Forum

Manuscript Terminology: a Plurilingual Perspective

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Manuscript terminology[1] – or codicological terminology, given that palaeographical vocabulary is still a taboo – has been a debated issue since 1953, when the idea of a multilingual glossary was conceived by Charles Samaran, the doyen of Latin palaeographers. The project did not become reality for quite some time, and then only in the family of Latin-based languages.[2]

The range of available dictionaries and other terminological tools is still rather unsatisfactory in English and German and in the other European languages. There are, however, exceptions in the form of a number of contributions focusing on individual aspects, mainly bookbinding and decoration,[3] a mass of largely unreliable glossaries that are often no more than simple lists of terms,[4] and one promising English project being developed by Peter Gumbert, but this is still far from complete.[5] If we turn to the various manuscript cultures that developed round the Mediterranean basin, the outlook – with the partial exception of the Arabic sphere[6] – is even more daunting: shortcomings in terminology are frequently joined by vague definitions of related concepts for which the need has not even been noticed.[7]

Research has continued, however, and existing terminologies are therefore showing inevitable signs of age: new flaws and errors have joined earlier shortcomings affecting the choice and organization of terms and the wording of definitions.

With regard to historical terminology, the situation is even less encouraging: the surveys presented at a round table in Paris twenty years ago have not been followed up,[8] and the only systematic initiative that has been carried on since then concerns the Byzantine book; this is still incomplete.[9]

There is a general consensus as to the usefulness of a common codicological terminology in the main European research languages, but its objectives and the means for implementing it are unclear. What are the reasons for this continuing stagnation, apart from the fact that Denis Muzerelle's authoritative *Vocabulaire codicologique* definitely helped to inhibit the development of alternative projects (with rare exceptions)? Are the ambitious agenda and underlying assumptions of the Comité de paléographie still to be considered valid? What are the needs that a technical vocabulary should fulfil? What kind of public should it address? In practical terms, what are the challenges facing book terminologists and what are the new tools to help them accomplish their task? These are the issues I address in the following pages.

1. Why and for whom?

The first question for any aspiring terminologist concerns the purpose of the work – in other words the needs of the public to whom it is addressed. Samaran's original project was rooted in a well-defined context in which the scientific study of the codex – as a material artefact and not just a container of texts and a vehicle of thought – was in its infancy and lakked a mature technical lexicon and reference works.[10] This explains the importance attributed by Denis Muzerelle to the definition of a conceptual framework that would systematize an emerging discipline and to rigorous selection of the terms to be fit into it. The success of his *Vocabulaire* is largely

[1] This contribution is an expanded version of a paper presented at the 'Internationale Tagung der Handschriftenbearbeiter', held in Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek, on 19th–21th September, 2011.

[2] French: Muzerelle 1985; Italian: Maniaci 1996, 1998²; Spanish/Castillan: Ostos, Pardo, and Rodríguez 1997; Papahagi 2013. The Catalan version by Arnall i Juan 2002 is questionable under many regards (selection and ordering of terms, wording of the definitions); not by chance it has not received the patronage of the Comité International de Paléographie Latine.

[3] I refer in particular to Gnirrep, Gumbert, and Szirmai 1992; Brown 1994; Jakobi-Mirwald 2008; for other references see Maniaci 2002, 2005², 191–193. The work by Beal 2008 disappoints the expectations raised by its title; it is in fact an alphabetical list of terms, adopting a very wide definition of 'manuscript' and principally referring to the 16th and17th centuries. The recent repertory by Šedivý, Pátková 2008 is an interesting, but limited (and isolated) attempt to collect and define palaeographic terminology.

[4] For a merely indicative selection of links see Maniaci 2008, 209–210 n. 84.

[5] Gumbert 2010: thanks to the generosity of the author, I had the opportunity to preview and discuss with him the available chapters ('Scribes and their tools' and 'From sheet to page').

[6] See Gacek 2001; 2008; 2009.

[7] Comparative codicology has the daunting task of reducing the gap in the state of knowledge concerning the different book cultures: this is the main task of the ongoing project COMSt, Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies (http://www1.uni-hamburg.de/COMST/).

[8] See Weijers 1989.

[9] Cf. Atsalos 1971 [2012]; 1971 and 1972; 1977; 2000.

[10] Ruiz García 1988 and 2002; Lemaire 1989.

attributable to these basic choices. In the absence of more specific instruments it has also been used as a handbook of codicology, even though the author intended to limit his definitions to the bare minimum of terminological information and resisted the temptation to adopt a more encyclopaedic approach.[11]

The considerable increase in the number of reference works in recent decades[12] has led to a decline in the inappropriate use of existing vocabularies for teaching purposes; in the meantime new and pressing needs for the standardization of terminology have emerged as a result of the spread of new technologies and the internet. This significant change has not yet brought about a deliberate redefinition of the original project: codicological terminology is still loaded with old and new expectations and responsibilities, and these have not yet been arranged in a clear setting. The main requirements may be summarised as follows:

Communicate with the greatest possible precision the body of technical knowledge relating to the manuscript book with a view to reducing ambiguity. Peter Gumbert recently reformulated this general objective effectively: '... as long as we have not embedded the facts in a structure of words, they are not yet sufficiently clear to ourselves, and it will be difficult to observe them, or to communicate our observations to others.'[13]

