, rather, as an intellectual endeavor in its own right. This endeavor consisted of passing judgement on earlier opinions. The purpose of the commentary might even have been identical with the purpose of the *thesis*, in that its entries were read to an audience. This would have affected the selection and weighing of arguments by the composers and influenced the style.

Assembling and culling different opinions, astute maxims, sharp replies, and general information relating to a certain lemma across the private or public library marks the production of an erudite commentary. For a long time, this procedure has been reduced by scholars to epitomizing/excerpting and frugal compiling. The method was criticized as uncreative and deficient in comparison to the ancient and seemingly more original texts from which the excerpts were taken. More recent scholarship has come to acknowledge and even praise the creative potential of epitomizing and compiling, and to appreciate the sophisticated and aesthetic use of excerpts, which are sometimes only as long as a pointed remark or a poetic line.[54] Indeed, "the very act of

[52] Translated by Wildberg, "Philosophy in the Age of Justinian," 327, cited in Baltussen, "Philosophical Commentary," 308.

[53] See Daniel Boyarin, "Dialectic and Divination in the Talmud," in *The End of Dialogue in Antiquity*, ed. Simon Goldhill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[54] See Formisano, "Aesthetic Paradigm."

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selection can be a powerful instrument for innovation; juxtaposition and recombination of discrete passages in new contexts and combinations can radically alter their original meaning."[55] Rather than as a compilation of texts, the treatment of excerpts in late antiquity may more accurately be described as the orchestration of different voices. This orchestration could be achieved in various ways, such as the explanation of one excerpt with another, the construction of entirely new texts out of bits and pieces of others (e.g., the *cento*), the integration of one or several excerpts into the deliberations of an author, the exchange of a dialogue in one excerpt with a quote from another, and so on.[56]

These compilatory methods do not have emic designations, apart from the mere *excerpere*, and scholars have struggled to name both the practice and the practitioner accurately. The terms used include "antiquarian," "epitomizer," "compiler," "redactor," "collector," "anthologist," "editor," and "composer." Some of these terms are unfortunate in that they narrow down the actual intellectual effort of authors working with excerpts by highlighting a single activity of what was a complex process of anthologizing, epitomizing, collecting, storing, arranging, perhaps further dissecting, and editing. In the end, "composer" may be the most all-encompassing title for an author working with excerpts. It will, therefore, be used throughout this book to refer to an author who produced a text by applying these methods.

The use of excerpts is challenging in many ways, depending on what a composer wants to achieve. The mediation of unrelated sources requires creativity and ingenuity, as well as a clear idea of one's own stance on the topic, contribution, or specific argument. Writing by means of excerpts is demanding, not least because composers must work with "a fund of completed compositions of thought, compositions that have taken shape without attention to the need of the compilers."[57]

[55] David Stern, introduction to *The Anthology in Jewish Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 7.

[56] On the Virgilian *cento*, see Formisano, "Aesthetic Paradigm," 283–284; on the *cento* tradition in Byzantium, see Herbert Hunger, "Profandichtung," in *Die hochsprachliche profane Literatur der Byzantiner*, ed. Herbert Hunger, Byzantinisches Handbuch 5.2 (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1978), 98–107.

[57] Jacob Neusner, "The Talmuds of the Land of Israel and of Babylonia," in *The Generative Premises of Rabbinic Literature: The Judaism behind the Texts*, *SFSHJ* 101 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1994), 5:10.

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THE ENCYCLOPEDIA AND THE MISCELLANY IN THE IMPERIAL PERIOD AND LATE ANTIQUITY

Like the commentary, the late antique encyclopedia produces a form of a *thesis* but on a topic unrelated to another text and not necessarily with the same argumentative aspirations. The organization of an encyclopedic work is more demanding than that of a commentary, which is organized around a text. The intellectual activity of composers of encyclopedic works starts before they even begin to collect relevant information since they need to outline and circumscribe the topics they want to cover. Closely related to the encyclopedia, but without obvious structure, is the miscellany, in which variegated "things worth knowing" are collated and organized associatively. It can be composed at any given time from someone's *collectanea*.

Designing a structure of organization for a specific set of information was (and still is) a major intellectual challenge. Because of that difficulty, plausible structures for encyclopedic works were mimicked and adapted by other composers for their own project. Examples are arrangement according to the seven liberal arts (grammar, logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy); peoples; geography; natural substances; medical herbs; the alphabet; or the map of the body, head to foot.[58]

Yet even miscellanies are often not exactly without structure. Rather, the structure falls outside of the just-mentioned arrangements and may address various unrelated topics, such as "women," "grammar," and "wine," categories that have emerged through sorting and association. Interestingly, authors of miscellanies repeatedly emphasize the unstructured nature of their work, priding themselves on the work's random and variegated "poikilographic" nature.[59] In his prologue to his *Attic Nights*, for example, Aulus Gellius writes:

[58] The structure according to the free arts is found in Varro's *Disciplinarum Libri IX* (first century CE) and Celsus (first century BCE/CE). It was subsequently also adapted by Martianus Capella for his *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* (fifth century CE). Polyaenus's *Strategemata*, a compilation of military strategies (second century CE), was structured according to peoples. Rutilius T. A. Palladius's work on agriculture, *De re rustica* (fourth/fifth century CE), follows the months of the year. Apuleius's *Herbarius* (fourth century CE) was structured according to medical herbs. The anonymous *Medicina Plinii* (third century CE) proceeds head to foot and then to the whole body. For authors who ordered according to topographical or hodographical principles, see Klaus Geus and Colin Guthrie King, "Paradoxography," in *The Oxford Handbook of Science and Medicine in the Classical World*, ed. Paul T. Keyser and John Scarborough (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 438.

[59] Another example is Clement of Alexandria's *Stromates*, the variegated (*poikilōs*) nature of which he points out repeatedly. Despite this claim, the work seems quite structured; see Morgan, *Popular Morality*, 268–269.

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But in the arrangement of my material I have adopted the same haphazard order that I had previously followed in collecting it. For whenever I had taken in hand any Greek or Latin book, or had heard anything worth remembering, I used to jot down whatever took my fancy, of any and every kind, without any definite plan or order; and such notes I would lay away as an aid to my memory, like a kind of literary storehouse, so that when the need arose of a word or a subject which I chanced for the moment to have forgotten, and the books from which I had taken it were not at hand, I could readily find and produce it. (Praef., sec. 2 [Rolfe, LCL])

The declared goal of Gellius as outlined in his previous paragraph (sec. 1) is to provide a work with which his children could busy themselves in order to delight their hearts, a work that would turn their reading into "recreation" (*remissio*). A structure according to topics could not help him reach this goal as well as could a varied one, according to Gellius's pedagogical reasoning. Apparently, he wants to play with the tension and surprise prompted in the reader who does not know what is to follow. Monotony is thereby avoided, as is Gellius's children's loss of interest. This aim stands somewhat in contrast to the other one expressed in this same passage, namely, that the work should serve as an aide-mémoire. To provide an orientation aid in his apparently accidentally organized work, Gellius therefore enhanced each chapter with a very brief summary of its content.

Aelian, who wrote the poikilographic miscellany *On the Nature of Animals*, similarly worried about people's interest in the topic. The reason for his concern was the narrow outlook of his work, which focused only on animals: "For not all things give pleasure to all men, nor do all men consider all subjects worthy of study" (Prologue [Scholfield, LCL]). Conversely, it can be deduced that a mixture of "all things" would attract more readers. The recipe for a bestseller in the imperial period was apparently variegated content, even without discernible structure: Gellius knew the titles of thirty other such miscellanies.[60]

As the examples of *Attic Nights* and *Nature of Animals* show, there were different types of miscellanies: those focusing on a specific topic, such as animals, anecdotes, or paradoxes, and those interested in all sorts of things.[61] On these grounds, the distinction between encyclopedia and miscellany becomes difficult. It seems possible, however, to differentiate between encyclopedic works with an overriding topic, with or without a subsequent distinct arrangement by subtopic, and miscellanies,

[60] These titles, which will be considered in more detail in the next chapter, point to overt *poikilia*: "Miscellaneous Queries," "Incidentals," or "Discoveries."

