

1 | Introduction

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The boundaries of encyclopaedism

What does it mean to talk of ‘encyclopaedism’ before the Enlightenment?

We should make it clear right from the start that this volume does not attempt to trace a systematic genealogy of the ‘encyclopaedia’ as a genre. It is would be hard, in any case, to find anything quite like a modern ‘encyclopaedia’ before the eighteenth century. Instead we are concerned with the much broader phenomenon we refer to as encyclopaedism. We are interested, in other words, in the ways in which a series of different authors (primarily located within western, European culture) made use of a range of shared rhetorical and compilatory techniques to create knowledge-ordering works of different kinds, works that often claimed some kind of comprehensive and definitive status. And we think in terms of an encyclopaedic spectrum, with different texts drawing on shared encyclopaedic markers to different degrees and for very different purposes.¹

The inadequacy of a generic approach becomes clear when we look more closely at the word ‘encyclopaedia’ itself. The belief that this was an ancient Greek word has sometimes been used to link the great compilatory works of the classical world with the encyclopaedias composed by Diderot and his contemporaries. That idea does not stand up to scrutiny. The word ‘encyclopaedia’ first appears in the late fifteenth century.² There is no surviving example of a Greek or Roman author using it to describe his or her own work. Its original fifteenth-century users wrongly believed that it had been used (in its Greek form *enkyklopaideia*) by the first-century CE Roman writers Pliny (*Natural History*, preface 14),³ and Quintilian (*The Orator’s Education* 1.10.1). It has become clear, however, that that belief was based on misreading of the texts, both of which were in fact using the two-word Greek phrase *enkyklios paideia*, meaning ‘general education’ (discussed

¹ This volume is intended to be complementary to the essays in Binkley (1997a), many of which work similarly with the idea of an encyclopaedic spectrum.

² See Blair and West, below (chapters 18 and 23); also de Rijk (1965); Fowler (1997) 27–9.

³ On this passage, see Beagon (1992) 13–16; Naas (2002) 16–18; Murphy (2004) 33–4; Doody (2010) 43–51; and below, chapter 2, p. 48.

further below). As Ann Blair shows in chapter 18, the term *enkyklopaideia* and its Latinate variants increasingly came to be used, from the mid-fifteenth century onwards, to describe compilations linked with educational curricula and compilations organised in such a way as to examine a series of different intellectual disciplines in turn. It was not until the late seventeenth century that the meaning of the word ‘encyclopaedia’ shifted, and came to be applied to a much more modern concept of large-scale, comprehensive compilation. The word ‘encyclopaedia’ may be derived from classical Greek, then, but we cannot for that reason assume an unbroken, unchanging tradition of ‘encyclopaedias’, in the modern sense, stretching back into classical antiquity. That lack of terminological consistency makes it all the more difficult to posit a uniform, cross-cultural notion of an encyclopaedic genre. And that insight in turn has consequences for our understanding of many pre-modern texts: for example, the long history of reading Pliny’s *Natural History* as an ‘encyclopaedia’ in the post-Enlightenment sense has arguably led to a distorted view of its function within Roman imperial culture.⁴

The self-conscious newness of the great encyclopaedias of the Enlightenment should also make us pause before we search for anything similar in the centuries before. The *Encyclopédie*, published in France under the direction of Denis Diderot and Jean Baptiste Le Rond d’Alembert between 1751 and 1772 (in 17 volumes of text and 11 of plates, compiled by multiple contributors) is the most often-cited landmark, although many features of that work were anticipated in other publications from earlier decades, two of the most notable being John Harris’ *Lexicon Technicum* (first edition in 1704) and Ephraim Chambers’ *Cyclopaedia* (first edition in 1727), of which the *Encyclopédie* was originally intended to be a translation.⁵ The *Encyclopédie* in particular is often viewed as an icon of Enlightenment ideals, indeed it is presented very much in those terms in Diderot’s own introduction. Richard Yeo, in his book on Chambers and Harris, writes as follows: ‘Deriving from an ancient classical heritage, the encyclopaedia is also closely linked with the emergence of modernity, with assumptions about the public character of information, and the desirability of free intellectual and political exchange that became features of the European Enlightenment.’⁶ It symbolises ‘the achievements of science and reason’, while also ‘epitomising the success of print capitalism.’⁷ The proliferation of printed books is, for Peter Burke, a

⁴ See Doody (2009) and (2010).