Represent the state of knowledge at a given time: the clarity and depth of knowledge will require precision and richness in the terminology used to express it. One example may suffice: a central concept for the study of the genesis and evolution of the codex – the 'codicological unit' – has been proved inadequate by recent research and, given the number and variety of structural 'units' that can be isolated in most Medieval codices, as a consequence a nebula of additional or alternative terms and concepts has emerged. These include 'booklet', 'élément codicologique', 'modular unit', 'production unit' and 'circulation unit', but their mutual relationships have not yet been defined – as shown, unsurprisingly, by the vague and inaccurate definitions proposed for most of these terms.[14]

Two other requirements have emerged more recently that are less clearly defined and apparently very different from each other:

Manage the body of existing knowledge, with particular regard to the growing mass of unordered information available in digital formats. An increasingly urgent demand for glossaries of basic terms, possibly with multilingual equivalents, has recently emerged to meet the need for universal organisation and access to content on the internet. With regard to the Western and Byzantine medieval book, it is generally believed that this need is largely met by the online version of the *Vocabulaire codicologique*, also managed by Muzerelle.[15] Few people seem to be aware that this is actually a one-way database founded on the original French text: it gives Italian and Spanish equivalents, occasionally adding a proposed English term, and it does not take into account developments in the versions based on the French prototype, such as the introduction of new terms, the deletion of obsolete ones, the introduction of corrected or modified definitions, or the sometimes imperfect correspondence of meanings among the different idioms.

Produce new knowledge through detailed mapping of the various aspects of the study of book materials and techniques, with a focus on poorly defined issues and concepts and, if necessary, the invention of new terms to designate them, organised into coherent systems. This less urgently perceived requirement stems from the progress made in codicological research in recent decades, particularly in fields such as the study of paper and watermarks, 'complex' codices, rulings and layouts. I have recently proposed an example of this new approach, which is not represented in the *Vocabulaire codicologique* and other glossaries based on its structure; I shall return to this shortly.[16]

It would be misleading to view electronic management of codicological knowledge and the production of new research as opposing practical and scientific needs. In fact the creation of a glossary of key terms such as those most frequently used in manuscript catalogues can only occur as the result

[11] Muzerelle 1985, 8: 'La notice explicative consacrée à chaque mot ou expression devait, selon la comparaison dont il usait lui-même [i.e. Charles Samaran], demeurer ausssi concise, objective et rigoureuse, qu'une définition du Petit Larousse. Et c'est à quoi nous avons tâché en nous défendant toujours expressément d'introduire tout développement ou considération de type historique, géographique ou typologique. Les explications techniques, elles-mêmes, ont été restreints à ce qui était strictement nécessaire pour l'intelligence du terme en question' .

[12] See the very close publication dates of the following recent introductions to codicology: Maniaci 2002, 2005^2; Agati 2003 and 2009; Géhin 2005.

[13] Gumbert 2010, Preface.

[14] The point on this topic, with a detailed discussion of the single terms, is made by Andrist, Canart and Maniaci 2013; see also Andrist, Canart, and Maniaci 2010 (where the Medieval codex is compared to a LEGO game, each brick representing a stage of its construction or further transformation) and Gumbert 2004 (with a temptative English terminology for the 'stratigraphy' of the codex).

[15] http://vocabulaire.irht.cnrs.fr/., now integrated into the application 'Codicologia', http://codicologia.irht.cnrs.it.

[16] Maniaci 2008, 197–205.

of reflection on the conceptual and practical limitations of the vocabulary in use. This is also proved by the failure of a proposal made a few years ago at a London conference to address the creation of a basic English terminology in a pragmatic form using invented terms to fill the most glaring gaps.[17]

2. How to proceed?

Once the objectives and beneficiaries of the terminologist's activities have been defined, he or she still has to make some delicate choices such as the delimitation of the field of interest, the methods of survey and selection from the existing lexicon, the possible creation of new terms, the criteria for sorting entries, and the wording of definitions. Because most of these subjects have already been treated by all the authors of codicological terminologies, including myself, I will merely summarize the main issues, with some additional considerations:

Defining the field

Although many, if not most, collections of technical terms are inspired by the immediate needs of personal research, every systematization of technical terminology should be based on a census of the vocabulary in use. This is achieved by analysis of existing publications; in some sectors nowadays it can be done with special software. In any case, the field to be covered must first be defined. I have recently shown that the attempt to identify objective criteria for a codicological lexicon must inevitably admit the existence of a 'zone of discretion', the size of which will depend on the topics.[18] Even though an excess of enthusiasm led me about 15 years ago to comprise in my vocabulary a number of marginally relevant terms – which attracted some criticism – I remain convinced that a reasonably inclusive attitude is preferable to a rigidly restrictive one. The decision to include the names of the most common pests affecting wood and paper, which are distantly related to the book, in a chapter on preservation and restoration seems to me less sinful than excluding, under some criterion of relevance, the rich vocabulary of the machinery and tools used in paper manufacturing, as if it were irrelevant to the codicological description of the paper itself.