[61] For examples of paradoxographies, see Geus and King, "Paradoxography."

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whose topical range is unrestricted. Although certain chapters or books of miscellanies may be arranged around a theme – wine, for example – the material often flows associatively from one topic to the next, from wine as drink to wine as medicine, from stories involving wine to toasts, blessings, mysteries, and festivals relating to wine.[62] The starkest contrast between the modern encyclopedia and the imperial period and late antique one is that the latter is confined to a topic, to a certain aspect of knowledge, while the modern encyclopedia is expected to say something about everything. This all-encompassing approach to knowledge is rather characteristic of the imperial period and late antique miscellany.

Although the encyclopedia and the miscellany both offered memorable knowledge, the usefulness of such a document as a reference work was limited. William Johnson observed that "The bookroll's lack of structural devices that might assist in reference consultation mirrors the ancient reader's apparent indifference to the use of books for random retrieval of information." He adds, "That does not mean that reading was not done for personal profit (such as to increase one's knowledge or to gain information), but rather that the reader's attitude toward what the text represents is subtly different."[63] Compared to the use of a library for reference, comparatively concise works such as Pliny's *Natural History* in thirty-seven books, or Macrobius's even briefer *Saturnalia* in seven books, were much easier to handle, a claim both authors actually make in their preface.[64] Such practical considerations highlight the importance and necessity of taking notes and excerpting relevant information onto a more convenient and confined surface while reading. Excerpting as the process of copying text passages on a wooden tablet was, then, a practice that somewhat naturally accompanied purposeful reading and not just a fancy habit of prospective authors of erudite works.

In addition to being of practical utility, books were a luxury and served as a display of knowledge and a source of entertainment.[65] Although today we may not necessarily associate the commentary or the encyclopedia with leisure or a delightful reading experience, the ancients certainly did. The wealthy had educated servants read even technical treatises to their guests over a meal or enjoyed having someone read to them as

[62] E.g., *The Learned Banqueters* 1.26ff.

[63] William A. Johnson, "Toward a Sociology of Reading in Classical Antiquity," *American Journal of Philology* 121, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 616.

[64] Macrobius, *Sat.* praef. 2; Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* praef. 33.

[65] See also Peregrine Horden, "Prefatory Note: The Uses of Medical Manuscripts," in *Medical Books in the Byzantine World*, ed. Barbara Zipser (Bologna: Eikasmos Online II, 2013).

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recreation.[66] Pliny the Elder, for instance, missed no occasion to have things read to him and often took notes *en route* and even in the bath.[67]

Especially casual or even unrecognizable structures were acknowledged to be a very entertaining form of arrangement, and so was diversified content, as poikilographic authors emphasized. Engaging content was indeed indispensable if authors wanted people to read their whole work. If a work did not promise to be of benefit to the reader – a recurring issue in the prefaces, the "blurb" written by the authors themselves – and if it did not keep this promise in its first few lines, it was likely to be put aside. The Roman poet Martial (first century CE) even appended epigrams of merely two lines' length with a title in order not to tire and bore the reader and to facilitate their decision making as to what they wanted to read (*Epigrams* 14.2).

Another engaging way to combine a wealth of issues with an entertaining *and* educational structure was to stage a symposium. This type of literature arranges excerpts into fictive conversations and speeches held at a festive banquet, thereby mimicking a symposium. The resulting miscellany should, however, not be confused with literature written *for* the symposium, that is, to entertain its guests.[68] To clarify this issue, it was suggested that the adjective "sympotic" be used "to refer to the actual cultural institution, which is the symposium, and 'symposiac' to refer to the literary genre, which is the symposium."[69] This convention will be adopted in the subsequent discussion of symposiac literature.

Symposiac literature has a long tradition, going back to Plato's literary *Symposium* (fourth century BCE), as Macrobius notes in the preface

[66] See Johnson, "Toward a Sociology of Reading," 616–618. On the anticipated entertaining aspect of his work, see Gellius's prologue to *Attic Nights*, where he states, "Other more entertaining writings may be found, in order that like recreation might be provided for my children, when they should have respite from business affairs and could unbend and divert their minds" (translated in Eleni Bozia, *Lucian and His Roman Voices: Cultural Exchanges and Conflicts in the Late Roman Empire*, Routledge Monographs in Classical Studies 19 [New York: Routledge, 2015], 62). Bozia stresses the comparative structure of the phrase, which implies that Gellius sees his work as entertaining in relation to that of others.

[67] See Albrecht Locher and Rolf C. A. Rottländer, "Überlegungen zur Entstehungsgeschichte der *Naturalis Historia* des älteren Plinius und die Schrifttäfelchen von Vindolanda," in *Lebendige Altertumswissenschaft: Festschrift für Hermann Vetters*, ed. Manfred Kandler (Vienna: Holzhausen, 1985), 141.

[68] On the symposium and its literature, see the concise discussion in Tim Whitmarsh, *Ancient Greek Literature*, Cultural History of Literature Series (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2004), 52–67, and Joel C. Relihan, "Rethinking the History of the Literary Symposium," *Illinois Classical Studies* 17, no. 2 (Fall 1992).

[69] Relihan, "Rethinking the History of the Literary Symposium," 213.

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to his own symposiac work.[70] Plutarch's *Quaestiones convivales* (first/second century CE) or Lucian's *Symposium* (second century CE) take on Plato's model. These works engage several guests in a debate over different topics. The speeches of these banqueters are sharp and interlocking models of how to use rhetoric for social display. Plutarch and Lucian use parody, allusion, and exaggerated paraphrase but rarely actual excerpts from other authors. More interesting for the present argument, therefore, are those authors who created symposia out of their miscellaneous collections of excerpts. The ones whose works have come down to us are Athenaeus with his *The Learned Banqueters* (*Deipnosophistiai*; late second/early third century) and Macrobius with his *Saturnalia* (early fifth century). The banquet designed by Athenaeus focuses on topics related to food and banqueting. Within this framework, his literary guests discuss whatever has been said in prior Greek works about these issues. For this purpose, Athenaeus puts "over 1000 authors and over 10,000 lines of verse, many of them known from no other source," in the mouths of fictive symposiasts.[71] As Christian Jacob observed, "This compilation is at the same time the collecting pool of previous knowledge, and a starting point for multiple new traditions: the Deipnosophistae is a perfect case-study of devices which provide their readers with a digest of a wide range of literary and scholarly data, that could then be used and circulated for its own sake."[72]

Athenaeus's symposiac discourses start out with Homeric heroes and wine, vegetables and meat (books 1–3), before turning to frugality (4), meals in history, ships, and philosophers (5), drunkenness (10), drinking vessels (11), and the pleasures of love (12) or (female) beauty (13), just to give an impression of the range of themes.[73] All of these topics relate to the symposium while, at the same time, being broad enough to encompass all kinds of technical information, such as medicine, astronomy/astrology, geometry, tactics, and painting. A story included in *The Learned Banqueters*, attributed to a certain Nicomachus and his work *Eileithuia*, nicely illustrates how all these subjects were thought to relate to food and could improve the experience of dining. The story stages a

[70] Xenophon wrote a work by the same title.

[71] Athenaeus, *The Learned Banqueters* (Olson LCL, ix).

[72] Jacob, "Athenaeus," 86–87.

[73] The summaries follow Jean-Nicolas Corvisier, "Athenaeus, Medicine and Demography," in *Athenaeus and His World: Reading Greek Culture in the Roman Empire*, ed. David Braund and John Wilkins (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000), 493. A similar range of topics is discernible in Julius Africanus's miscellany *Embroidered* (*Kestoi*) from the early third century.

