New (and renewed) resources in the field of manuscript description (the 'Syntaxe du codex' and more …)*

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A new resource for manuscript cataloguing

The idea of an introduction to manuscript cataloguing stems from a series of scholarly achievements, conceptual inputs, and methodological debates which in the last few decades have concerned research on archaeology, history and the description of mediaeval books.

We can mention, first of all, a recent and intensive production of new handbooks and introductions to manuscript studies, not confined to the most well-known and documented manuscript cultures (that is, the Greek and the Latin ones), but open to a comparative evaluation of other and less-investigated traditions, even in terms of a sheer quantitative census and summary description of their manuscript witnesses.[1]

In parallel to this, there has been significant progress in the study of the constituent materials and the structural components of the codex, which may greatly affect descriptive practices. In particular, among the new trends in contemporary codicology the recognition of the 'complex structure' of mediaeval manuscripts stands out as one of the most significant achievements. This implies an awareness that the exact delimitation of the constituent parts of a codex is one of the most crucial tasks for a correct interpretation of its genesis and historical evolution (see below).

In the meantime, the traditional form of the printed catalogue is still popular and vital, but it is triggered by a persistent contradiction between the

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* Our contribution, conceived in close collaboration between the two authors, is organized in two sections: the first (by Marilena Maniaci) is the first official anticipation of an ongoing project, concerning the preparation of a new *Introduction to manuscript cataloguing*; the second (by Patrick Andrist) announces the forthcoming publication of an updated English version of our monograph on *La syntaxe du codex*, which will appear hopefully in 2017. — We wish to thank Roderick Saxey for revising our English text.

1 A brief and non-exhaustive list includes Mazal 1986; Ruiz García 1988 and 2002; Lemaire 1989; Déroche et al. 2000 (most recent revised edition, in Italian, Déroche and Sagaria Rossi 2012); Maniaci 2002 and 2005; Agati 2003; Clemens and Graham 2008; Agati 2009; *COMSt* 2015; Cursi 2016.

increase in 'codicological awareness'—which is reflected in more and more detailed and burdensome descriptive protocols—and the troubling awareness of how many yet uncatalogued or inadequately catalogued manuscripts still exist.

As we have looked for a way out of this *impasse*, printed physical catalogues have been gradually complemented or replaced by electronic or intangible ones, which are increasingly numerous and varied as regards their features, their promoters, and their quality. These catalogues were initially saved on mass storage devices, then more and more often compiled and disseminated through the Internet in the form of 'closed' databases, *in-progress* descriptions, or portals and hypercatalogues, complemented by galleries of digital images, bibliographies, discussion forums.

This picture's dynamic nature is counterbalanced by a lack of updated handbooks and introductions which would give an account of the most recent developments of cataloguing theory and would offer practical advice for the cataloguers' work. The few exceptions include useful works whose diffusion is mostly limited to single national contexts[2] or a wide range of other contributions with more limited targets and ambitions, such as the sets of rules connected to specific cataloguing projects.[3]

The volume we are preparing together with Paul Canart aims to fill, at least partially, this gap. Who are its potential readers? First of all, *'militant' manuscript cataloguers*, whatever the category they belong to, be it manuscript librarians, professors and researchers, established and apprentice scholars, or other professionals. Manuscript cataloguers ought to have a good training in the fields of palaeography and codicology, solid knowledge of literary history (which is particularly vast in the case of the so-called 'general' catalogues) and art history; we can add to that, nowadays, a familiarity with IT languages and architectures: basic knowledges and skills that only a long and patient practice allows one to strengthen and refine. Manuscript cataloguing is therefore also a highly formative research activity, which in turn can bring out unexpected discoveries and stimulate new research. Manuscript cataloguers are always faced with the need to make a series of choices, such as: (1) Which features are to be described and which ones are not? (2) How minutely must each feature be described? Which aspects thereof should be addressed? (3) According to which formal rules do they have to be presented? Even in

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2 Petrucci 1984 (2nd edn 2001); Géhin 2005; again AA.VV., again *COMSt* 2015 (chapter 4. *Cataloguing*).