Collecting and selecting terms

The selection of terms also involves a bit of healthy pragmatism. Only in artificial languages does each term correspond to a single abstract definition within a fixed hierarchy. In the case of manuscript terminology, examination of the sources produces a hybrid mix of technical and non-technical terms that are lexically and conceptually inconsistent even when they are not drawn from other languages: this occurs as a result of eclectic use of foreign words – notably terms imported into Italian from French such as *lisière*, *mise en page* or *calque* (favoured by historians of book decoration), and literal translations of terms from other languages.[19] To address this varied lexical ensemble, terminological theory offers a choice of opposites: a descriptive or a normative approach. The descriptive approach considers technical terminology as a systematization that derives spontaneously from actual use of a special vocabulary in a given context – a view that promotes respect for the inconsistencies of a language by registering synonyms, homonyms and obsolete terms with a view to reflecting the natural tendency of the lexicon to variation and renewal. The normative approach, on the other hand, seeks to unify the established terminology artificially, a task proposed and supported in some sectors by national and international agencies and associations. In the case of book terminology, which has remained on the margins of the debate that has developed around other scientific languages,[20] it seems to me that such rigid contradistinction should be mitigated by adopting a more flexible attitude than the strictly descriptive stance of the *Vocabulaire* and its Italian and Spanish homologues. In fact the artificial regularization of a living lexicon consisting of contributions from various origins does not suit a small specialist community such as codicologists, who work in various local scientific traditions and are not particularly open to experimentation, and who are inclined to employ a variety of expressive usages. Yet it seems to me that the current context, which is characterized by rapid globalization and dominated by new and increasingly urgent requirements for information retrieval, justifies a more proactive attitude, at least in relation to the basic terminology normally used in cataloguing descriptions.[21] The aim of describing what is observed as objectively and uniformly as possible is to facilitate the retrieval of information in a given category and to aid comparisons, respect for tradition

[17] *An English Codicological Vocabulary* (*an English Language Version of the Vocabulaire codicologique*), London, 8–10 July, 2004 (the programme may still be consulted at http://ies.sas.ac.uk/cmps/events/conferences/2003-2004/Vocab/index.htm).

[18] Without necessarily sharing the extreme position of Biel 2008, VIII: 'the main principle of selection operating here was my own interests and knowledge'.

[19] For the 'physiognomy' of Italian terminology (with observations which can be extended to other languages) see Maniaci 2008, 5–7. Interesting remarks on the criteria underlying the construction of the German vocabulary of book decoration have been formulated by Jakobi-Mirwald 2011, an unpublished speech delivered at the conference cited above, fn. 1.

[20] I refrain from giving an – even partial – account of the bibliography concerning non-codicological terminology, which is too rich and diverse, as well as very far from my specific skills.

[21] My opinion differs under this respect from that expressed by Jakobi-Mirwald 2011.

and defence of linguistic diversity but often has the single effect of generating ambiguity and confusion instead. Consider, for instance, the Italian use of synonyms for 'leaf' such as *foglio* or *carta*, both of which are lexically ambiguous, or the logical sequence *binione – ternione – quaternione – quinione* and the etymologically questionable alternative *duerno – terno – quaterno – quinterno*. In these and other cases it seems to me that the achievement of lexical uniformity is worth attempting, though in some fields – the best example is decoration – the task may at first seem impossible. I remain convinced that no revision or rationalization of the lexicon can be successful unless it is associated with an equally determined effort to harmonize cataloguing protocols, abandoning the unconditional defence of their exceptional variety, in the name of the uniqueness of the manuscript book.[22]

Linguistic invention

The idea that the current codicological lexicon can be modified implies correcting inconsistencies and filling gaps, both of which are delicate and risky tasks that entail different levels of intervention. The first and more conservative operation involves adapting or 'creatively' manipulating existing terms, as cautiously admitted by Muzerelle and more recently Gumbert,[23] with a view to constructing complete and logically consistent terminological sets: in the French sequence *bifeuillet extérieur – bifeuillet médian* or *centrale*, for example, the expression *bifeuillet intermédiaire* can logically be inserted, though it is not documented in any sources.[24] But genuine linguistic invention is a different and more daring matter in that it is intended to fill particular gaps or – more ambitiously – to enrich and organize existing conceptual and terminological sequences by introducing new concepts and proposing new terms to define them. I recently tried to apply this conceptual rather than terminological approach to the description of the quire: in doing so I highlighted the incompleteness and inconsistency of the available family of Italian terms, but the situation is the same in other languages. The example of vocabulary concerning the structure of the quire is particularly telling because almost all the terms needed to describe the relative position of each leaf and page in the *bifolium* and the quire are lacking. To compensate, I had to invent forms of expression such as: i) *bifoglio naturale* ('natural *bifolium*') and *bifoglio artificiale* ('artificial *bifolium*') to designate a *bifolium* obtained by folding a single surface and one obtained by joining two separate surfaces; ii) *fogli solidali* ('joint leaves' of natural *bifolia*) and *fogli coniugati* ('conjoined leaves' of artificial *bifolia*); iii) *pagine solidali* ('joint pages') and *pagine coniugate* ('conjoined pages') belonging to the same face of a natural or artificial *bifolium*; iv) *foglio anteriore* ('front sheet') and *foglio posteriore* ('back sheet') for the first and second of the opposing surfaces of a *bifolium* in the direction of reading; and v) *fogli ante-cucitura* ('pre-seam leaves') and *fogli post-cucitura* ('post-seam leaves') to designate leaves belonging to the first or second half of a quire.[25] Systematic dismantling of the concepts associated with the term 'quire' rapidly produces a hypothetical sequence of terms and definitions that is significantly richer than those in the glossaries published to date.[26] In this case the terminology is clearly not meant to impose premature use of an artificial lexicon: it is intended to stimulate enrichment through logical organization. The risk of error must not be underrated. In 1996, influenced by research I was conducting with Frank Bischoff, I coined and included in my glossary the expression *in quarto longitudinale* ('as a longitudinal *quarto*') referring to a hypothetical mode of subdividing parchment sheets, but (after more than 15 years) its application has not yet been validated by archaeological evidence.[27]

Organization of terms

Specialist terminologies, which are logically structured collections of concepts, tend to be presented in thematic order rather than the strictly alphabetical order typical of general vocabularies. As we know, the glossaries inspired by Muzerelle's *Vocabulaire* all faithfully follow the structure of their prototype with a view to harmonizing different linguistic and conceptual systems. But this approach, which I have long supported, involves the risk of forcing research into a system that is too rigid and inevitably outdated. The emergence of alternative systems such as that proposed by Peter Gumbert therefore appears to be justified, though the prospect of alignment between different languages may be further complicated in the future.