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dialogue between the host of a banquet and the cook he hired for this occasion. The cook (A) is actually blaming his temporary master (B) for not having inquired enough about his abilities in advance and is now describing his prowess. He explains what makes a good cook by taking himself as the example:

A. A fully-trained cook's a different matter. You'd need to master a large number of quite significant arts; and someone who wants to learn them the right way can't take them on immediately. First you have … to take up painting these things …; and before the Art of cooking you have to master others, some of which it would be better to understand before … talking … to me, like astrology, geometry, and medicine. Because that's how you'll understand the capacities and tricks to handling the fish—you'll pay attention to the time of year, when each type is out of season and when it's in. Since there are huge differences in how they taste: sometimes a bogue's better than a tuna.
B. Granted. But what use do you have for geometry?
A. We set up the kitchen-area as a sphere; dividing it into sections and assigning each spot the type of job that matches it in the most advantageous way—this all comes from there.
B. Hey; I'm convinced, even if you don't tell me the rest.
A. As for medicine: Some foods produce gas or indigestion, or punish a person instead of nourishing him, and anyone who eats what's wrong for him becomes cranky or out of control. Medicine's where you'd find antidotes for this kind of food. My training's where I get this from; what I do involves insight and a sense of proportion. As for tactics: The question is where everything's going to be put; and counting the crowd is part of a cook's job. (Athenaeus, *Deipn.* 7.290d–291a [Olson, LCL])

The passage not only shows how and why a surprising amount of knowledge can be related to food and cooking but also in what ways broad poikilographic knowledge is useful. The ideal of such vast learning is already found in the writings of the first-century BCE architect Vitruvius, who was of the opinion that "the architect must have some knowledge of writing, draftsmanship, geometry, arithmetic, history, philosophy, physiology, music, medicine, law and astronomy."[74] This is in addition to the fact that the would-be architect must also possess knowledge of the theoretical as well as practical aspects of his field.

There are, however, bodies of knowledge that even Athenaeus could not relate to food. In these cases, the symposium, because of its increasingly

[74] Daniel Harris-McCoy, "Making and Defending Claims to Authority in Vitruvius' *De architectura*," in *Authority and Expertise in Ancient Scientific Culture*, ed. Jason König and Greg Woolf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 110.

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drunken guests, and especially the uncontrollable nature of discourse, justifies all sorts of digressions. Indeed, digression and faulty speech, possibly with subsequent rebuke, only adds to the vivid nature of the ongoing literary discourse. Here is a passage from book 15, just to give an impression of the realistic nature of the exchange Athenaeus managed to craft between his guests in spite of their talking mostly in citations (qua excerpts):

> After Democritus completed these remarks, Ulpian glanced at Cynulcus and said: "What a philosopher the gods forced me to share a house with!
>
> To quote the Phantom of the comic poet Theognetus (fragment 1.6–10): ....
>
> Where did you get this 'chorus of pipers [surbênes]'? What authority that deserves mention refers to a musical group of this sort?"
>
> Cynulcus replied: "I will offer you no answer, sir, until you pay me the appropriate amount. For I do not pick out the thorny passages from my books when I read, as you do; I look instead for those that are most useful and worth hearing."
>
> This upset Ulpian, and he shouted out the passage from Alexis's Sleep (fragment 243): "..."! (Athenaeus, *Deipn.* 15.671b–d [Olson, LCL])

The symposiac dialogues created by Macrobius are similarly encompassing in their outlook. His work spans a three-day-long symposium held on the occasion of the Roman feast called Saturnalia. Since the work's purpose is to introduce Macrobius's son to the art of banqueting, it is organized around the three days of the festival, dividing up each day into a morning, afternoon, and evening session with distinct topics for discussion. Although the Neoplatonist Macrobius does not allow his guests to behave in the same libertine manner as Athenaeus's symposiasts, there is still plenty of room for digression into technical matters, but also for jokes and funny anecdotes.[75] This somewhat natural mix of topics is the primary benefit of presenting the material as a conversation. The dialogue structure further has the advantage of mirroring what the author himself considers to be the appropriate flow of conversation in gatherings of educated men: "At a banquet the conversations should be as pleasurably beguiling as they are morally unimpeachable; the morning's discussion, on the other hand, will be more vigorous, as befits men both learned and very highly distinguished" (*Sat.* 1.4 [Kaster, LCL]).

The *Saturnalia* relies heavily on the material of Gellius's *Attic Nights*. By arranging the material in the form of conversations, Macrobius adds to the engaging factor of the content, thereby increasing the pedagogical

[75] On the Neoplatonic program of Macrobius's work, see Paula Olmos, "Two Literary Encyclopaedias from Late Antiquity," *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science* Part A 43, no. 2 (June 2012): 285 and 285n6.

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value of the work.[76] Moreover, Macrobius's work does not only offer the content for a sophisticated conversation but also a rhetorical model for imitation.

THE TALMUD: A RARE CASE OF A COMMENTARY ON AN ENCYCLOPEDIA?

The structure, style, content, and scope of the talmudic text resembles in many ways the erudite genres discussed above. According to this assessment, the Talmud is broad in its outlook like a miscellany, presents its material as a conversation like a symposiac text, and follows the content of the Mishnah, a second-century, late Hebrew work from Roman Palestine, like a commentary.[77] The Talmud's distinct units are introduced by consecutive but select lemmas derived from the Mishnah. Since the Mishnah is organized by topic, the Talmud inherited that encyclopedic structure. It is therefore necessary to briefly discuss the genre of the Mishnah before returning to the Talmud.

The Mishnah is basically a collection of *sententiae* expounding the laws of the Torah by means of cases, each of which required an appropriate ruling, adages, and reminiscences of teachers. In order to give an impression of the texture of the Mishnah, a randomly chosen example will suffice to highlight its characteristic features. The main body of the text is a running exposition of laws and cases, with interwoven citations of distinct opinions on the matter by earlier teachers:

On the three days preceding the festivals of gentiles, it is forbidden to engage in business transactions with them, to lend to them or to borrow from them, to lend or borrow any money from them, to repay debt, or receive payment from them. Rabbi Judah says: "We should take repayment from them, since this restricts them financially." But they said to him: "Although it restricts them for now, it will cause them joy afterwards."

[76] Olmos, "Two Literary Encyclopaedias," 286.

[77] Whether or not the Mishnah was available to Babylonian rabbinic sages as a book or as a memorized "text" as a – more or less fixed – sequence of transmitted knowledge is a matter of debate. See Yaakov Sussman, "The Oral Torah in the Literal Sense: The Power of the Tail of a Yod" [in Hebrew], in *Meḥqerei Talmud III: Talmudic Studies Dedicated to the Memory of Professor Ephraim E. Urbach*, ed. Yaakov Sussman and David Rosenthal (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2005); and Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine: Studies in the Literary Transmission of Beliefs and Manners of Palestine in the I Century B.C.E.–IV Century C.E.*, *TSJTSA* 18 (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1962), 87

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Rabbi Ishmael says: "On the three preceding days [of the festival] and the three following days it is forbidden." But the sages say: "It is only forbidden before their festivities; afterwards it is permitted."

These are the festivals of the gentiles: Kalenda, Saturnalia, Kratesis, the anniversary of accession to the throne, and birthdays and anniversaries of deaths, according to Rabbi Meir. (m. Avod. Zar. 1:1–3a)[78]

This passage is taken from tractate Avodah Zarah, which is included in the order Neziqin. The Mishnah encompasses sixty-three thematically distinct tractates grouped into the following six orders: Seeds (agricultural matters), Festivals, Women (matters of marriage and divorce), Damages (civil and criminal law), Holy Things (temple matters), and Purities (matters of ritual purity and impurity).[79] This highly ordered structure is possible because the material that the Mishnah displays is very focused. Indeed, there is hardly any digression from the main topic and its implications for court matters or everyday life. In that the text avoids the sort of digressions often observed in both the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds, the Mishnah should be classified as an encyclopedic work due to its narrow focus. Indeed, the six orders seem to adopt the structuring principle of *ordo rerum*, the order of things, which was in differing variations also used by Cato, Columella, Pliny the Elder, and Celsus, as opposed to the *ordo atrium*, for example, the order according to the seven liberal arts.[80]

Since the Mishnah, just like the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds, did not come down to us with a sort of a "preface" (whether it never existed or was lost we will probably never know), we know next to nothing about its original purpose, its addressees, the choice of material, or how the structure came into being.[81] It has been suggested that the individual rulings and cases originated in the household as the most important

[78] Unless noted otherwise, the translations are mine.

