

Introduction to the Conference

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Dear Colleagues, dear Friends, dear Participants,

welcome to the first international conference on manuscript cataloguing in a – very wide – comparative perspective! In this introductory address, we will shortly summarize the reasons that led us to convey specialists of a wide range of Eastern and Western book cultures, with diverse interests and scientific backgrounds, to confront on the state, main methods and perspectives of manuscript description; to present their own cataloguing approaches and discuss the reasons for their adoption and compared relevance; to reflect together on the current challenges and further developments of manuscript cataloguing, both in ‘traditional’ print and in electronic media.

For a long time, manuscript catalogues were mainly or exclusively made, on the one hand, to help owners and manuscript keepers to know and understand their collection, and, on the other hand, to answer the needs of philologists, historians of manuscript traditions or text and art historians, that is scholars who primarily work on the textual, musical or iconographic contents of the manuscripts. Until recent times, the material characteristics of manuscripts in codex form have long been systematically neglected, while those of other book forms have been completely ignored. Only since the late nineteenth century other material details have acquired timidly the right to be systematically mentioned: the size of the leaves, the layout of the text (full page or two columns), the style of the decoration, the type of binding (even if not particularly luxurious), the provenance. As for the description of writing and decoration, the variety of choices made by the cataloguers reflects the lack of consensus on a shared palaeographical and art-historical nomenclature: a problem which still persists today, and whose solution doesn’t seem to be close at hand.

The fact that features other than the contents only gradually – and partially – acquired the right to be mentioned in manuscript catalogues (too often as second-class information meant to provide a context for the transmissions of the contents, and mostly without a clear vision of any other possible utility for research) explains at least partially the large diversity in their choices and ways of description. Only during the last decades, quality and features of writing materials, quire collation, pricking, ruling, layout, ordering

and reference devices, and binding have gradually become the object of increasingly accurate – although not always effective – observation and descriptive efforts.

Parallely, another scientific requirement has made its way, that is the need of drawing systematically from the available catalogues a number of data concerning the material features of the manuscripts, to be exploited with the aid of statistical techniques. The development of ‘statistical codicology’ brought to the fore the poor quantity of the material features described in the catalogues; their discontinuous presence, the variety of descriptive protocols, and the ambiguity of the terms and formulas used with different meanings by different scholars... who did not always show much interest in the practices and terminology adopted by their colleagues.

More recently, as another consequence of the development of codicological studies, the codex itself became, for some scholars, a central object of study: in this new perspective, each of its material features is deemed to be equally relevant and has to find a place in a dynamic historical representation of the whole book. Therefore, the ‘complex structure’ of both medieval and post-medieval codices has been fully recognized, implying the awareness that the exact delimitation of their constituent parts is one of the most crucial tasks for a correct interpretation of their genesis and historical evolution. Scholars have thus become growingly aware that the way data were presented in standard catalogues often did not make it easy for the readers to understand the structure of the codices, and sometimes even gave food to the suspicion that their physical and historical complexity had escaped the attention of the cataloguers themselves. This statement led to the development of a new paradigm in organizing the descriptions, which is penetrating in recent cataloguing projects, although not without resistances and misunderstandings. It is interesting to evaluate how this evolution is reflected in the practice of manuscript cataloguing, through the comparison among different manuscript traditions.

In the meantime, printed catalogues have been gradually complemented, or often replaced, by digital catalogues, increasingly conceived in the form of open databases, intended to host flexible and *in progress* descriptions. ‘Immaterial’ catalogues, extremely varied as regards their promoters, features, and quality of the outcome, were optimistically charged of a number of intrinsic qualities: they were meant to overcome the alternative between detailed and summary descriptions, and greeted as the technological answer to the imposing bulk of yet uncatalogued or inadequately catalogued manuscripts, and to the Herculean effort required for filling the gap. However, some creators of cataloguing databases acted as if piling up

supposedly objective information from all kinds of sources would magically transform it into a coherent picture. It is essential to understand that in digital as in printed catalogues, this cannot be the case: in spite of the many advantages of digital catalogues, some of them look like modern “towers of Babel”. In fact, as it has been rightly pointed out, there are no fundamental differences between printed and digital catalogues, as far as the models and categories are concerned. A digital catalogue can be an analytical or summary one, as well as it can be a good or a bad catalogue, depending on the theoretical choices made by its authors and the way they are practically applied. Despite the existence of old and prestigious cataloguing traditions, both printed and digital catalogues still show a high level of heterogeneity, even within one and the same manuscript culture. The physical features of the manuscripts, including the most basic and recurrent ones – those which are common to different manuscript traditions – are rendered according to a number of different principles and, needless to say, the solutions applied are not all equally convincing. The same is also true for the description of the texts – still unsatisfactory both from the point of view of the identification and the consistent representation of author’s names and titles of their works (but also of other kinds of contents, such as images, other graphic elements, or musical notation). We believe that time is ripe for an organic and internationally shared reflection on how to come out of the *impasse*, reducing the time requested by the cataloguing of each manuscript and yet reaching a comprehensive and scientifically satisfactory knowledge of our common manuscript heritage at an international and intercultural level. The fact that so many of you came from so many places encourage us to believe we are not wrong about the relevance and timeliness of this conference. It also reminds us how vast this field of research can be. This conference is hopefully just a first step into exploring it.

