Conclusions

Manuscript Cataloguing in a Comparative Perspective: State of the Art, Common Challenges, Future Directions (Hamburg, May 7th-10th, 2018)

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Ten years ago this conference could not have taken place. It was now the perfect time to do it, as the director of the CSMC, Michael Friedrich told me at the end of the last morning session of the conference, satisfied with its results. Indeed, it is time to hold a conference on cataloguing past and present, between the printed book era and the digital one. Nothing better to demonstrate the interest that this issue raises today than the numerous audience that this congress was able to draw. And by this I do not only mean the speakers, but also many other scholars, mainly young, who have shown a dynamic interest in this topic.

Catalogues do not fare very well these days. Public research agencies are not the only ones that deem catalogues obsolete. Libraries tend to favour more glamorous publications, although catalogues still are the basis for any research on manuscripts. However, there is still some hope, beginning with this conference that brought together scholars from various fields but with a common experience in cataloguing and the belief that the latter is really important. Here and there, one sees ventures going against the tide of current misconceptions about catalogues. May I mention the *Series catalogorum* started in Rome by Michele Bernardini who was able to publish among others a volume with the catalogue of Persian manuscripts kept in the Bibliothèque nationale de France that the library decided it was not worth printing.

Ten years ago, in Spain, the Ministry of research decided to stop giving money to cataloguing projects, because cataloguing was considered as one of the so called auxiliary sciences, and therefore not research *per se*. In Germany this conception (or perhaps misconception) has arrived at a later date, but here it is. Cataloguing projects do no longer get support if they are not part of a broader research project. Bad times… or maybe not, because this situation has perhaps compelled us to be more practical and to put forward a new type of debate about the catalogues such as the one that has brought together this week the participants of this conference.

In the presentation text, the organizers stated that "printed catalogues have been gradually supplemented or replaced by electronic ones". And this has actually become obvious over the last few days, since we have been offered more papers about digitalization and digital cataloguing processes than about "old style" printed catalogues; actually, the vocabulary is also changing, and the minimum unit in the codex is not the quire, nor the bifolio; not even the folio (as shown by Urlich Smid or Christophe Flüeler). Now the page is at the forefront, since the visual unit is imposing itself as a consequence of the digitization process. However, there seems to be still a widespread opinion that a double format would be needed in order to have a better control of quality and accessibility (Javier del Barco, Thies Staack). Because both have their pros and cons:

The pros of the digital age are very clear, especially in terms of the digitization of materials. Columba Stewart gave specific examples of manuscripts in a war zone that could be photographed and described, but are now displaced, mutilated or, even worse, missing. Matthieu Cassin showed the explicit interaction between institutions, descriptions and objects through a link to what his project proposes as a unique and stable numeric identifier providing an easier access to the data. And of course, as Christian Brockmann emphasized, the quick access to data and especially to images is the great asset of digital libraries, so much so that sometimes the image is displacing by its mere presence the cataloger's work, as indicated Marina Bernasconi.

But there are also some cons for digital libraries:

Stinson pointed out firstly that the information entered in digital format is quite often the same as that found in the old paper catalogues and secondly that the digitizations are in many cases confusing (in that they do not provide the actual dimensions and exact colours of the object) and incomplete. And Javier del Barco added that in some cases, digital catalogues are weaker, less reliable than paper publications, since they have not been subjected to several readings by different experts (that is to say, they have not been double checked).

A big concern is the sustainability of digital catalogues. At a first step comes the financial issue, and not less important, the compatibility of such catalogues with changes, language, etc. of future databases. Tilman Seindesticker was not very confident, and said that maybe within five or ten years the actual digital catalogues will not be readable! However, I have to add that Matthieu Cassin augured a life of at

least two hundred years to digital projects. In order to ensure the long-term accessibility to the databases, Seidensticker suggested that a large-scale, probably at national level, institutional involvement should be put in place. It seems that Germany's commitment goes in that direction according to Christoph Mackert's paper: we heard that six centres are currently working on cataloguing Medieval manuscripts.