[79] The summaries of the contents of the orders follow van Bekkum, "Sailing on the Sea of Talmud," 207.

[80] Christel Meier, "Organisation of Knowledge and Encyclopaedic *Ordo*: Functions and Purposes of a Universal Literary Genre," in *Pre-Modern Encyclopaedic Texts: Proceedings of the Second COMERS Congress, Groningen, 1–4 July 1996*, ed. Peter Binkley (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 105–107.

[81] For concise accounts of the events that might have led to the compilation of the Mishnah (with different foci), see Michael Satlow, *How the Bible Became Holy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 262–269, and Hayim Lapin, "The Origins and Development of the Rabbinic Movement in the Land of Israel," in *The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period*, ed. Steven T. Katz, vol. 4 of *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, ed. W. D. Davies and L. Finkelstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 206–215.

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economic unit of the time, in the Sanhedrin (the Jewish court under Roman rule), or in theoretical deliberations in teacher–student settings.[82]

The stringent nature of the Mishnah seems to indicate that it is the result of a condensation of traditions. This notion is supported by another extant text, the Tosefta (lit., "addition"), which originated at approximately the same time and in the same place as the Mishnah. The Tosefta is organized around the same orders as the Mishnah but with more ancillary material.[83] The condensation of texts would match the contemporary trend toward brevity in the Roman Empire, which affected every realm, including juridical sentences.[84]

Although the Mishnah makes use of sayings, that is, attributed maxims called *chreia* in Greek grammatical language, the work is not arranged to give the impression of a vivid debate as observed above for the symposiac works and, as will be discussed later, is also characteristic for the Babylonian Talmud. The one direct reply in the above example, in which "the sages" respond to Rabbi Ishmael's ruling, is a double *chreia*, a figure of speech, "in which one line is cited by one πρόσωπον [character], the second by another."[85] The Mishnah does not create a

[82] See Stephen G. Wald, "Mishnah," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Wald Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed. (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2006); Alexei M. Sivertsev, *Households, Sects, and the Origins of Rabbinic Judaism*, *JSJSup* 102 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 211–218; Catherine Hezser, "Mobility, Flexibility, and Diasporization of Palestinian Judaism after 70 CE," in *Let the Wise Listen and Add to their Learning (Prov 1:5): Festschrift for Günter Stemberger on the Occasion of His 75th Birthday*, ed. Constanza Cordoni and Gerhard Langer, Studia Judaica 90 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016), 211–214. On legal fictions in Tannaitic and post-Tannaitic works, see Leib Moscovitz, *Talmudic Reasoning: From Casuistics to Conceptualization*, *TSAJ* 89 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 163–199, and see Sivertsev, *Households*, 255. All these settings are basically connected to the position of the paterfamilias.

[83] The relationship between the two works is still unclear; see the summary in Stemberger, *Einleitung*, 170–173. Michael Sperling's computerized analysis of the texts of the Mishnah and Tosefta, however, has shown that the long-held assumption that the Tosefta was three to four times larger than the Mishnah, and therefore contained additional material, is wrong. The Tosefta is only about one-and-a-half times the size of the Mishnah and contains additional material where the Mishnah has not much to say. Michael Sperling, "Myth of the Gargantuan Tosefta" (paper presented at Association for Jewish Studies 50th Annual Conference, Boston, MA, 2018).

[84] Stephan Dusil, Gerald Schwedler, and Raphael Schwitter, "Transformationen des Wissens zwischen Spätantike und Frühmittelalter," in *Exzerpieren – Kompilieren – Tradieren: Transformationen des Wissens zwischen Spätantike und Frühmittelalter*, ed. Stephan Dusil, Gerald Schwedler, and Raphael Schwitter (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016), 18–20. The earliest examples they could find date back to the end of the third century.

[85] Ronald F. Hock and Edward N. O'Neil, eds. and trans., *Classroom Exercises*, vol. 2 of *The Chreia and Ancient Rhetoric*, *WGRW* 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 351.

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dialogue between such figures of speech but contextualizes and frames fixed maxims and *chreia*.

All in all, the Mishnah may perhaps best be classified as a Jewish *oeconomica*, intended to guide the paterfamilias in his daily business, with all of its juridical and other far-reaching decisions, such as, for example, which festivals to observe and how to treat his Jewish and gentile servants in accordance with the Torah.[86] The Mishnah may be a cultural and ideological translation of the issues addressed in the three books of *Oeconomica* attributed to Aristotle.

Strikingly, however, none of the above-mentioned Greco-Roman encyclopedias, and certainly no miscellany, are known to have been the subject of a commentary, or, somewhat consequentially, to have become canonized. Although the information provided by encyclopedias was widely excerpted and reused, nobody bothered to write a commentary on an encyclopedia, a practice that would place this particular encyclopedia into some sort of canonized status.[87] Jason König and Greg Woolf assume that this was because people could easily create their own encyclopedia, which was easier than writing a commentary on someone else's.[88]

As discussed above, the commentary in the imperial period needs to be treated as part of a continuum between the scholion, the straightforward explanation of difficult terms, and the erudite commentary that provides inquiries into subjects raised by the base text. Unsurprisingly, the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds contain aspects of both types of commentaries. Like the words addressed by a scholion, the Talmuds often chose difficult, technical or foreign mishnaic terms as their lemma, or unclear and doubtful legal cases in need of explanation.[89] Yet neither Talmud contends with marginal comments on these issues, as a scholion would. Rather, like other erudite commentaries, they present an extensive inquiry into the subject of the lemma, using the mishnaic

[86] On the *oeconomica* as domestic encyclopedia, see Meier, "Organisation of Knowledge," 124–125, and references there. Most of the extant works of that genre, however, date to medieval times.

[87] E.g., Columella drew from Cato and Varro; Pliny's material was successfully condensed and enriched in Solinus's *Collectanea rerum mirabilium* (also known as *Polyhistor*); Cato's material was used and rearranged by Oribasius; and so on.

[88] See Jason König and Greg Woolf, "Encyclopaedism in the Roman Empire," in *Encyclopaedism from Antiquity to the Renaissance*, ed. Jason König and Greg Woolf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 63.

[89] See Baruch M. Bokser, *Samuel's Commentary on the Mishnah: Its Nature, Forms and Content*, Part One; *Mishnayot in the Order of Zera'im*, *SJLA* 15 (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 178–186 and 235.

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text as an index.[90] Related issues, and not just the lemma alone, are associated and spread out. Indeed, often only the statements following immediately upon the mishnaic lemma relate directly to it. The rest of the commentary that follows the lemma, although following a distinct plan, often seems far-fetched.

To illustrate the case, I will take the beginning of a commentary in the Babylonian Talmud to a mishnaic lemma. The example quite typically shows how the commentary subtly bends away from the lemma toward an inquiry into two other subjects. This particular commentary comes from tractate Gittin, which deals with bills of divorce. The whole passage ("Mishnah") from which the lemma is taken reads as follows: "One who is seized by *qordiaqos* and says: 'Write a *get* [divorce document] for my wife!' did not truly say anything. If someone says: 'Write a *get* for my wife!' and is then seized by *qordiaqos* and says: 'Do not write a *get* for my wife!' – his last words mean nothing" (m. Git. 7:1, author's translation). The problematic word that will serve as the lemma is *qordiaqos*, a Greek or Latin loanword, and the Talmud raises it in a question, citing only this word from the Mishnah:

What is *qordiaqos*?
Samuel said: "The one who is bitten by new wine from the wine press."
[If this is so, then] let the Mishnah state: "the one who was overcome by new wine."

[No, rather,] this is what it teaches us: the name of the spirit [who seized the man] is Qordiaqos.
From this [statement] it can be inferred [that this knowledge serves for writing] an amulet.

What is his [the man affected with *qordiaqos*] cure?
Red meat on coals and diluted wine.