Definitions

The problems of constructing definitions, which I tried to summarise earlier, are as numerous and delicate as those of

[22] Another source of recurring ambiguity is the confusion between an instance of alignment and rationalization of the terminology used in different languages and the need for its strict lexical normalization, which is essential to allow automatic searches in catalogues and collections of images: in this second perspective, the choice between semantically equivalent alternatives such as, in Italian, '*specchio di scrittura*' and '*specchio scrittorio*' becomes unavoidable.

[23] Muzerelle 1985, 12; Gumbert 2010, Preface.

[24] Muzerelle 1985, 96 (313.16, 313.17, 313.18).

[25] The definitions are given in Maniaci 2008, 199–200.

[26] Other examples of this same approach have already been given: for mediaeval paper, see Ornato, Munafò, and Storace 1995, 4–12 (and also Ornato 1995, 1–3); for the layout of texts accompanied by commentaries see Sautel 1999, 17–31.

[27] Bischoff, and Maniaci 1996, 305 ff.; Maniaci 2008, 127.

selecting and organizing terms.[28] Again, I will draw attention to two points.[29] The first concerns the choice between a purely terminological perspective, which limits the wording to elements that are strictly essential to the definition of the item, with reference where necessary to terms defined elsewhere, and an encyclopaedic approach, which tends to incorporate inessential information in order to clarify the properties or usage of a given term or to outline the essential knowledge concerning it. An example is the (perfectible) terminological definition of *bifolium* in the *Vocabulaire codicologique*:

> Bifeuillet (bf.)
> Bifolio (-lium)
> Diplôme
> *Feuillet double
> *Double feuille
> Pièce rectangulaire de parchemin, papier…, pliée en son milieu pour former deux feuillets.[30]

This is to be compared with the encyclopaedic definition more recently proposed by Gumbert:

> bifolium
> a sheet ((b) or (c)), folded in the middle so as to form two leaves.
> The two leaves are conjoint or conjugate leaves (each being the conjoint or conjugate leaf of the other); they are respectively the anterior and the posterior leaf.
> A convenient way of mentioning e.g. ‘ff. 26 and 29, that are conjoint’ is to print ‘ff. 26^29’.[31]

Apart from the fact that both definitions ignore the existence of artificial bifolia as defined above, they seem to me equally eligible provided they are clearly distinguished and systematically applied.

The second point concerns the difficulty of conceiving perfectly accurate definitions, even – or perhaps especially – for apparently simple notions such as ‘book’, which has been the subject of several more or less convincing attempts. Compare, for example, the version offered by Muzerelle’s *Vocabulaire*:

> Livre
> Assemblage portatif d’éléments présentant une surface plane, sur lesquels un texte peut être écrit de façon durable.[32]

and a more recent proposal by myself and two colleagues, arrived at after several tentative versions:

> Livre
> Objet transportable destiné à accueillir, partager et transmettre des contenus immédiatement lisibles de façon ordonnée et durable.[33]

The apparently minor innovations of the second definition consist of: i) explicit mention of the fundamental aim of the book – to host, share and transmit content – which does not necessarily imply a text; ii) the requirement that the content be ordered, which makes the definition inapplicable to loose leaves and drafts in which the sequence of leaves can be freely altered after writing; and iii) replacement of the adjective ‘portable’ with ‘transportable’ in order to include the possibility of moving very large and heavy books that were meant to be read or consulted *in situ*.

3. Towards a plurilingual lexicon

At this point the notion of a multilingual terminology, suggested long ago by the Comité de paléographie but soon dismissed as premature, deserves separate discussion. Christine Jakobi has recently dealt with this issue[34] and in general I share her observations, particularly the assumption that the translation of a whole terminology – or its harmonization with that of another language – is for various reasons of language and content an impossible and ultimately unnecessary task. I think, however, that it is feasible and desirable to build a glossary of key terms, with parallels in several languages, even if Jakobi’s courageous but problematic attempt on the vocabulary of book decoration convinces me that it would be best to postpone the enterprise pending fuller reflection on each individual language.

4. A possible new horizon?

Is it better to circumscribe rigidly the boundaries of a technical language, or to trespass into more or less closely related sectors? Is it better to reflect the variety of the existing lexicon, or to run the risk of normalizing it? Is it preferable simply to record gaps and inconsistencies, or to use some creativity to correct and supplement terminology established over time? Is it preferable to limit definitions to essentials, or to enrich them with detail? Is it better to preserve the specificity of individual languages, or to force them into a common system, reducing variety in order to promote common usage? These questions highlight the limitations of the traditional

[28] See Maniaci 2007, 1–15.

[29] Other paradigmatic examples have been proposed by Jakobi-Mirwald 2011.