This evaluation automatically highlights an important point, which could not be discussed due to a lack of time: What kind of catalogue do we want? Who are the intended users? As Michael Friedrich made clear, when you prepare a catalogue, you have to know whom you are heading for. But for that, the cataloguer has to have a good training (as Alessandro Bausi, Denis Nosnitsin or Matthieu Husson pointed out). In addition, full time dedication and money are required, whereas obstacles are not few, beginning with the access to the manuscripts in many instances. This leads the cataloguer in many occasions to write another type of product, closer to the brief inventories of the 19th century.

But we have to take care that the role of the reader/user does not replace the cataloger's will. In the Arabic manuscript project presented by Tilman Seidensticker, for example, the former's role is fundamental. Seidensticker defined him as "someone interested in Arabic contents", an argument that proved sufficient in this project to push back into the background the codicological component and dismiss the texts that have been written in another language than Arabic, even if they are part of the same MTM. It does not seem that the public of the room (especially Alessandro Bausi and Camillo Formigatti) was much in favour of this proposal. Actually the importance of a correct, consistent and coherent material description has been stressed by Marilena Maniaci and Patrick Andrist, Steve Delamarter, Elodie Attia, Imre Galambos, Emmanuel Francis, or Julia Craig, with the new proposals and problems associated with the online catalogues presented by Alberto Campagnolo (VisColl 2.0) and Pietro Liuzzo.

To finish, Ronny Vollandt and Ulrich Schmidt pointed out the importance of the bibliography, envisioned in a very practical way in the Arabica Bible project, since the manuscripts involved in this project are mentioned in each bibliographical entry.

It does not seem that it is the moment to ask ourselves in which series it would be convenient to publish the catalogue we are preparing, much less to suggest a new

series to a publisher. The digital languages have now become relevant, as well as the importance of using one or another software or platform (as shown by Lampang Marmart), although it has not been possible yet to get an agreement on the relevance of TEI (Yasmin Faghihi, Pietro Liuzzo) or 3IF (Christoph Flüeler, Christoph Mackert).

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There are some questions, some ideas, some starting points that could not be discussed enough. And I think now, although many of the colleagues have already had to leave, it may be the right time to do it.

a) All of us have written catalogues on paper and almost all have done the same on the internet. But to date, there does not seem to be a state of the art on this subject yet. As a good MTM, every catalogue is a unique product, and according to the internal characteristics of the series we choose, to the budget we have (in the case of paper catalogues), and to the public we want to reach (in both cases), the final product will change. Maybe we could agree on a basic set of information we would like to find anyhow in a catalogue. In this boom of digital libraries, it is perhaps the right moment to begin to set out some cataloguing standards. What better place than a conference in the CSMC?

b) Is it enough to identify a manuscript through its shelfmark? Is a unique identifier better? How should we refer to the object? Doc IDS, page IDS, ShelfIDs?

c) How should we describe popular texts, such as rituals, where parts of the texts are copied and pasted, others are announced but never written down?

d) We have heard the terms unification, coherency, or standardization in codicological descriptions. We have seen the state of the art on some aspects, such as the description of quires or ruling. Is there any opinion on the best possible way to do that? Is there a catalogue model (or codicological description) that would be most appropriate? Do we need different standards to identify the different features?

e) Could it be interesting to set up a single platform in order to include the results (or data) from different projects/sites/catalogues?

f) For a good cataloguing database, a common language is needed in terms of codicology, art history, palaeography, etc., but it also has to be in several languages, in order to make searches more productive. But is this possible? (We cannot forget what happened with the old project of Latin palaeography.) Is it possible to translate the various words necessary for a good cataloguing? In a new digital reality, which

seems to lead us to pragmatic and brief items, how to express the doubts, the uncertainties, that only a paragraph written has allowed us to do so far?

We are looking forward to attending and participating in a further discussion about these and other topics about manuscript cataloguing.