Abaye said: "Mother told me: For the sun[stroke?] of one day: a pitcher of water; for that of two days: bloodletting; for the one that lasts three days: red meat on coals and diluted wine." (b. Git. 67b)

Although *qordiaqos* is immediately explained, in the manner of a scholion, as the condition of someone being drunk from drinking too much new wine, the explanation is refuted. It is argued that if *qordiaqos* simply referred to this condition, then the Mishnah would have said so instead of using a cryptic term. Thereupon another explanation infers that the

[90] See Alexander Samely, "Educational Features in Ancient Jewish Literature: An Overview of Unknowns," in *Jewish Education from Antiquity to the Middle Ages: Studies in Honor of Philip S. Alexander*, ed. George J. Brooke and Renate Smithuis (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 180–181.

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importance of the mishnaic formulation lies in the very term it uses: it is the name of a spirit. Another question then asks about the cure that the person afflicted with *qordiaqos* obviously needs, whether he or she is drunk or seized by a spirit. The contents of the cure lead, by way of association, to a medical recipe against sunstroke that lasts for three days, whose cure is exactly the same. The cure's two ingredients, meat and wine, will continue to dominate the subsequent commentary, running over nearly seven folia. Starting from *qordiaqos*, the commentary will finally provide a full inquiry in the manner described above into the medical properties of wine and meat (see Chapter 3).

This short passage already shows how the talmudic text was created out of small but significant units that were associatively strung together and supplemented, when necessary, with a comment or question. These units mostly have the form of sayings, maxims, reminiscences, stories, or even medical recipes. The structural makeup of the Talmud does therefore not seem to differ much from works such as *The Learned Banqueters* or the *Saturnalia*, which arrange excerpts into conversations. As in the case of these other works, individual excerpts remain generally identifiable and are often distinctly different in style or even language (Hebrew or Aramaic), their careful arrangement and the necessary mediation pointing to a meticulous craftsmanship in the art of compilation. These preliminary observations are suggestive of a shared approach to text production and invite further comparison.

The Talmud's dissolute nature suggests that the work was not meant as a *brevarium* of Babylonian rabbinic teaching and learning. Rather, the purpose seems to have been the organization of rabbinic intellectual output around the Mishnah. Judging from the result, this learning was rather holistic, a poikilographic mix of topics typical for the time. Similar to the cook in the work of Athenaeus, for example, the Talmud encourages broad knowledge not only with its very content and scope but also through the words of its protagonists, as in the following excerpt in tractate Shabbat:

Rav Huna said to his son Rabba: "Why are you not to be found in front of Rav Hisda, whose teaching is sharp?"

He said to him: "Why should I go to him? If I go to him, he teaches me worldly matters.[91] He told me: 'One who goes to the toilet should not sit down immediately and should not extend, since the large intestine is placed on three teeth. Maybe [if one sits down immediately or overly extends his stay] the large intestine may become dislocated, and he would be endangered.'"

[91] מילי דעלמא.

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He said to him: "He cares for people's lives and you call this 'worldly matters?!' All the more should you go before him!" (b. Shabb. 82a)

Clearly, the Talmud as a whole, and its excerpts, expresses the opinion that all knowledge somehow relates to Torah and the intent of the creator. This outlook concurs especially with that of miscellanies. And with two of the above discussed miscellanies, with Athenaeus's *The Learned Banqueters* and Macrobius's *Saturnalia*, the Talmud shares yet another feature: the dialectic structure.

THE TALMUD: A SYMPOSIAC COMMENTARY?

The text of the Mishnah is comprised of an editorial voice that introduces cases and laws, as well as dicta attributed to named individuals or schools, such as the "house of Shammai" and the "house of Hillel." Exempla and reminiscences sometimes enhance the arguments. Yet there is no effort made to give the impression of a direct interaction between different opinions, except for the already discussed case of double *chreia*, which is a stable compound in itself. Quite contrary to the sequence of *chreia* and double *chreia* in the Mishnah, the Babylonian Talmud creates a vivid conversation between rabbinic sages, many of them bearing the title "Rabbi" (in Hebrew) or "Rav" (in Aramaic). Additionally, the Talmud uses an anonymous editorial voice (the so-called stam) to keep the discourse going. Such "off-excerpt" voices are also known from Pliny's *Natural History*, Gellius's *Attic Nights*, or Julius Africanus's *Cesti* ("Embroideries"). The construction of a discourse by means of this unattributed voice and attributed interjections has led to theories regarding the chronological layering of the Talmud, which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. Here it will suffice to point to this distinctive discursive structure, which the Babylonian Talmud shares with the Palestinian one. It is, however, more pronounced in the former.

The anonymous voice in the Talmud usually stimulates the discourse by using a recurring pattern of questions and phrases. This set of stock phrases used in the Talmud is more engaging than the one used in the Mishnah in that it asks for reasons, invites further analysis, introduces more arguments or alternatives on the subject, or draws conclusions.[92] The stock questions are reminiscent of the ones that had been introduced

[92] See Jack N. Lightstone, "The Rhetoric of the Mishnah and the Babylonian Talmud: From Rabbinic Priestly Scribes to Scholastic Rabbis," *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 21, no. 1 (1995): 86–87.

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by Aristotle to conduct investigations and were still used by late antique doxographers. They revolve around quality (How is it? Does it exist? From what is it different?); quantity (How many?); and place (Where does it occur? Under what circumstances?).[93] Similarly, frequent questions in the Talmud are as follows: Why (אלמא)? What is the reason (מאי טעמא)? What is similar (מאי דמי)? And what is the difference (מאי שנא)? These questions facilitated the arrangement of excerpts in a discursive form but are also reflective of the intellectual process that underlies the arrangement of these passages.

There is, however, not just a dialogue going on between composers and excerpts, since even the sages to whom certain dicta are attributed are presented as conversation partners. This is a feature that is already perceivable in the Palestinian Talmud but is, again, more nuanced in the Babylonian one.[94] The Babylonian Talmud, then, entertains a more elaborate discursive style in the way the authorial voice is deployed *and* in the way in which the sages are staged to be engaged with one another – just like the guests in symposiac works. The following example will give an impression of the vivid interactions constructed out of and between excerpts:

> For a fluttering heart: Bring three barley cakes and soak them in a *kamka*-dish that is no older than forty days, eat them, and afterwards drink watered-down wine.
>
> Said Rav Aha from Difti to Ravina: "Of course their heart will be fluttering [if they do that]!" [Ravina] said to him: "I said 'for the heaviness of the heart' [not 'for a fluttering heart']!" (b. Git. 69b, author's translation)

Here, a (fictitious) misunderstanding is used to interrupt a sequence of unattributed medical recipes, the excerpts, to remind the audience that they are in the middle of a conversation between learned men. This format, as was pointed out for *The Learned Banqueters* and the *Saturnalia*, has the advantage of providing the reader/listener with information in an engaging way, while at the same time teaching the art of argumentation and conversation.

[93] On this subject, see David Leith, "Question-Types in Medical Catechisms on Papyrus," in *Authorial Voices in Greco-Roman Technical Writing*, ed. Liba Taub and Aude Doody, AKAN-Einzelschriften 7 (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2009), 113; see also my discussion in Chapter 5 of this book.

[94] See Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, introduction to *Creation and Composition: The Contribution of the Bavli Redactors (Stammaim) to the Aggada*, ed. Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *TSAJ* 114 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 18. Contrary to David Weiss Halivni's assessment that dialectics represent an advanced and hence younger stratum of Talmudic literature, I suggest that the creation of dialectics is a distinct choice by the author and a method that has been known since antiquity; see references discussed above.

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In many ways, the talmudic conversation reminds one of the staged symposia of Athenaeus and Macrobius, who created characters to attend their banquets and placed excerpts from other authors into their mouths, either as attributed speeches or as direct remarks. The talmudic conversation partners are the rabbinic sages, who may have figured as the authors of some excerpts or in prior rabbinic works. Some anonymous material was probably also assigned to them based on style or content.[95] Pseudepigraphy, that is, writing in the same style and along the same argumentative lines as someone else, must also be assumed.[96] In general, the attributions follow quite stereotypical patterns.[97]

Chronological, geographical, or biographical accuracy, however, seems not to have dominated the construction of dialogues.[98] Rather, what seems to have mattered was the thematic relationship of the sayings. Thus, in the next example, the Palestinian Rabbi Yohanan replies to a statement attributed to the Babylonian sage Abaye, who, according to the traditional dating, was born a year after Yohanan had died:[99]

Abaye said: "The one who is not healthy in the way of the world: bring three *qpiza*-measures of safflower seeds, grind them, boil them in wine, and drink it."
Rabbi Yohanan said: "Exactly this [recipe] returned my youth to me!" (b. Git. 70a)

The same exclamation by Rabbi Yohanan is also used in a different but equally fitting context.[100] Snippets suitable for interjection were obviously recycled. Similarly, Rav Nahman bar Yizhaq laconically comments

[95] Such reassignments continue throughout the manuscript traditions, which vary not rarely in their attributions.