⁵ See Yeo (2001); also Kafker (1981) on these and other predecessor volumes.

⁶ See Yeo (2001) xii for this quotation; and 12 for the importance of communicating with a wide public, rather than accumulating elite knowledge, for eighteenth-century encyclopaedists.

⁷ Yeo (2001) xii.

fundamental precondition of the transformation of educational curricula, libraries and encyclopaedic projects during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁸ The encyclopaedic compilations of Vincent of Beauvais and Gregor Reisch were among the medieval works printed and widely distributed during the sixteenth century. But the real significance of printing was the enormous increase in the production of books it enabled, forcing scholars to develop more sophisticated mechanisms for ordering knowledge. Diderot and his immediate predecessors both responded to the challenge of printing and took advantage of its capacity to set a new kind of reference work near the centre of the intellectual universe.

Enlightenment encyclopaedism is thus distinguished in part by its novelty.⁹ The decisive shift occurred, Yeo suggests, ‘when observers acknowledged that there was an unbridgeable chasm between the knowledge contained in individual memory and the collective body of knowledge stored in an encyclopaedia.’¹⁰ Old models of fitting the whole world into a single book compiled by a single author were suddenly challenged by new conceptions of knowledge-ordering based on (among other things) specialisation and empirical investigation.¹¹ And those new principles eventually bore fruit in other pioneering encyclopaedic projects of the late eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries – notably the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, first published between 1768 and 1771. Yet despite that widely accepted model of a strong break between modern and pre-modern knowledge-ordering practices, surveys of earlier encyclopaedic texts have tended to be interested in them primarily as (imperfect) precursors of what came later.¹² That kind of approach underestimates the variability of encyclopaedic compilation across the two millennia or so before the Enlightenment.

What we need instead is an approach which looks beyond genre to a more flexible mode of categorisation. That is not to say, however, that we should completely discard the notion of a boundary between encyclopaedic and non-encyclopaedic writing. In what follows, different contributors have taken different approaches to that problem. For example, some have given more weight than others to the notion of an encyclopaedic tradition. In the next chapter we argue that the encyclopaedic spectrum model has a particular relevance to the knowledge-ordering texts of ancient Greek and

⁸ Burke (2000) 81–115.

⁹ However, on the disingenuousness of Diderot’s claims about the novelty of the *Encyclopédie*, and his tendency to ignore earlier encyclopaedic traditions, see Clark (1990) 26–7.

¹⁰ Yeo (2001) xi.

¹¹ See Yeo (2001), incl. 9–11 on the influence of earlier, seventeenth-century thinkers, especially Bacon, on these developments.

¹² E.g., see Collison (1966).

Roman culture, and that modern attempts to lump together the works of authors like Celsus and Pliny as members of the same genre go too far: worse, they misapply modern generic categories in a way which fails to capture the original function of these texts within their own cultures. But for other periods, the situation is less clear-cut. Within the western European culture of the medieval and Renaissance periods we do indeed find works which have a strong sense of working within an encyclopaedic tradition, flagging their debt to earlier works of compilation even as they stress their own originality.¹³ Different contributors have also chosen to view the limits of encyclopaedism rather differently: some, for example, have even used the word ‘encyclopaedia’, rather than ‘encyclopaedic’, for the texts they discuss, as a shorthand to signal a boundary between encyclopaedic texts and others which do not deserve the name. Certainly it is clear that encyclopaedism is more than just compilation – we have to draw a line somewhere. But how rigid that dividing line should be is a matter of debate. As editors we have preferred to leave that debate open rather than attempt to impose some false consensus.