[30] Muzerelle 1985, 91 (311.03): the Italian definition (Maniaci, 1996, 1982, 125) opens with the specification ‘unità costitutiva del fascicolo’, which now appears to me inappropriate.

[31] Gumbert 2010.

[32] Muzerelle 1985, 57 taken exactly in the Italian and Castilian versions.

[33] Andrist, Canart, and Maniaci 2013.

[34] Jakobi-Mirwald 2009, 1–8.

form of the printed glossary. As I have argued elsewhere in detail, a solution to this impasse might emerge from the construction of a new digital resource that combines different perspectives, needs and uses.

I am not referring to the straightforward transposition of paper dictionaries into electronic format, following the *Vocabulaire* online, but to the construction of a knowledge management system designed to overcome the rigid conception of book terminology based on abstract and binding criteria of uniqueness, consistency and stability.

The switch from a terminological approach to an integrated knowledge database would make it possible to combine different levels of content:

- terminology, returned to its specific function of producing concise and accurate definitions purged of extraneous or redundant content;
- an encyclopaedic dictionary intended to extend, contextualize and update the basic information provided by the definitions; this aspect is crucial to encourage the development of terms not currently available in one or more languages;
- historical lexicography aiming to collect and organize ancient, medieval and recent terminology that has been superseded by modern research;
- a reference bibliography, enabling the researcher to refer to sources attesting the use of each term, which may include quotations to give the context in which it appears and references to external sources such as the digital libraries that are more and more widely available online;
- iconographic documentation, intended to integrate verbal definitions rather than replace them; and
- new research, which would lead to the creation of new and innovative terminological proposals.

The 'encyclopaedic dictionary of manuscript terminologies' I have in mind would be fully multilingual, with each language – and not only Western languages – treated as an autonomous system and connected to the other languages through the use of symbols graduated according to the nature and limits of the suggested parallels.

The advantages of this approach may be summarized by the word 'flexibility':

- Flexibility means conceiving terminological activity as a work in progress with a view to revising, correcting and updating the available vocabulary. The changes could be documented in notes to clarify the way they reflect the evolution of knowledge or the ongoing debate among scholars.
- Flexibility implies the possibility of accessing information by various means without being bound by a single system. The database allows for the coexistence of a logical classification – appropriate site maps would have to be constructed – with an alphabetical classification that would make it possible, among other things, to extract and display thematic glossaries with equivalents in different languages, and with a multidirectional and hypertextual classification that enables navigation through terminological entries containing hyperlinks, images and quotations.
- Flexibility implies the rejection of a rigid approach to the selection of terms and to the wording of definitions. Several different definitions may be included for concepts whose interpretation is still controversial or not yet fully elucidated.
- Flexibility entails a certain freedom in the demarcation of disciplines and the possibility of incorporating terms from related disciplines and of linkages to external resources.
- Lastly, flexibility means that new graphic, iconographic and textual materials can be integrated as they become available on the internet.

In concluding this paper I cannot conceal a vague sense of unease. Having attempted – with the recklessness of youth – to produce codicological terminology, I have also helped to increase the speculation that has hampered the long-standing project of a multilingual lexicon. As happens in other fields[35], there is a risk that theorizing works as an alibi to obscure tardiness in achieving results. Although I am convinced that international scientific cooperation is the only way to ensure the survival of manuscript research, enterprises such as the *Catalogues des Manuscrits Datés* clearly illustrate the difficulties of multinational institutional cooperation in the absence of a supranational documentation and research entity that has the authority to impose common standards and operational criteria and support them with financial and logistical inputs. For the same reasons, the electronic manuscript terminology may be in danger of being no more than a pleasant utopian dream.

[35] I refer for instance, as regards Italy, to the field of manuscript cataloguing, where – with rare but worthy exceptions – the theoretical debate developed in recent years has been more intense and lively than the projects sponsored by universities and other public institutions (see for instance Palma 2003, 333–351).

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Forum

Hand-Writing Styles in Early Chinese Manuscripts

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A. Preliminaries

Since the early 1970s Chinese archaeologists (and tomb robbers) have uncovered fairly large numbers of manuscripts dating from the centuries just before and just after 221 BCE, the year of the first political unification of China into an empire. The majority of these manuscripts are written on bamboo strips, less frequently on silk or wood. The earliest of the finds date from approximately the second half of the fourth century BCE; with rare exception earlier excavated or discovered texts are either epigraphic or inscriptional, that is, written on hard, durable materials. The manuscripts come from many different places, representing many different kinds of content. Generally speaking, we can identify two large categories of manuscript based on content, (i) literary and (ii) non-literary. Literary manuscripts include works that are known from the transmitted tradition, either because they are manuscript versions of transmitted texts proper or because their content, while not matching the text of any known transmitted work precisely, reflects literary or historical themes familiar from the received literary tradition.[1] Most of the discovered manuscripts that fall into the literary category are of this type. In only a very small number of cases does the main content of a literary manuscript not find a reflection somewhere in the received literary tradition.[2] Among literary manuscripts four corpora stand out as having so far attracted the most attention from students and scholars alike. These are, in the order in which they have become available to the scholarly public:

Silk manuscripts from Mawangdui 馬王堆, ca. 200 BCE, (Mawangdui tomb itself closed in 168 BCE) discovered in the early 1970s and first announced in July, 1974.[3]

Fig. 1: Mawangdui *Laozi* silk *jia* 甲 manuscript fragments.[4]

[1] Because Chinese texts have been transmitted largely in printed form from about 1000 A.D., manuscripts have played a comparatively minor role in traditional Chinese textual criticism and textual studies generally. The scholarly response to the discovery and availability of early Chinese manuscripts in recent decades has been to see this material not as integrally linked to the tradition of printed texts, forming a single line of textual transmission, but rather as a kind of newly recognized ancillary counterpart to traditional text history. It has become customary in the study of early and mediaeval Chinese texts to recognize 'transmitted, received texts' and 'excavated, manuscript texts' as distinct, complementary kinds of text forms.