[96] On the subject of imitation of style (*mimesis*) and speech in character (*ethopoeia*), see Chapters 3 and 4. This definition of pseudepigraphy, which aligns with the ancient idea of pseudepigraphy as art, complements earlier scholarly ideas of pseudepigraphy and that located pseudepigraphy exclusively in instances of exaggerated and unlikely attributions, or explicit confusion over a source, see Louis Jacobs, *Structure and Form in the Babylonian Talmud* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 6–17.

[97] See Richard Kalmin, "Quotation Forms in the Babylonian Talmud: Authentically Amoraic, or a Later Editorial Construct?," *HUCA* 59 (1988); Barak S. Cohen, "Citation Formulae in the Babylonian Talmud: From Transmission to Authoritative Traditions," *JJS* 70 (2019).

[98] Even within chains of transmission (i.e., sages citing other sages), which seem to be the most reliable source for network analysis, (traditional) chronology, geographical data, and biographical data are not always congruent. Thus, Michael Satlow and Michael Sperling's sophisticated digital analysis led to interesting, but at times also puzzling, results. See Michael Satlow and Michael Sperling, "The Rabbinic Citation Network," *AJSR* (forthcoming).

[99] For these dates, see Stemberger, *Einleitung*, 101 and 110, respectively.

[100] b. Shabb. 111a.

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in tractate Shabbat, "The madder fell into a pit," while, in tractate Hullin, it is the rumen that fell into a pit, according to the mouth of the same sage.[101]

Macrobius was aware of the chronological conflict that sometimes arose between the literary guests at his symposium, and he apologetically addressed the issue in his preface:

> And let no one fault me if one or two of those whom this gathering has brought together did not reach their maturity until after the age of Praetextatus [320–384 CE]. This is permitted, as Plato's dialogues testify: Parmenides was so much older than Socrates that the latter's boyhood scarcely overlapped the other's old age—and yet they discussed difficult issues; Socrates spends a glorious dialogue in discussion with Timaeus, though it is common knowledge that they did not live at the same time. Indeed, Plato has Paralus and Xanthippus, Pericles' sons, converse with Protagoras on his second visit to Athens, though the ill-famed Great Plague at Athens [430–429 BCE] had carried them off long before. So, with Plato's example as my support, I did not think it appropriate to tote up the guests' ages on my fingers. (*Sat.* 1.5–6 [Kaster, LCL])

Indeed, a dialogue constructed out of excerpts from different sources requires astute methods of those who would weave them together meaningfully, and, at times, one might observe rather irregular and cramped seams between excerpts from different sources.[102]

Against the distinct setting of the symposium in Athenaeus's and Macrobius's work, however, there is no indication of the social setting in which the Talmud imagined "its" sages to have conversed. Were they pictured sitting in places and settings frequently mentioned in the excerpts, such as the study house (*bet midrash*), the great assembly (*kallah*), or the assembly house (*bet hava'ad*)? Yet if we imagine such comparatively stern settings for the staged conversations, we might automatically expect content that is much more serious than what we often encounter between the pages of the Talmud.

Composers of symposiac works explicitly chose the format of the symposium because it allowed them to include a lighter tone in their work, as opposed to the occasionally highly technical and informative content of other erudite texts. As a counterpoint to the rather excessive symposiac works, Methodius of Olympus (third/fourth century) chose exactly this format to write a *Symposium on Chastity*, using an equal number

[101] b. Shabb. 66b and b. Hul. 50b, respectively.

[102] E.g., David Weiss Halivni's examples of "forced explanations" and "forced responses." *The Formation of the Babylonian Talmud*, trans. Jeffrey L. Rubenstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 143–149.

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of excerpts from Plato and Christian sources to support his point.[103] Methodius's countereffort underlines the informal setting of the table talk, which involved lightness and frivolity but also alcohol-induced aggression. Macrobius is aware of the frivolity at symposia but also of the possibilities that such a literary setting holds for him as a composer. He reflects on this point in his introduction:

> The conversation at table is of a lighter sort, more pleasurable and less austere. For not only in the works of others who have described banquets, but especially in the great Symposium of Plato, the banqueters did not converse about some more serious subject but described Love in various witty ways: in that setting Socrates does not, in his usual way, press his opponent and tie him up in tight argumentative knots but—in a way more playful than combative—almost offers those in his grasp the chance to give him the slip and get away. (*Sat.* 1.2–3 [Kaster, LCL])

Nonetheless, the Neoplatonist Macrobius introduces his section of jokes in his usual sober way, presenting them as rhetorical devices (*Sat.* 2.1–2.7). Athenaeus, by contrast, weaves them into his text without preparing the reader. The Babylonian Talmud operates along similar lines as Athenaeus, thereby increasing the tension in the audience (the readers or listeners), who, just as in a real conversation, can only hope to anticipate what comes next. In both works, literally anything can happen next, from a joke to a comical story, a philosophical exposition, a juridical discussion, or even a math exercise.[104]

Graham Anderson has mapped the humorous instances in Athenaeus as follows: social gaffes; slapstick often relating to drunkenness or sexual behavior; excerpts from comedies and prior sympotic literature; and a seriocomical overtone in the arrangement of excerpts, the *spoudaiogeloion*.[105] Due to the nature of the work, there are two levels of humor present in *The Learned Banqueters*: the humor already present in the excerpts used by Athenaeus and his own humorous contribution, which results mostly from the way he brought the material into conversation.

[103] See Jason König, *Saints and Symposiasts: The Literature of Food and the Symposium in Greco-Roman and Early Christian Culture*, Greek Culture in the Roman World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 151–176.

[104] On mathematical exercises and elaborations in the Talmud, see Benedict Zuckermann, *Das Mathematische im Talmud: Beleuchtung und Erläuterung der Talmudstellen mathematischen Inhalts* (Breslau: F. W. Jungfer's Buchdruckerei, 1878).

[105] Graham Anderson, "The Banquet of Belles-Lettres: Athenaeus and the Comic Symposium," in *Athenaeus and His World: Reading Greek Culture in the Roman Empire*, ed. David Braund and John Wilkins (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000), 318–319.

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The latter exposes traits of *spoudaiogeloion*, the seriocomical, a neologism of the Greek *geloion*, "laughable," and *spoudaion*, "serious."[106]

The term *spoudaiogeloion* has already been used by Daniel Boyarin to explain the very feature that, as I suggest, connects the Babylonian Talmud as much with symposiac literature as does its dialogue structure. Talmudic *spoudaiogeloion* is created by "the presence of narratives that not only celebrate the lower part of the body but actively portray the rabbis, the very heroes of the Talmud, in grotesque, compromising, or ethically problematic light."[107] The alternating of these stories with more serious content suggests that the Talmud, like Athenaeus and, to a lesser degree, also Macrobius, intentionally uses *spoudaiogeloion* to navigate different sources.

Not only the alteration between serious, less serious, and even humorous material connects the Talmud with the literature of its time; the very existence of these types of sources is interesting. This is especially true because stories about "sinful saints" are more pronounced in the Babylonian Talmud than in the Palestinian one.[108] Boyarin suggests analyzing their literary footprint alongside the one left by writers, such as Lucian, who made use of Menippean Satire or, to a certain extent, even Philostratus in his *Lives of the Sophists*.[109] It may be noteworthy that Lucian was originally from Samosata, a town located at the Upper Euphrates River. The style seems indeed to have been popular in the East, since similar outspoken, comical, and even somewhat grotesque stories are also found among the stories about anchorite monks, such as the following reminiscence of Abba Anthony:[110]

[106] See Lawrence Giangrande, *The Use of* Spoudaiogeloion *in Greek and Roman Literature*, Studies in Classical Literature 6 (The Hague: Mouton, 1972), 15.