3 Among which, to cite a few examples, [Beaud-Gambier and Fossier] 1977; Iemolo and Morelli 1990; *DFG. Richtlinien* 1992; *Norme per la descrizione uniforme* 2000; Pass 2003; *Guida a Nuova Biblioteca Manoscritta* 2006; De Robertis et al. 2007; Andrist 2007.

a highly unstandardized field, the ultimate goal of the cataloguers' choices should be to produce a description in which the systematic and coherent presentation of the data is accompanied by, but clearly distinct from, their subjective interpretation; this, in order to provide its users with all the elements necessary for understanding as accurately as possible the genesis and structure of the manuscript and to develop a personal judgment on it.

Besides cataloguers, this volume will address the wider and diverse audience of *catalogue users*: not only palaeographers and codicologists, but also philologists and students of manuscript traditions and of ancient and medieval texts and cultures, art historians, and all those who need to read and interpret a manuscript description correctly, so that they may not only find the information they are looking for, but also correctly evaluate its quality and reliability.

Potential users also include, of course, *students and young scholars*: our book aspires to increase their awareness of the importance of manuscript descriptions for the safeguarding of our handwritten heritage—since undescribed or badly described books are particularly exposed to the risk of theft and mutilation—and also aspires to help them develop a critical approach towards the popularizing of manuscript books, which should not be limited to the 'spectacularization' of the richest and finest specimens by imprisoning them in display cases and reducing their exhibition to a single two-dimensional opening.

We also hope that our work may receive the attention of *conservators and restorers of manuscripts*, who are ever more aware that the capacity to make a careful analysis and scholarly description of a manuscript is essential to checking its conditions, to critically evaluating any need for restoration, to defining the most appropriate ways to effect such, and to documenting as clearly and completely as possible each step of the intervention and its final results.

The text of our new *Introduction* is divided into four main sections (fig. 1):
— The first section aims to give a critical overview of the basic features and issues of modern catalography, both in printed and electronic form, concentrating on its most recent achievements and on the major open issues: we briefly treat the main 'models' and 'categories' of catalogues and we give a critical review of the advantages and limits—the 'dreams' and 'nightmares'—of digital catalogues. Although recent catalography has been accused of investing most of its energies in methodological reflection and the development of cataloguing rules rather than in the actual practice of manuscript cataloguing, we believe that there is still a need for theoretical reflection, perhaps even more than in the past. On the one hand, descriptive standards, including the most recent and rigorous ones,

Introduction

1. Theory of cataloguing
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      1.2 Categories of descriptions
      1.3 Categories of catalogues
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      1.3.2 Thematic catalogues
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2. Before describing
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      3.4 History of the codex
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4. Present and future of manuscript description

Appendix – Study cases (examples from catalogues)

Reasoned bibliography

Fig. 1. Provisional table of contents of the English version of *La syntaxe du codex*

do not seem to have been fully acknowledged and translated into practical guidelines; and this holds also for some important achievements in codicological research, such as the aforementioned recognition of the structural complexity of the mediaeval codex. On the other hand, the technological evolution which began at the end of the twentieth century has produced a rapid, as well as chaotic, explosion of projects concerned with the digital conversion of existing printed catalogues, and a more timid yet growing emergence of new and fully digital catalographic enterprises; yet the transition from printed to electronic catalogues cannot be considered fully nor satisfactory accomplished.

— A second section is devoted to what we identify as a 'new codicological awareness' which has led scholars to look at the codex as a 'complex' object (see below).