That variation in approach should not be a surprise. It is partly a problem of changing vocabulary and cultural variation (more on that below). Different periods use different words for the act of compilation. If we try to translate the words ‘encyclopaedism’ or ‘encyclopaedia’ into the languages of the texts we study, we will search in vain for an exact match. It is quite clear that there are ancient or medieval conceptions which equate roughly to what we find in later centuries and to each other. Those conceptions are similar in significant ways, and make the exercise of juxtaposition and comparison potentially very fruitful, even in the case of compilatory traditions which have developed quite independently of each other. And yet it is desperately difficult, once we have discarded the simplistic notion that Pliny and Quintilian used the word ‘encyclopaedia’ in the same way as we do, to pin down the areas of common ground which matter most. How do we access and interpret the categories pre-modern compilers were themselves working with, and their precise degree of connection with, or disjunction from, their counterparts in other periods? We have to edge our way towards an understanding of their similarities and differences in a tentative and provisional fashion, sensitive to shifting use of language and shifting conceptions over time. No single model of encyclopaedism will work for all periods.

In fact we suggest that part of the fascination of encyclopaedism – even if one agrees on the broad notion of an encyclopaedic spectrum just

¹³ See West (2002) 14–42.

outlined – is precisely the difficulty of knowing how to fix its boundaries.¹⁴ Different chapters in this volume respond to that challenge in different ways.¹⁵ That inconsistency may be frustrating to some readers, but we suggest that it is inevitable, given the range of texts and periods we deal with. We also contend that it is worth risking, as a by-product of the attempt to juxtapose a range of different periods and different cultures, and to look across disciplinary boundaries. It also seems peculiarly appropriate to the subject we are dealing with. As we shall see below, many of the texts we study were acutely aware of the impossibility of the task they set themselves: any attempt to sum up the whole of human knowledge in a single text runs the risk of incompleteness and inconsistency and arbitrariness. Any attempt to define encyclopaedism in a dogmatic fashion for all of the different periods we study risks facing the same accusations.

That productive uncertainty about where exactly encyclopaedism is to be located has shaped the contents of this volume. Many of the chapters which follow are interested in exploring the possibility that encyclopaedism can be found in some very unexpected places. Texts like the ancient collections of wise men's sayings (see Teresa Morgan's chapter), Plutarch's *quaestiones* (Katerina Oikonomopoulou), Artemidorus' collection of dream interpretation (Daniel Harris-McCoy), and Dugdale's *History of Imbanking and Drayning* (Claire Preston) cannot be said to have been central, influential texts for western encyclopaedic writing. In a different collection the likelihood is that some or all of them would go unmentioned; other similar case studies might take their places. Occasionally we even see encyclopaedic motifs and priorities flowing out into other kinds of writing altogether: witness Ian Johnson's discussion of the encyclopaedic qualities of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. We include all of these texts here, not in order to suggest that one cannot study encyclopaedism before the Enlightenment without them, but rather as experiments, vehicles for testing out where the limits of encyclopaedism lie; also as demonstrations of the way in which the rhetoric and techniques of comprehensive compilation left their mark on a remarkable range of texts.

¹⁴ See Fowler (1997) for discussion of the difficulties of definition. For other recent discussions of encyclopaedism in particular periods, all of them offering a rather more rigid definition of their subject, see Ribémont (1997) on the medieval encyclopaedia; Van Ess (2006) on Islamic encyclopaedism; Van Deun and Macé (2011) xiii–xix and Schreiner (2011).

¹⁵ For that reason (also because we realise that some are likely to read selectively, focusing on specific authors or periods) we have left contributors to lay out their own views on the range of different possible definitions of 'encyclopaedia' and encyclopaedism, at the risk of some repetition.

Common ground

There is thus a tension lying at the heart of this volume between similarity and difference, between the common ground these texts share and the idiosyncrasies which distinguish them. The rest of this introduction examines the two sides of that tension in turn.