[107] Daniel Boyarin, *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 22. Instances that entangle a graphic voyeurism and create what may appear to the modern reader as a "hyper-sexualization" of the text are much more pronounced in the Babylonian than in the Palestinian Talmud; see Ishay Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires: "Yetzer Hara" and the Problem of Evil in Late Antiquity*, Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 112–119, and esp. 116, for examples.

[108] See Richard Kalmin, "Doeg the Edomite: From Biblical Villain to Rabbinic Sage," in *The Interpretation of Scripture in Early Judaism and Christianity: Studies in Language and Tradition*, ed. Craig A. Evans, Journal for the Study of Pseudepigrapha Supplement Series 33, Studies in Scripture in Early Judaism and Christianity 7 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

[109] Boyarin, *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis*, 24–32 and 179–181.

[110] For a general discussion of shared style, form, and common themes between the Apophthegmata Patrum and the Babylonian Talmud, see Michal Bar-Asher Siegal, *Early Christian Monastic Literature and the Babylonian Talmud* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), esp. 64–100.

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A hunter in the desert saw Abba Anthony enjoying himself in the desert with the brethren and he was shocked. Wanting to show him that it was necessary sometimes to meet the needs of the brethren, the old man said to him: "Put an arrow in your bow and shoot it." So he did. The old man then said: "Shoot another," and he did so. Then the old man said: "Shoot yet again," and the hunter replied: "If I bend my bow so much I will break it." Then the old man said to him: "It is the same with the work of God. If we stretch the brethren beyond measure they will soon break. Sometimes it is necessary to come down to meet their needs." When he heard these words, the hunter was pierced by compunction and, greatly edified by the old man, he went away. As for the brethren, they went home strengthened. (*Apophthegmata Patrum*, Antony 13)[111]

Spoudaiogeloion as a principle for arranging excerpts still cannot explain why philosophers, sophists, desert fathers, and rabbinic sages were depicted in obviously embarrassing situations. Rather, there must also be a mimetic and pedagogical purpose involved. The goal of education, which is similarly reflected in the above-discussed erudite compilations, is the "accomplished man," brilliant and rhetorically versed in every situation. Accordingly, the learned men in these stories usually escape the situation with a great deal of wit, thereby showing the value of their learning. Just as Athenaeus's audience learns from his sophists how to behave and converse at a symposium, the talmudic audience learns from rabbinic sages how to master tricky situations. And just like Athenaeus's work is not about his guests but rather about their words and actions and how they set examples to mimic or avoid, so too the Talmud is not primarily concerned with learning *about* rabbinic sages, but *from* them and *with* them.[112] The advantage of the Talmud not specifying a distinct setting for this learning is that its audience will learn how to act anywhere, not just at the banquet or in the study house.

According to ancient definitions, *spoudaiogeloion* is not only a matter of arrangement, alternating between verse and prose, between comedy and tragedy, and between surrealism and realism, but it can also affect various literary forms. Thus, the fable or story (*ainos*), the saying (*chreia*), or the parody, the exaggerated and incongruent imitation of someone or something, may be funny but still convey a serious moral.[113] Similarly, the Talmud "regularly forced God, angels and biblical characters to speak

[111] Translation follows Lillian Larsen, "School Texts," in *A Companion to Late Antique Literature*, ed. Scott McGill and Edward J. Watts (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2018), 486.

[112] On this issue in Athenaeus, see Jacob, "Athenaeus the Librarian," 107.

[113] See Giangrande, *Use of* Spoudaiogeloion, 19–31. On parodies in the Talmud, see Holger M. Zellentin, *Rabbinic Parodies of Jewish and Christian Literature*, *TSAJ* 139 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011).

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the 'language of the sages,' even the language of the Roman court and the Hellenistic school of rhetoric."[114]

Orators, who always searched for a balance between message and entertainment, found the laughable exploitable for serious matters in the same way meaningful equivocation could result in a laugh. Cicero, for example, writes in *On the Orator*: "Bons-mots prompted by an equivocation are deemed the very wittiest, though not always concerned with jesting, but often even with what is important .... So, to bore you no further, there is no source of laughing-matters from which austere and serious thoughts are not also to be derived" (2.250 [Sutton and Rackham, LCL]).

The distinction between a saying and a joke thus becomes rather blurred. Macrobius, for example, found the joke he was looking for in a collection of sayings:

> Take the case of Lucius Flaccus, for example, whom Cicero successfully defended with a timely joke when he was on trial for extortion, and his crimes were as plain as black and white – the joke is not found in the speech itself, but I learned of it from Furius Bibaculus's book, and it's among his celebrated sayings [*dicta*]. I use the word 'sayings' [*dicta*] not by chance but intentionally, since our ancestors used that term for jokes [*iocus*] of this sort. (*Sat.* 2.1.13–14 [Kaster, LCL])

This quote underlines what appears to be a prevailing late antique opinion, namely, that witty dicta could be as useful as serious proverbs, or, in this case, as an appeal to the law or defense arguments. Unsurprisingly, many collections of such bon mots circulated; they would be used as is or, slightly modified, would be attributed to someone else.[115] The joke as it is encountered in erudite works, then, is predominantly focused on the right choice of words, that is, "clever repartee."[116]

Some jokes involve figures of inferior or marginal status and reverse the conventional roles, in that the wit is attributed to the one thought inferior. These include slaves, uneducated people, foreigners, and women and may take the following form:

[114] Arkady Kovelman, *Between Alexandria and Jerusalem: The Dynamic of Jewish and Hellenistic Culture*, Brill Reference Library of Judaism 21 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 54.

[115] Giangrande, *Use of* Spoudaiogeloion, mentions as collections of *chreia* by Latin authors "the *faceta dicta* of Cicero and the collected apophthegms or *disticha* of Cato the Elder and Publius Syrus" (23). Jokes are collected and their style discussed in the already-discussed Cicero, *De or.* 2; Macrobius, *Sat.* 2; and Quintilian, *Inst.* 6. Apart from his many interspersed jokes, Athenaeus has a long list of witty replies by courtesans in *Deipn.* 13. In *De illustribus grammaticis* 21, Suetonius recalls a certain Gaius Maecenas Melissus, who produced a collection of jokes in 150 books.

[116] Larsen, "Early Monasticism," 25.

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It happened at one point, therefore, after he thoroughly disgraced himself and had been thrown out of the Theater, that Diphilus went to visit [the courtesan] Gnathaena anyway. So when he asked Gnathaena to wash his feet, she said: "Why? Didn't you travel here by air?" (*Deipn.* 13.583 [Olson, LCL])

It once happened that a man asked a woman for an act of sexual immorality. She said to him: "Fool! Do you have forty *seah* of water in which you can immerse [in order to free yourself from the sin according to rabbinic law]?!" He withdrew immediately. (b. Ber. 22a)[117]

In these two examples, men are outsmarted by their inferiors, in this case women. In others, however, philosophers and sophists are depicted as doing the outsmarting. Philostratus's *Lives of the Sophists*, for example, is full of witty *chreia* and double *chreia* embedded in the daily affairs of the sophists.

When this Leon came on an embassy to Athens, the city had long been disturbed by factions and was being governed in defiance of established customs. When he came before the assembly, he excited universal laughter, since he was fat and had a prominent paunch, but he was not at all embarrassed by the laughter. "Why," said he, "do ye laugh, Athenians? Is it because I am so stout and so big? I have a wife at home who is much stouter than I, and when we agree the bed is large enough for us both, but when we quarrel not even the house is large enough." Thereupon the citizens of Athens came to a friendly agreement, thus reconciled by Leon, who had so cleverly improvised to meet the occasion. (*Vit. Soph.* 1.2.2 [Wright, LCL])

Again, the literary approach to learned men is much the same in Philostratus as in the Babylonian Talmud: both works repeatedly get their sophists into trouble, only to let them escape triumphantly with a witty word:

Just then, Rabbi came to the academy. Those who were light ran and sat in their places. Rabbi Yishmael ben Rabbi Yose, because of his weight, was treading as he went.
Abdan said to him, "Who is this one who treads on the heads of the Holy People?"
He said to him, "I am Ishmael, son of Rabbi Yose, who has come to learn Torah from Rabbi."
He said to him, "And are you worthy to learn Torah from Rabbi?"
He said to him, "And was Moses our Master worthy to learn Torah from the mouth of the Almighty?"
He said to him, "And are you Moses?"
He said to him, "And is your master God?" (b. Yevam. 105b)[118]

[117] Hebrew. Translated according to Ms. Munich 95.
[118] Translation follows Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *Stories of the Talmud* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 21–22. As the story continues, the fat Abdan is shamed in the academy, just like the fat Naucleides son of Polybiades is in a story appearing in *Deipn.* 7.550d.