[2] There are, to be sure, minor passages in many of these literary manuscripts, the content of which is not known from the transmitted corpus, but these unknown passages typically constitute parts of larger textual units that are generally familiar from the received tradition, if only because of names and events mentioned.

[3] Hunansheng Bowuguan 1974, 39–8, 63.

[4] Guojia Wenwuju 1980, color plate 1. This is the so-called '*jia* 甲 [i.e., "A"] manuscript', chronologically the first of the two silk manuscripts found at Mawangdui, usually thought to be about thirty years earlier than the second one. See illustration two for an example of the second Mawangdui silk manuscript.

Fig. 2: Mawangdui *Laozi* silk *yi* 乙 manuscript fragment.[5]

[5] See Guojia Wenwuju 1980, color plate 2. This is the so-called '*yi* 乙 [i.e., "B"] manuscript', chronologically the second of the two silk manuscripts found at Mawangdui. The earlier one (fig. 2) is called '*jia* 甲', and is about thirty years earlier than this one.

Bamboo strip manuscripts from Guodian 郭店, Hubei province, ca. 300 BCE, discovered in the 1990s and published in 1998.[6]

Fig. 3: Guodian, '*Zi yi*' 緇衣 ('Dark Attire'), str. 01.[7]

Bamboo strip manuscripts from the Shanghai Museum corpus ca. 300 BCE, purchased on the antiquities market in Hong Kong, provenance and discovery therefore of uncertain date and locale; published to date in nine nearly-annual installments, 2001–2012.[8]

Fig. 4: Shanghai, '*Zi yi*' 緇衣 ('Dark Attire'), str. 01.[9]

[6] See Jingmen Shi 1998, 1–2.

[7] See Jingmen Shi 1998, 17. Note that the image is of a single unbroken strip that has been photographically divided into three pieces as a *mise en page* practical matter.

[8] See Ma Chengyuan 2001, 1–4, for the initial brief account of the purchase and scope of the collection. Apart from this, the acquisition of these strips by the Shanghai Museum was announced in the *Wen hui bao* 文匯報 newspaper on 5 January, 1999, pp. 28–29. I am grateful to Ms. Sun Yingying 孫瑩瑩 (University of Washington) for informing me of this newspaper announcement. Volumes two through nine, all edited nominally by Ma Chengyuan, appeared in 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2011 and 2012.

[9] Ma Chengyuan 2001, 45. As with figure three, the image here is of a single unbroken strip that has been photographically divided into seven pieces.

Bamboo strip manuscripts from the Tsinghua University collection, which, like their Shanghai Museum counterparts, were purchased on the antiquities market in Hong Kong and are therefore of undocumented provenance and discovery. On the basis of the physical appearance and shape of the bamboo strips themselves and the distinctive features of the orthography, the Chinese scholars charged with editing this corpus of material have determined that they are mid to late Warring States period manuscripts, that is, roughly the late fourth century BCE, about the same date as the Guodian and Shanghai manuscripts mentioned above (Li Xueqin 2010,1–4).

Left and up: Fig. 5: Tsinghua '*Jin teng*' 金縢 ('The Metal-bound Coffer') str. 01-02 (right–left).[10]

[10] Li Xueqin 2010, 75. On the reverse of the last bamboo strip of this manuscript is written a title that says *Zhou Wu wang you ji Zhou gong suo zi yi dai wang zhi zhi* 周武王又[有]疾周公所自厶[以]弋[代]王之志 ('Zhou gong's intention to offer himself in place of the king when king Wu of Zhou was seriously ill'). This ought strictly speaking be used as the name of the manuscript, but because it is somewhat unwieldy and because the content of the manuscript matches very closely the well-known

The non-literary manuscript category includes medical and legal texts, divinatory works, hemerological records, civil and military administrative orders and records, etc. Three of the best known and most widely studied collections of such manuscripts are:

Han period (206 BCE – 220 CE) wooden slip documents from Edsen Gol (Chinese Juyan 居延, Inner Mongolia), known generally as Juyan Hanjian 居延漢簡.[11]

Fig. 6: Wooden strip, administrative document dated to 95 BCE.[12]

Bamboo strip manuscripts from Baoshan 包山, Hubei province, ca. 300 BCE, excavated in late 1986 and early 1987, published in 1991.[13]

Fig. 7: Baoshan divinatory document, str. 234.[14]

'*Jin teng*' ('The Metal-bound Coffer') chapter of the *Shu jing* ('Classic of Documents'), it has become common to refer to the manuscript by the name '*Jin teng*.'

[11] See Lao Gan 1957, 1–2; Loewe 1967, 1; Lao Gan 1986.

[12] Cf. Lao Gan 1957, vo. 1, plate 01, transcription at Lao Gan 1986, 1.

[13] See Hubeisheng 1991, 1–2.