— A third and more 'practical' section illustrates methods and techniques which may be applied to the description of the so-called 'external' features of the manuscript book (codicological, physical), its 'internal' features (textual, visual) and its 'historical' features. We will offer examples of 'good practices'—without seeking to impose unique solutions—and a (not exhaustive) overview of existing tools (handbooks, dictionaries, introductions to specific categories of manuscripts, collections of texts, repertories of various kind, and so forth). Despite the existence of old and prestigious cataloguing traditions, reflected in rigorous and comprehensive operational standards, one is in fact struck by the extreme level of heterogeneity in the descriptive solutions regarding the physical features of the manuscripts, even for the more basic features (such as the dimensions or the ruling types); this is striking when one considers that the features described are essentially the same in almost all the manuscripts and the various cultural areas, and yet the solutions employed are not all equally convincing. The same is also true for the description of the contents, still quite lacking in regard to the consistent representation of author's names and titles of their works. By sharing remarks and illustrating a few solutions among many possible options, our goal is to make cataloguers aware of the various possibilities and encourage them to define their own practice more coherently, use it systematically, explain it clearly to their readers, and, as a result, more efficiently communicate the book's original structure (including the related contents) and the evolution it has undergone in the course of time.

— The final section returns to the issues and challenges of online catalogues and addresses this from a more technical point of view, in order to draw a picture of the available instruments and possibilities and to give an insight into their further, dizzying developments. An appendix offers a selection of what we consider representative examples of older and more recent catalogues, in both paper and electronic forms.

Although our presentation of the challenges of manuscript cataloguing and the choice of examples will be primarily based on the Greek and Latin traditions, which are most familiar to us, we hope that the volume can also serve as a useful reference tool for those dealing with the description of codices belonging to a wider range of book cultures. Among the stated aims of our work there is in fact that of stimulating a common debate and reflection and a profitable sharing of best practices in order to enable the technically less advanced cataloguing traditions to bridge the gap, but also to stimulate the more established traditions to face new issues and problems.

The English syntax of the codex

It was for a number of reasons that we began to consider publishing a revised English edition of our recent *La syntaxe du codex*.[4] First of all, about a year after the book was printed, we were surprised to receive word from Brepols that it had sold out, mainly because Brepols did not believe the book would garner a great deal of attention and printed a rather limited run.[5] Secondly, we received some interesting and valuable comments from readers or reviewers, which helped us understand that certain points required further clarification and illustration or improvement. Thirdly, we realised that our French prose was not entirely clear to some non-native speakers, to the degree that in some publications our statements were misinterpreted. We wanted therefore to avoid misunderstandings and to broaden the circle of our readership by preparing an English translation of the book. Lastly, the *COMSt* network gave us the opportunity to deepen some points in our reflection. To give but one example, let us mention the typology of the production unit as a tool for arriving at a more nuanced understanding of the history of the codex.

Structural codicology sees the codex as a complex book-object which needs to be understood both from a genetic constitutive perspective (which in our book we analyse on the basis of various 'production units' of a codex, UniProd) and in terms of its subsequent history (based on the retrievable 'circulation units', UniCirc). Each UniProd was once a part of a UniCirc.

We would like to use a simple, fictitious example (fig. 2) to illustrate the potentials of this approach. Let us imagine the following situation:

— Two codices were copied by two different scribes, including blanks at the end of them, on two different kinds of paper. Each codex circulated independently of each other. In our system this would mean that there are two production units and two circulation units, each with its own content and material writing support.

— At a later stage, someone joined the two units into a single new codex, but did not add any new written content. Apart of the new binding, there is no new production unit (neither new content nor new material support), but there is a new circulation unit.

— Later, someone used the blanks at the end of the two original production units to write some poems. This time, we have both a new circulation unit *and* a new production unit, in two parts, including a new hand and two new pieces of content, but no new material writing support.

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4   Andrist, Canart, and Maniaci 2013; see also Andrist, Canart, and Maniaci 2010.