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These snappy stories are not simply entertaining but model, just like the symposiac texts, what rhetorical proficiency should look like. They stimulate imitation and encourage personal improvement. Indeed, the punchlines themselves suggest improvement: they are built to be transformed, to be rendered snappier, cleverer. As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4, late antique teachers generally encouraged students to rewrite rather than to write. Authors such as Lucian, for example, constantly reworked and recycled the work of others as well as their own.[119] Apart from multiple reworkings of stories known from other sources, rabbinic and otherwise, then, the Talmud often provides several possible endings to a story. The following witty story from tractate Bava Metzi'a even provides three different crafty endings:

> When Rabbi Ishmael the son of Yose and Rabbi Elazar the son of Rabbi Shimon used to meet each other, an ox team could walk between them [under the arch formed by their bellies] and not touch them.
> A certain matron said to them, "Your children are not yours."
> They said, "Theirs [our wives' bellies] are bigger than ours."
> "If that is the case, even more so!"
> There are those who say that thus they said to her: "As the man, so his virility."
> And there are those who say that thus did they say to her: "Love compresses the flesh." (b. B. Metz. 84a)[120]

Some stories, however, depict rabbinic sages in such messy situations that no rhetoric can save them. In such cases, prior merits, reputation in heaven, and overall sincere study come to the sage's rescue.[121] Indeed, in talmudic stories, there is always something to be learned about the benefit of learning, learning that ultimately leads to said merits and reputation in heaven. The intellectual agon in which the Talmud itself and its sources participate does not seem to differ much from the one in the Greco-Roman world.[122]

[119] See Graham Anderson, *Lucian: Theme and Variation in the Second Sophistic*, Mnemosyne Supplement 41 (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 1–22.

[120] Translation follows Boyarin, *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis*, 178–179. Boyarin (180) also highlights the similarity of the second response to Leon of Byzantium's *simile*, which he used to explain to the Athenians that even two fat people could find room in one bed if they agreed; see above, Philostratus, *Vit. Soph.*, 1.2.2.

[121] E.g., b. Pesah. 112b, or b. Hag. 15a–b, discussed in Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 64–82.

[122] On the literary agon emerging in the early Roman Empire, see Helmut Krasser, "*Me manus una capit*: Von kleinen Büchern und ihren Lesern in Martials Epigrammen," in *Techniken und ihre Materialität: Alltägliche Präsent, mediale Semantik, literarische*

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Whether the authors who wrote the texts presented in the Babylonian Talmud knew about *spoudaiogeloion* or not, they lived in a time in which the precise word was highly appreciated. No talmudic story goes without pun, reference to rabbinic law or its distinct legal vocabulary, a saying (*chreia*), or quote from the Bible. To make a point, many talmudic authors did not refrain from using humor, which, "when the ratio is proper between the laughable and the serious … is functioning at its highest peak of efficiency."[123]

Some humor, then, was in many ways already part of the material used to compose the Talmud. Yet much seriocomic effect was added, as Daniel Boyarin has pointed out, by the choice to produce one single work in spite of the variegated nature of the excerpts.[124] After the present analysis of imperial period and late antique genres, as well as writing and compilation habits and ideals, the program of the Babylonian Talmud can be described as an innovative combination of the features of a symposiac miscellany with the structure of a commentary.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has been dedicated to an investigation into the forms and purposes of three late antique genres, which, by modern standards, have been labeled commentary, encyclopedia, and miscellany. Although these genres did not exist in their present outlines in late antiquity, the investigation offered a useful platform for discussing how the Talmud might fit into this picture. As it turned out, the imperial period knew basically two types of commentary: the scholion, with its focus on language and grammar; and the exegetical or erudite commentary, with its inquiries into the deeper meaning of a lemma. The thematically focused encyclopedia, organized around a specific topic, was much narrower in its perspective than the miscellany, which was then the preferred format of fathers writing for their children.[125] Thus, the miscellany seems to satisfy modern

Reflexion, ed. Cornelia Ritter-Schmalz and Raphael Schwitter, Materiale Textkulturen 27 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2019), 159; on the agonistic atmosphere in rabbinic learning culture, see Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 64; and Richard Hidary, *Rabbis and Classical Rhetoric: Sophistic Education and Oratory in the Talmud and Midrash* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 108.

[123] Giangrande, *Use of* Spoudaiogeloion, 123.

[124] Boyarin, *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis*, 22.

[125] Gellius, Macrobius, and Martianus Capella (*De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii*, fifth century) dedicated their miscellanies to their sons, while Athenaeus dedicated his to a

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expectations with regard to the content and purpose of an encyclopedia, but it remains puzzling to current readers due to its lack of structure, which impedes its use as a reference work. Yet these genres, which are all "erudite works," meaning that they make use of excerpts from other books, were intended as displays of knowledge that could be used for one's own social benefit. Erudite works served contentwise, and in some cases also structurally, as rhetorical models. They were not, at least not primarily, designed to help readers retrieve a single specific quote or piece of information but rather to direct them to a whole cluster of knowledge. In many ways, these works did a far better pedagogical job by offering knowledge in context than does the modern encyclopedia, which provides a mix of random but alphabetically ordered subjects. The late antique miscellany, with its associative structure and multiple digressions as the natural result of this sort of "stream of consciousness," keeps the reader's curiosity awake and their attention focused.[126]

Humor was also highly valued for conveying difficult matters in a light tone. Jokes were thought to teach at least as good a lesson in clever repartee and mannerisms of life as did dry rhetorical theory. To that end, miscellanies usually presented their material as an alternating but unpredictable mix of humorous and serious matters called *spoudaiogeloion*. The dialogue structure offered additional didactic advantages and enhanced the entertaining aspect of a work. The reader could toil through the content while simultaneously learning from the protagonists about how to debate and behave when in a similar position.

The logic behind this literary – or even oral – technique seems to have been entwined with an aesthetic ideal of the time, which suggested that true perfection could be obtained, and natural beauty surpassed, with an eclectic combination of the most beautiful parts.[127] By assembling the most astute, perceptive, educated, and witty expositions, comments, and exegeses "of all times" into one discourse, a composer was able to create the perfect discourse.

friend. Pliny the Elder, who highlights the indigenous achievement of the Roman people throughout his *Natural History*, dedicates it to the emperors.

[126] On digression (παρέκβασις) as a purposeful and efficient rhetorical tool to keep the audience interested, see Peter S. Perry, *The Rhetoric of Digressions: Revelation 7:1–17 and 10:1–11:13 and Ancient Communication*, *WUNT* 2/268 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 107–141.

[127] See Balbina Bäbler, "The Image of Panthea in Lucian's *Imagines*," in *Intellectual and Empire in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, ed. Philip R. Bosman (London: Routledge, 2019), 195–196.

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The Babylonian Talmud, in an original but (with an eye to the Palestinian Talmud) not exactly unprecedented way, writes an erudite commentary on the Mishnah by treating each lemma as the starting point for an inquiry (*thesis*), while at the same time embracing the associative and variegated (poikilographic) focus of a miscellany and adding the benefits of a symposiac dialogue. To create the impression of the latter, the work engages the protagonists with each other as well as with a narrative voice. The Babylonian Talmud's original mixing and matching of excerpts, its creative adaptation, and its improvement of what had already been written thus far, marks this work with the characteristics of the erudite literature of Mediterranean late antiquity.

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