[14] Hubeisheng 1991,vol. 2, plate 193; transcription at Hubeisheng 1991, vol. 1, 368. As with illustration three, the image here is of a single unbroken strip that has been photographically divided into four pieces as a practical matter.

Bamboo strip manuscripts from Zhangjiashan 張家山, Hubei province, ca. 200 BCE (Zhangjiashan tomb itself closed in 186 BCE or shortly thereafter), excavated in late 1983 and early 1984, published in 2001.[15]

Fig. 8: Zhangjiashan, '*Yin shu*' 引書 ('Breathing & Stretching Exercises') str. 01.[16] (left: obverse, with textright: reverse, with title)

[15] See Zhangjiashan 2001, 1–2.

[16] See Zhangjiashan 2001, 109, transcription and notes at Zhangjiashan 2001, 285.

B. Hand-writing style

In his handbook on Latin palaeography the late Bernhard Bischoff recognizes 'two fundamentally different techniques of writing… the calligraphic and the cursive'. The former, he states, is 'proper to bookhands', the latter 'to the whole spectrum of everyday scripts'.[17] Bischoff offers a number of very precise details about the Latin writing techniques that characterize the differences between these two styles. These concern the diachronic development of the letters of the Latin alphabet, in particular the relation between the old cursive and the development of Latin uncial and half-uncial letters. In drawing a distinction between these two writing techniques, apart from the shape of the letters themselves, he also takes into account such things as the preparation and shape of the quill, the angle at which the writing instrument is held relative to what is being written on, the care with which the writing instrument is or is not raised from the writing surface to produce discretely executed or cursively linked letters, etc.[18]

In order to consider scripts other than Latin in this regard we might generalize the difference between the two techniques roughly in the following way.

Book-hand / calligraphic writing: formal, executed with care, attention to varying pressure on the writing surface and angle of the writing instrument and to general orthographic precision; neat and often elegant orthography, with attention to the appearance of the manuscript as a whole.

Cursive writing: informal, casual, executed without apparent conscious attention to the distinction between broad and fine strokes, little or no attention to varying pressure or angle of the writing instrument, minimal care given to orthographic precision, graphs are 'run on', often becoming linked one to the next; not neat and rarely elegant, apparent lack of concern with the appearance of the finished product.

In a nutshell, we can say that book-hand script is *refined*, cursive writing is *utilitarian*. Bischoff suggests that the contrast in writing technique can be correlated with a contrast in the kind of document written; the refined book-hand script was used chiefly 'in elevated higher grades of writing' and the utilitarian cursive was in 'daily use', written by 'everyone'.[19]

Can we identify anything in early Chinese manuscripts similar to this two-way distinction in early Latin writing technique and its possible correlation with manuscript content? If so, what are the implications of such a distinction? Illustrations one through five above are all passages from

[17] See Bischoff 1986, 51.

[18] See Bischoff 1986, 51-53.

[19] See Bischoff 1986, 53.

well-known literary texts. The form of writing in each case, though different in some places one from the other, seems overall to fit the criteria for refined book-hand status. Illustrations six through eight by contrast are all passages from non-literary works and would seem to be written in a comparatively casual, everyday utilitarian style. The writing technique associated with literary works in these examples, which I am suggesting might be called a refined, book-hand script, shows, among other features, a more regular and more generous use of space between individual characters than do the utilitarian scripts of the non-literary pieces. In the case of the Mawangdui silk manuscript, we find also red lines separating the vertical columns of characters. These are features that enhance the appearance of the manuscripts as physical objects; they are not characteristics of the actual 'letter-form' orthography *per se*. This suggests that the distinction between refined and utilitarian writing techniques embraces more than simply character form, and is a feature of manuscripts in all of their physical as well as orthographic respects.[20]

The distinction between refined script and utilitarian should not be confused with the general historical development, as it is traditionally understood, of the so-called Han *li shu* 隸書 'clerical' script emerging out of the pre-Han *xiao zhuan* 小篆 'small seal' script. The term 'clerical script' refers to that Qin-Han-period form of writing that is supposed eventually to have become the Han 'standard,' and should not be allowed to imply a use only for clerical, i.e., administrative documents.[21] The script of illustration six, the wooden administrative document dated internally to 95 BCE, might be thought to reflect nothing more than the evolution of writing in general from the forms seen in the manuscripts of one or two centuries earlier, irrespective of the literary ~ non-literary distinction. But the same suspicion cannot be maintained for the scripts of the manuscripts shown in illustrations seven and eight, the first of which is essentially contemporaneous with the Guodian and Shanghai manuscripts and the second of which is contemporaneous with the Mawangdui manuscripts.

Conversely, the most frequently made observation about the script of the two Mawangdui silk manuscripts is that the second of these two silk manuscripts (illustration two), dating from the early second century BCE, uses the Han *li shu* 隸書 'clerical' script, whereas the first (illustration one), dating from the late third century BCE, about a generation earlier, is written in the pre-Han *xiao zhuan* 小篆 'small seal' script, as are the bamboo strips of about a century earlier (figures three, four and five). The later of the two Mawangdui silk manuscripts, using the *li shu* 隸書 'clerical' script, is all the same very much a literary text, and its overall appearance, including the fact that it is written on silk in the first place, conforms to the general criteria for a formal-hand manuscript. This example shows that the terms *xiao zhuan* 小篆 'small seal' (pre-Han) and *li shu* 隸書 'clerical' (Han) refer to script types, distinguished by changes in both graphic structure, stroke ductus and minor calligraphic features that can be observed in the development of the writing from the fourth to the second centuries BCE, and that this distinction is separate from the matter of formal vs. quotidian orthography.[22] The general point to be considered is that manuscripts with literary content and qualities are typically written in a refined calligraphic style and manuscripts of an administrative, legal, medical, calendrical or other prosaic kind tend to be written more informally, in a utilitarian style. The distinction is not absolute, of course. Based on an informal and limited survey, it seems that while literary manuscripts are rarely found written in a casual, quotidian script, non-literary manuscripts

20 It is also possible, perhaps likely, that the preparation and quality of the writing medium varies directly with the distinction between a literary text in a refined script and a non-literary text in a quotidian script, but for the early Chinese manuscripts, to which very few scholars have direct physical access, this speculation is difficult to assess.

