

# Codicological Descriptions in the Digital Age

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# Traditional role of codicological descriptions

Tend to:

- Formalize an approach to and vocabulary for understanding cultural artifacts
- Provide an expert opinion on the origins and status of manuscript books
- Serve as useful preliminary resources for researchers looking for information that will suggest which volumes, collections, and repositories are likely to reward further time and effort

# Characteristics of codicological descriptions

Tend to:

- Feature highly specialized and specific vocabulary
- Be written in terse prose entries that make highly efficient use of space in printed books
- Contain abbreviations and formulae

M. 948 GUILLAUME DE LORRIS AND JEAN DE MEUN. *Roman de la rose*. France, about 1520, written by Girard Acarce for Francis I, king of France.

Vellum, 210 leaves (10 5/16 x 7 5/16 in.) (262 x 186 mm.), foliated. 2 cols., 33 lines (180 x 125 mm.). Gothic script, black and some gold ink, written by Girard Acarce. 2 full-page miniatures with architectural frames, 67 large miniatures with full-page architectural frames which also include portions of text, 38 small miniatures (half-column) with simple gold frames, 2 small decorated borders, numerous gold initials against alternating red and blue backgrounds throughout. The miniatures are by at least two distinct artists: examples by the stronger are fols. 77v, 83v, 95; the weaker, fols. 172, 180, 186. Collation: I4, II8, III7, IV8, V2, VI8–XIII8, XIV6, XV8–XXVI8, XXVII6, XXVIII9. Binding: Modern red velvet, edges gilt and gauffered, with a row of lozenges containing the letter F flanked by rows of lozenges containing fleur-de-lis.

The text is complete except for two breaks: a leaf between fols. 12 and 13 (containing lines 656–768 of M. Méon, *Le roman de la rose*, Paris, 1814, I, 23–32, and a small miniature probably depicting caroling or dancing), and two conjoint leaves between fols. 198 and 199 (containing lines 20907–21125 of Méon, III, 282–291, and a large miniature probably depicting Pygmalion at work).<sup>3</sup>

# Types of users

- Visitor to the library who wishes to use the description as a guide to a manuscript being consulted in person
- Researchers studying the manuscript remotely



# New norms in digital environments

“In order to apply computer technology to humanities research, it is necessary to represent in machine-readable form the artifacts or objects of primary or evidentiary interest in the research, as well as secondary information used in the description, analysis, and interpretation of the objects.”

- Daniel Pitti,

“Designing Sustainable Projects and Publications”

# Three categories of information

## 1) Dissemination of specialized knowledge

- Remains relatively unchanged in digital environment...
- But more easily searched, mined, disseminated

# Three categories of information

## 2) Information pertaining to physical nature of manuscripts

- Examples: physical measurements, collation, hair vs. flesh
- In digital environments, serves as check on distortions (e.g., size is changeable in digital environment)
- In digital environments, serves to catch errors - e.g., misnamed files, missing images



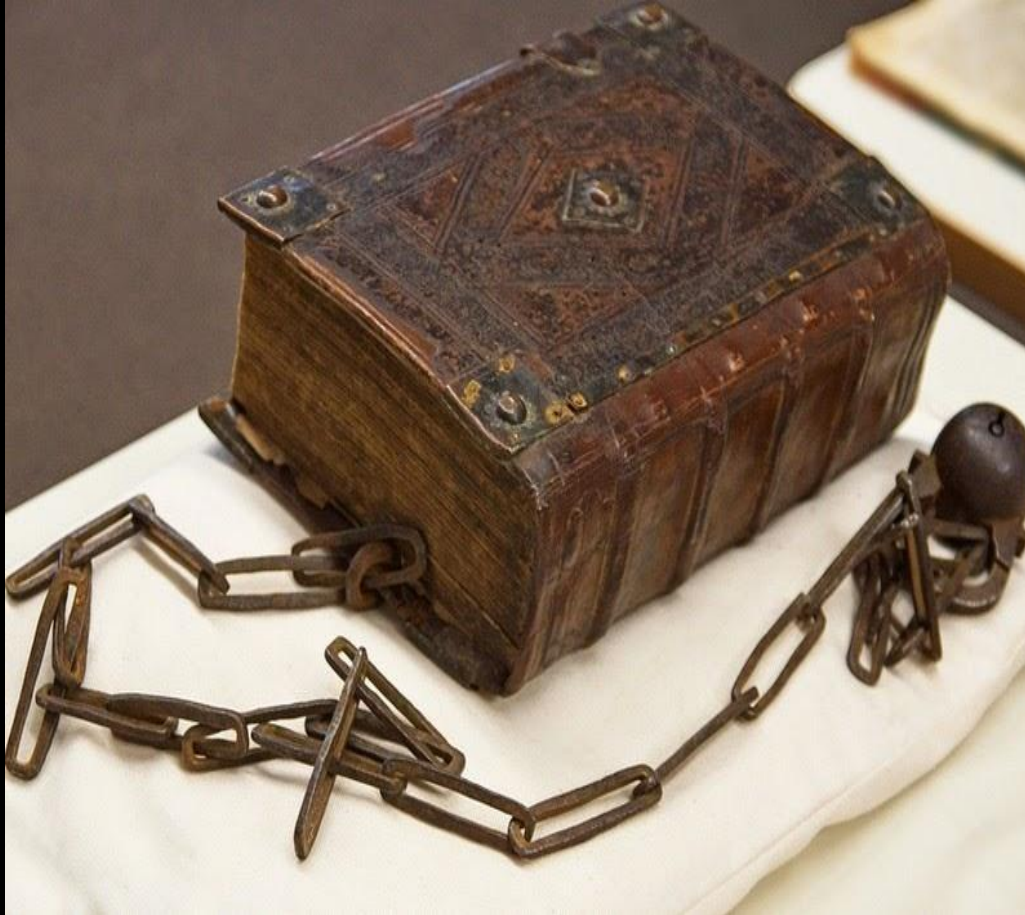
# Three categories of information

3) Information previously designed to aid remote research. Here we see the most fundamental change:

- Need to summarize physical appearance diminished with images
- Precision and specificity of language of codicological descriptions now becomes useful in databases
- Allows users to sort and see in context (e.g., number of folios vs. average, size vs. average)
- Terms not easily adaptable to databases rendered searchable across corpus (e.g., “gauffered,” “cursiva formata”)
- Descriptions become metadata



# Rationale of Hypertext

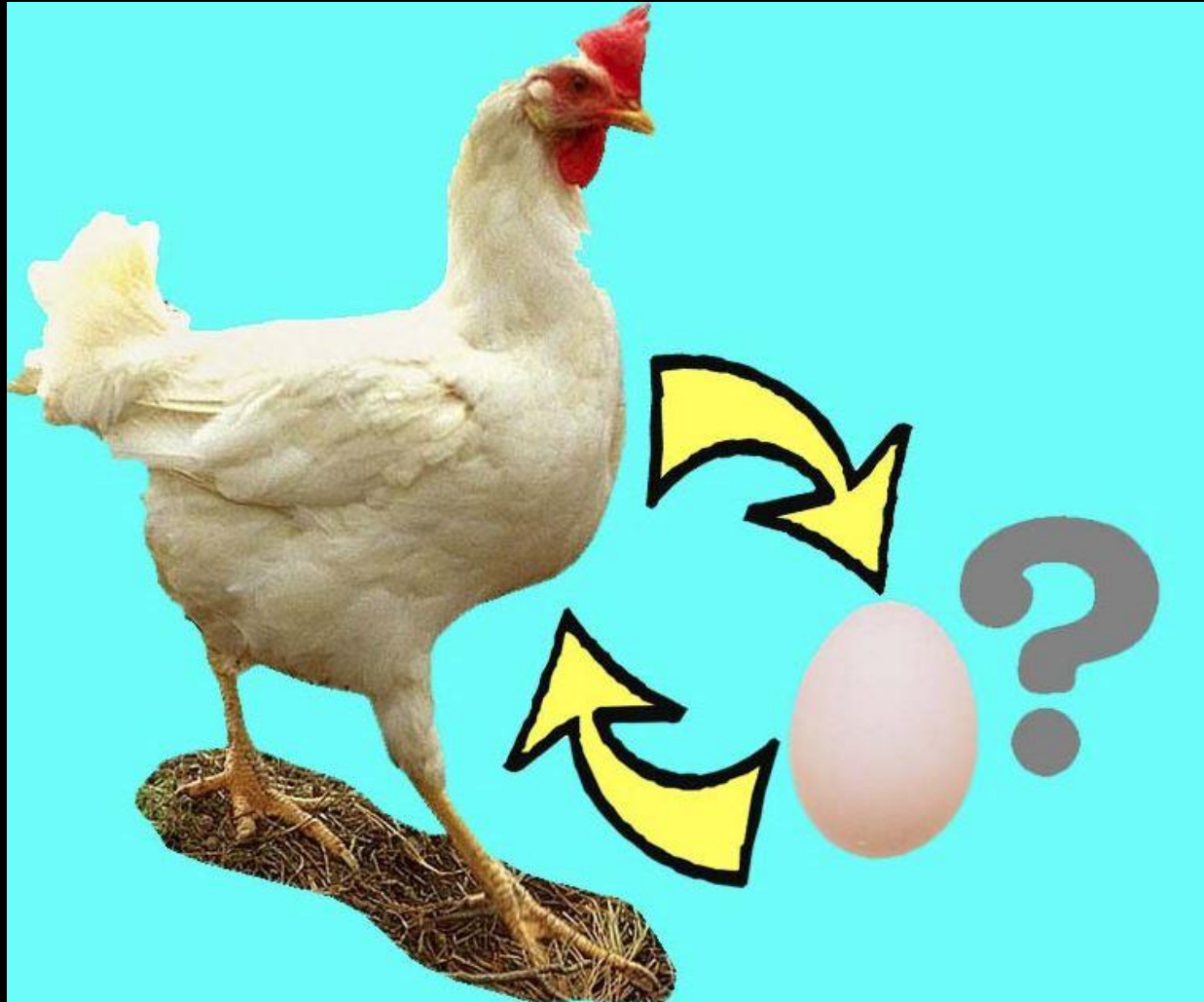


Escape the bounds of the book to study the book!

The collational formula and the basic description of an edition should be that of an ideally perfect copy of the original issue. A description is constructed for an ideally perfect copy, not for any individual copy, because an important purpose of the description is to set up a standard of reference whereby imperfections may be detected and properly analyzed when a copy of a book is checked against the bibliographical description. In a very rare book the evidence may not be sufficient to construct a perfect description, but it is better to aim at this perfect description, even though its collational formula may be incomplete and full of queries, than to misrepresent a book by describing only an imperfect individual copy. (113)

Fredson Bowers, *Principles of Bibliographical Description*

Which came first?





# Which came first?