Our focus throughout is almost exclusively on European and Mediterranean compilation. That is not meant to imply a mutual awareness between all of the different authors we discuss: different strands in the Mediterranean compilatory tradition broke off from each other and developed separately, in distinctive and innovative directions. Nevertheless most of the texts we look at do have some common points of reference, particularly from Greco-Roman literature. That goes even for Arabic encyclopaedism: we include two chapters on Arabic knowledge-ordering simply because it was so much influenced by the Greco-Roman tradition, and particularly by the systematising projects of Aristotle. The chronological order should make it easy for those with interests in particular periods to focus their attention on the areas they are most interested in. We do not aim to be fully comprehensive, but we have tried to make sure that all of the most influential texts and periods within that broad range receive some coverage, along with a selection of less frequently studied compilations. We have started successive clusters with overview chapters (König and Woolf, Magdalino, Keen, Muhanna, Blair), before moving on to more detailed case studies.

The only exception to that European/Mediterranean focus is Harriet Zurndorfer's closing chapter on Chinese encyclopaedism. That chapter is designed to function as a postscript to the rest of the volume, a very provisional test-case, intended to raise questions about how far the model of an encyclopaedic spectrum might be meaningfully extended, even to a culture which has none of the common reference points just referred to. As we shall see, some of the startling similarities between Chinese encyclopaedism as Zurndorfer describes it and its European/Mediterranean counterparts suggest that further comparative work has the potential to be very fruitful.¹⁶

What, then, are the similarities which tie this very disparate body of texts together? First of all, they rely on a spectrum of shared techniques. Note-taking, excerption and recombination, cross-reference (which was later used so heavily by Diderot and his collaborators),¹⁷ the use of contents pages and summaries to aid navigation – all of these techniques emerged in the classical world at least in rudimentary form, and were refined and adjusted in later centuries. Faced with the mass of pre-existing knowledge

¹⁶ Cf. Burke (2000) 30–1. ¹⁷ E.g., see Brewer (2011) 51.

and texts, our compilers had to make selections, and they then had to order their material. Decisions about selection and organisation were at the heart of all encyclopaedic projects. Of course, many of these techniques also characterised texts which even the most *laissez-faire* categoriser would not label as encyclopaedic. Nevertheless, in combination they are central to the way in which most encyclopaedic authors work.

Shared decisions about structure mattered too. Alphabetical ordering is a standard feature of many modern texts which call themselves encyclopaedias, but it emerged relatively late, gaining prominence only in the Middle Ages (there are a few classical predecessors) and only becoming the dominant organising principle in the sixteenth century. Much commoner in earlier centuries was disciplinary organisation, where different sections of the text dealt in turn with different fields of study. We need to be very careful about the assumption that the classical authors who invented that kind of structure – especially Varro and Celsus, whose work is discussed further in the chapter following – would have imagined themselves as part of a wider grouping, or considered themselves to be linked with other authors who did the same. But by the time we get to the late antique world and then, especially, into medieval culture, that Varronian scheme is used as a self-conscious gesture of affiliation to a tradition of totalising compilation. It was important not least through being tied to university syllabuses: seven of Varro's nine subjects (excluding medicine and agriculture) corresponded to the Seven Liberal Arts of the medieval *trivium* and *quadrivium*, the former composed of grammar, rhetoric and logic, the latter of geometry, mathematics, astronomy and music. Varro's schema remained an important influence in the Renaissance too, although it became increasingly common to reject his precise division in favour of a wider range of different disciplines.

Perhaps even more important, however, is the rhetoric of encyclopaedism. That rhetoric focuses above all on comprehensiveness. The ideal was to present a total coverage of the whole of what was knowable, or at least the whole of what was knowable about a particular subject – although, of course, in practice that claim always entails a degree of compression and selectiveness, which reins in and summarises that total knowledge with a view to making it accessible.¹⁸ Pliny's *Natural History* was a particularly important model for the idea of a text which could reflect the world in its

¹⁸ On the idea that comprehensiveness is an important feature of what makes an encyclopaedia, see (among many others) Clark (1992), esp. 107: 'discourse becomes encyclopaedic when it takes as its subject the process of knowing and the body of human knowledge, seeking to represent this body as a unified whole'; Fowler (1997) 8–9; Murphy (2004) 11–12, following Arnar (1990); and many of the chapters below; also North (1997) for the argument that the impression of totality is often more important than literal comprehensiveness, with reference especially to medieval encyclopaedism.