While the description of manuscripts in codex form can benefit from the reflection initiated by Greek and Latin manuscript scholars and cataloguers, and more recently implemented and developed also in other book cultures, a similar progress is still awaited for other book forms – rolls, concertina, palm leaves – which are mostly catalogued in summary and highly variable manners. It is superfluous to underline how the availability of a wider and more systematic collection of bibliological data could contribute to a deeper knowledge of the structure, contents and functions of manuscripts other than the codex, and help to shed light on various aspects of their history and functions that are still unclear or worthy of further study.

As for ‘immaterial’ catalogues, the way to fully exploit the potential of IT in the field of manuscript cataloguing is not as straightforward and simple as one might have expected and hoped, and the transition from printed to digital catalogues is not fully nor satisfactory accomplished. Digital catalogues have a

number of theoretical advantages: they allow, for example, to dilute over time the acquisition of the information concerning a manuscript and to make it usable in a flexible manner, provided that it is collected and rigorously structured according to the same principles. In this perspective, the main task and the priority of the scholars would no longer be to decide each time whether the description to be included in this or that catalogue have to be ‘analytic’ or ‘summary’, but to develop consensus models for comprehensive descriptions, properly formalized and standardized. Consensus model is not intended here simply as an empty box to be filled by different people at different times.

Another question remains: how a scholarly diagnosis of an historical object, done by someone who has seen and analysed it, can be intergrated in the database model? More broadly, how does the notion of “catalogue author” fit in cataloging projects to be done in a database? And what kind of academic recognition can a “database feeder” expect from the scholarly world? The often evoked advantages of e-catalogues – fluidity and flexibility of the contents, hierarchization of information, interactivity, multiplication of research opportunities, and evolutivity – have to confront themselves with a number of theoretical and technical difficulties that require in-depht reflection and call for the development of new solutions. The need is increasingly felt for a sober assessment of the advantages and limitations of digital catalogues and for a thoughtful reflection on their further developments and the conditions to make them durable and useful in a long range perspective. It is hoped a new generation of electronic catalogues allows a more harmonious articulation between descriptions as scholarly assesments and on-line availability of data to be used in various ways. These are some of the challenges posed by the integration and interoperability between on-line catalogues, repositories of digital manuscripts, and bibliographic resources of different kinds, without destroying meaning.

It will of course be impossible to discuss all these issues in detail in the limited space of a conference covering a very wide range of topics and an extensive range of manuscript cultures. Nevertheless, we believe that the comparative, cross-cultural approach is an important added value: not only it allows a synergistic approach to a set of common issues and promotes knowledge and sharing of best practices, but also it requires us to look at the challenges of cataloguing from different and enriching points of view and to exploit the potential for progress deriving from the confrontation with new and stimulating issues. Through a choice of examples and case studies, we wish to pin-point some major issues in manuscript cataloguing, aiming to mutual enrichment and also – where possible – to the identification of realistic objectives of harmonization of approaches and best practices.

For this purpose, the programme of the conference includes examples of recent achievements (and still open problems) in the main manuscript cultures. It should also foster comparative discussion of the methods and strategies which may be applied to the description of the single material and content-related features of manuscript books in the variety of their forms, with examples of good practices and open challenges.

As you may have noticed, we decided not to separate scholarly and cataloguing issues concerning the objects and their features, from digital approaches to them, as if the people dealing with them belonged to two different worlds. On the scholarly level, **on-line databases are only as good as the quality of the data they contain** and thus closely dependant on the skills and qualifications of who produce it; and inversely, it is not enough to produce quality descriptions: adequate digital solutions must also be developed for these descriptions to be not only correctly disseminated and understood, but also to be exploited in new ways, which are not made possible by printed catalogues. This is the reason why each session contains papers both on the features themselves and on the digital treatment thereof.

Some issues however are specifically related to the digital treatment of data. In the new era of semantic web, the need for computers to be able to talk with one another raises new challenges as far as designating the manuscripts and representing their features; the fact of describing manuscripts in datatases – with their many qualities and few defaults – also impacts the way manuscript cataloguing can be done in an efficient and faultless manner. We grouped these issues in the two last sessions of the conference, dedicated to the presentation of some of the existing and still missing tools: these contributions are conceived as an insight into the state and the further developments of electronic cataloguing and digital collections.

At the end of this short introduction, a warm thanks is due to the University of Hamburg, and above all to the CSMC and its tireless animator, Michael Friedrich, not only for hosting the conference, but also for joining us in the organization, together with Alessandro Bausi, who also contributed with his usual and well-known competence and dedication. We are also very grateful to Daniela Niggemeier and Christina Kaminski, who solved all the practical issues and unexpected problems, with inexhaustible patience, efficiency and kindness. Many thanks also to all of you, both speakers from four continents and listeners, for coming to Hamburg and sharing your knowledge and experience with us. Our goal will be fully reached

if, thanks to the papers and hopefully lively discussions, you will leave Hamburg with some new ideas and new questions about the present and future challenges of manuscript cataloguing.