21 See Qiu Xigui 2000, 89–130, which presents the traditional view in detail and Galambos 2006, 31–63, where the considerable uncertainties about the traditional view are set out.

22 Chen Jiangong and Xu Min in the preface to their dictionary of Qin-Han manuscript characters suggest that the difference between the two Mawangdui *Laozi* silk manuscripts is not one of time, but is rather a distinction between a 'cursive' *li shu* 'clerical script' (the A manuscript) and a 'formal' *li shu* 'clerical script' (the B manuscript). (Chen and Xu 1991, 3) To be sure, it is generally recognized that there were diverse forms of the *li shu* 'clerical script', some comparatively early examples overlapping with the 'late' use of the *xiao zhuan* 'small seal' script in the third century BCE. To my eyes the difference between the *Laozi* A manuscript and the B is more than a cursive vs. a formal *li shu*; the structure of some of the commonest characters is substantially different in one from the other. In the end whether we call the script as it is found in these two Mawangdui silk manuscripts both *li shu* or one a 'late' *xiao zhuan* and the other *li shu* is of less moment than how we understand the features of the script for purposes of dating the manuscripts and assessing the status that the scribes and users attributed to them. Yan Lingfeng in an early study of the Mawangdui *Laozi* silk manuscripts, while identifying the script of the A manuscript as *xiao zhuan* 'small seal' script and that of the B as *li shu* 'clerical script', recognizes that these two forms of writing were contemporaneous with each other in the late third century BCE, and thinks, contrary to the prevailing view, that both manuscripts are pre-Han. (Yan Lingfeng 1976,1–2) The Chen and Xu characterization of the scripts of the two manuscripts as 'cursive' *li shu* in one case and 'formal' *li shu* in the other raises the problem of how to establish objective definitions of something as inherently subjective as judging a 'cursive' from a 'formal' script. At the extremes, of course, where the differences would seem to be objectively discernible, it is easy to point to one or the other. But neither of the two Mawangdui manuscripts is in my view an extreme example of either a cursive or a formal script, though both seem closer to the 'refined' quality of a formal script that tends to be found in manuscripts of literary works, which both the A and B manuscripts are, than to anything that could be considered an everyday casual script.

may not so infrequently be found written in a formal, refined book-hand. In other words the distinction between refined and everyday script and its correlation with manuscript type is somewhat uneven, tending in one direction more than the other; literary manuscripts and a refined script almost always go together, but the association of non-literary manuscripts with a casual, quotidian script is less predictable.

These observations may seem unsurprising, even trivial, but if the correlations can be sustained generally by examination of a large number of manuscripts, we might be able to gain some measure of understanding of the contemporaneous attitude toward written documents overall. What did the people involved with these manuscripts, – the people who compiled them, the people who ordered them produced, the scribes who wrote them, the people who read or recited them, the people who included them in tombs, etc, – think about the physical object itself, such features as its appearance, its production, its utility and its cultural status, apart from its content?[23] If the distinction between a refined and a utilitarian writing technique can in fact be recognized in a large number of early Chinese manuscripts, then we can turn the implication around, without too great a risk of circularity, and infer that a manuscript written in a careful, refined, book-hand should be understood as having some measure of high status among its creators and users, even if its content to our eyes does not at first suggest such 'literary' merit.[24] The more general, typological question with respect to manuscript cultures, is whether such a basic, two-way distinction in hand-writing technique, correlated with content, can be identified for manuscripts from other areas and periods and what such a correlation may imply about diverse cultural norms?

[23] There is a further consideration in regard to the bamboo-strip manuscripts that are found in tombs. Xing Yitian has pointed out that the very large numbers of bamboo strips constituting what would seem to be a single manuscript text suggests that such texts were written explicitly for burial with a deceased person. The sheer weight and size of such a single manuscript, when as many as a hundred bamboo strips are strung together into a single physical unit, would make it very unwieldy and its actual use very difficult. For this reason Xing Yitian speculates that such manuscripts as are found in tombs were written just for burial, and not for any actual use by a living person. (Xing Yitian 2011, 21–23).

[24] The *qiǎn cè* 遣冊 'record of tomb contents', for example, of Mawangdui tomb three consists of over four hundred bamboo strips, each recording the quantity of one item included in the tomb. While this can in no way be considered a 'literary' text, much of it is written all the same in a script that would appear to be more akin to an elegant book-hand than to an everyday utilitarian style, and in that respect befitting a funerary document. See He Jiejun 2004, plates XX–LI. I am grateful to Ms. Sun Yingying for pointing out to me that, because some of the strips appear more elegant than others, the script on these four-hundred plus strips suggests that they were not all written by the same person.

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