entirety, the whole of nature.¹⁹ Moreover those ideals were often articulated through recurring metaphors. The medieval period, with its guiding image of encyclopaedic compilations as mirrors of the world, is an obvious example.²⁰ The tree of wisdom, through which the connections between every ‘branch’ of knowledge were demonstrated, was another popular figure, and one often presented diagrammatically.²¹ Often there was a competitive edge to this rhetoric, as compilers sought to convince their readers that their own compilations were the most authoritative, the best organised, to be contrasted with less successful attempts. The encyclopaedic works we study were not always welcomed or praised by their readers; we should not necessarily take their own ambitious statements about their projects at face value, as self-evident reflections of their achievement.

Many encyclopaedic texts forestall that kind of criticism by drawing attention to the limitations of their own ability. It is in fact a standard feature of encyclopaedic rhetoric to undermine or throw doubts on its own claims to totality even as it makes them, to reveal the precariousness of encyclopaedic aspirations to comprehensiveness.²² As we suggested above, the ordering work of the encyclopaedist is always in tension with the inherent miscellaneousness of the material he or she²³ must deal with.²⁴ In some cases the difficulty of achieving comprehensive coverage bursts into view despite the encyclopaedist’s best efforts to suppress it; in other cases, the encyclopaedist may even draw attention to that problem quite pointedly and self-consciously.

That kind of self-awareness has sometimes been taken as one of the defining features of the encyclopaedias of the Enlightenment. However, the studies gathered together here show that it was not confined to modern encyclopaedic enterprises. The history of encyclopaedism is littered with abandoned works, or works dreamed about but not even begun; and it

¹⁹ On Pliny, see chapter 2, below, and Beagon (chapter 4); Naas (2002), esp. 15–67, on Pliny’s aim of compressing the whole of nature into a single work and on his ambivalent relation with earlier conceptions of encyclopaedism; Carey (2003) 17–40, esp. 18–20; also West (2002) 32–41 and Blair (chapter 18) on Pliny as a model for Renaissance comprehensiveness.

²⁰ See Fowler (1997) 23–4. ²¹ Yeo (2001) 22–32.

²² Cf. Clark (1990), esp. 20–2 on the way in which the encyclopaedic desire for completeness is always ‘shadowed by incompleteness and obsolescence’ (that phrase from Clark (1992) 97).

²³ However, it is very hard to find female compilers within the history of pre-Enlightenment encyclopaedism.

²⁴ Cf. Clark (1992), esp. 101 on d’Alembert’s ‘Discours préliminaire’ to the *Encyclopédie*, which oscillates between the metaphor of tree or map for the encyclopaedia and the metaphor of labyrinth: ‘There is a tension between order and disorder: noise (the great, unorganised heap of proto-information) accompanies the totalising enterprise, just as in memory, forgetting and loss shadow the enterprise of retaining and retrieving the past’.

is common in alphabetical encyclopaedias for the letters towards the end of the alphabet to be treated much more briefly.²⁵ The Enlightenment's new confidence in the possibilities of human reason was combined with a parallel awareness of the precariousness of encyclopaedic ideals, which were stretched to breaking point by (for example) the rapid expansion of knowledge.²⁶ How could the totality of human knowledge be summed up in a single work when each decade brings revolutionary new progress?²⁷ Similar claims are often made now for the encyclopaedic compilations of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.²⁸ The advent of the internet has led to new experiments and rapid changes in the practice of encyclopaedism, especially in the web-pages of Wikipedia and its many imitators. The internet has produced new opportunities and new technologies for ordering and systematising human knowledge; at the same time it has provoked new questions and anxieties about the possibility of doing so adequately, in the face of the vast expansion of information available,²⁹ and in the face of the extraordinary proliferation of editors, whose accuracy and good faith is sometimes dubious.³⁰ By contrast, Richard Yeo has suggested that medieval encyclopaedism tends to be relatively confident about the possibility of collecting the sum of human knowledge into one place, and that it is only with the Renaissance that we start to see problems of information overload. However, he is surely too confident in claiming that 'anxiety about the hubris of the quest for knowledge . . . is a modern phenomenon'.³¹ Several of the contributors to this volume trace anxieties of those kinds back through earlier centuries, and show how they had always been a part of the encyclopaedic world-view,³² even if the earlier material does not quite share Enlightenment worries about the danger of knowledge becoming obsolete, worries which were inevitably less prominent in pre-modern cultures which did not rely on modern conceptions of scientific progress.