5   Needless to say, we are very grateful to all the members of *COMSt* (among others) who convinced their library to purchase a copy of our volume.
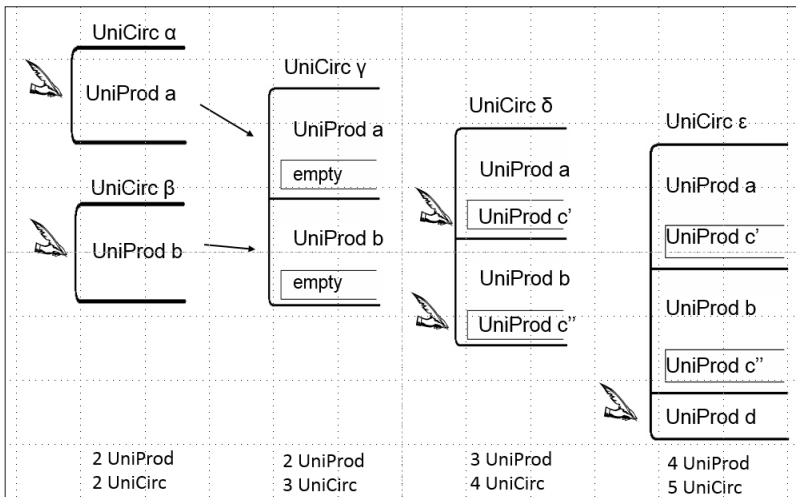
Fig. 2. The transformations of a codex: a fictitious example

— Finally, a while later, someone decided to add a table of contents to the entire codex on a few supplementary folia. This table of contents depends, of course, on the content which already existed in the codex. Thus, there is a new circulation unit (the resulting new book) and a new production unit (the table of contents), including a new hand, a new piece of content, and some new material support.

The important point here is that the four UniProd exemplify three different types of UniProd: (1) UniProd a and UniProd b have their own autonomous materiality, as well as autonomous texts; (2) UniProd c has autonomous texts but no material of its own; (3) UniProd d has its own materiality but no autonomous texts.

In *La syntaxe du codex* we argue that a study of the main discontinuities in the codex should, in most of the cases, allow one to recognize the various probable production units in the codex. Should we come across the codex from our example case, it would be fairly straightforward, since the UniProds can be distinguished according to their hand and sometimes also according to their material support. The goal is now to reconstruct, as far as reasonably possible, the probable stages of the history of this codex by analysing the types of its production units, even when we cannot assign a date to the material support or the writing. In our example case:

— The fact that the content of UniProd d depends upon the rest of the codex implies that it is the last production stage of the codex. In spite of its hav-

ing its own material writing support, there is little chance that it circulated independently because its content cannot stand on its own.

— The fact that both parts of UniProd c occupy the empty spaces at the end of UniProd a and b indicates that they were written *after* the main content of each unit. But why could not UniProd c' be written before UniProd b and UniProd c'', or UniProd c'' before UniProd a and UniProd c'? Or the three of them as one single production unit? Before we answer this question, we need to clarify the relation between UniProd a and UniProd b.

— The fact that both the hands and the material writing supports of UniProd a and UniProd b are different means that they probably were not produced at the same time. This can be possibly further substantiated by the differences in their layout and the ruling pattern. If UniProd a and UniProd b were produced separately, the chances that UniProd c was produced at a later date are much higher than that two scribes together produced one codex in two parts, including some poems by the third hand. Yet, this does not exclude the scenario where the scribe of UniProd c was for example the owner of UniProd a and UniProd b separately, and also added the poems separately. In this case, UniProd c should be split into two UniProd.

— As to the final question, whether we can be sure that UniProd a and Uni-Prod b circulated independently of each other, the answer is unfortunately no. We cannot exclude the possibility that one of them originally circulated as an independent unit, and the other was written later and immediately joined to it, without having ever circulated independently. The analysis of the layout and the quire signatures could give some hints whether this may have been the case or not.

We must stress the fact that these are *probable* stages. If no chronological clues can be obtained from the writing hands or the material support, or if it seems likely that the hands and/or the material support date from around the same time, and if there is an overall coherence in content and layout, one could even argue that what one finds here is four scribes working as a team, three of them using their own stocks of paper.

While it is often possible to reconstruct the history of a codex up to a given point, other details of its past will remain elusive and uncertain. When reconstructing the manuscript history, one should therefore always proceed with caution and avoid jumping to hasty conclusions.

We are having a lot of fun with our new 'LEGO-set', and we cordially invite everyone join us in this stimulating and fascinating game.

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