Two chapters in particular are important in that respect. William West, first of all, considers the encyclopaedic tradition broadly, with a special focus on the Renaissance, but also looking back to the medieval and classical worlds, and forward to the 'encyclopaedic fiction' of the twentieth century. He stresses that the vulnerability of encyclopaedic ambition, while it may sometimes be carefully orchestrated by the compiler, is often, instead, an inherent consequence of the projects these texts undertake. And he points

²⁵ See Yeo (2001) 4–5 for examples. ²⁶ See Yeo (2001), esp. 59–77.

²⁷ See Yeo (2001) 59–98. ²⁸ A theme of Burke (2012).

²⁹ Cf. Blair (2010) 2–3. ³⁰ See Dalby (2009), esp. 50–81. ³¹ Yeo (2001) 5.

³² Cf. also Blair (2010) on the Renaissance, incl. 14–46 for a survey of similar problems of information overload in classical, Byzantine, Arabic, Chinese and Latin medieval culture.

out that it is above all when we try to read encyclopaedic texts that we begin to see the precariousness of their claims to order and comprehensiveness. That problem, he suggests, is if anything clearer for the pre-Enlightenment world than for the encyclopaedias of Diderot and his immediate contemporaries and successors. Daniel Harris-McCoy offers a close reading of one single text, Artemidorus' *Oneirocritica*, along similar lines. He argues that Artemidorus both draws on, and at the same time deliberately exposes the inadequacy of, the ideal of comprehensiveness as it applies to his own instructions, which are, he stresses, subject to almost endless variation and adaptation according to the different contexts of the cases under discussion. In that sense Artemidorus has a great deal in common with other ancient technical and scientific authors who proclaim the usefulness of their own writings while also making them very difficult to use in practice. Proclaiming the complexity of one's subject matter – too complex to be summed up on paper – has a number of functions in ancient technical literature: it implies that the reader must learn not just by reading but also by experience; it provides an inbuilt defence against failure, allowing one to claim that particular local circumstances have made the case under discussion more complicated than might initially appear; above all, it leaves space for the authority of the expert practitioner, as something which cannot be codified or summed up on paper.³³

It is important to stress, in fact, that such failures of encyclopaedic comprehensiveness need not necessarily be represented in negative terms as things to be deplored or even necessarily concealed. For one thing, comprehensiveness may sometimes be sacrificed in favour of an outline vision of the overall shape of the workings of the natural world, just as we might eschew a close-up of a photo in order to see the whole picture.³⁴ Pliny, for example, several times draws attention to the necessity of leaving things out precisely for that reason, without apparently seeing such omissions as inconsistent with his goal of encyclopaedic coverage.³⁵ Acknowledgement of the precarious nature of encyclopaedic compilation can even be used to bolster the impression of a work's accomplishment. At times it almost seems that an awareness of the impossibility of exhaustive encyclopaedic order makes that goal all the more appealing, as if the encyclopaedist is at his most tenacious and determined precisely at those moments where he can feel the goal of comprehensive coverage slipping from his grasp.

³³ Cf. Barton (1994). ³⁴ See North (1997).

³⁵ See Carey (2003) 21–2 and 23: 'with playful irony, Pliny cites totality as the justification for brevity. But his confession serves not only as a defence, but once again to draw attention to the gargantuan nature of his project' (21) (with reference to *NH* 3.42 and other passages).