



**Standing Committee for the Humanities (SCH)
Research Networking Programme (RNP)
Comparative Oriental Manuscripts Studies (COMSt)**

Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies: Results and Outlook

18-20 March 2014

Venue:
Hamburg University
Edmund Siemers Allee 1 (Ost)
20146 Hamburg

Local Organizer:
Evgenia Sokolinskaia

Chair:
Alessandro Bausi

Scientific Report

I. Summary

After the nearly five years of the Research Networking Programme in Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies it is time to draw the first results. The final COMSt conference summarized the achievements of the network, presented the contributions to the forthcoming Handbook in Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies as well as invited prominent international speakers from related fields. They both spoke about the recent achievements in research as well as critically evaluated the COMSt approach and outcome.

A round table session was dedicated to the future outlook: the issues to be explored in new projects; future networking and cooperation; the value of the comparative approach in humanities are among the topics to be discussed by the invited scholars.

The conference was attended by 66 participants from 15 European or associated countries.

II. Description of the scientific content

After the opening words from Alessandro Bausi (Hamburg) as the Head of the Department of African and Ethiopian Studies of the Asia Africa Institute at Hamburg University, in his function as the Chair of the COMSt Steering Committee he highlighted the central issues behind the COMSt concept and aims. He dedicated a great share of attention to the notion of "Oriental" as used within the COMSt network. The COMSt has centred the cultures of Mediterranean Middle East in the broader sense that all had a genetic connection with the European culture and thus, while being all different, all have a great degree of continuity and homogeneity, which could not be said about the cultures of the Far East, left outside of the scope of research activities. Bausi further underlined the new state-of-the-art that was achieved for many COMSt-involved disciplines through the introduction of the comparative perspective.

Evgenia Sokolinskaia (Hamburg), the network Coordinator, subsequently summarised the COMSt mode of operation over the past five years, its organisation and its output (workshops, general bibliography, Newsletters, networking), highlighting the importance of the emerging Handbook.

The overviews of the activities of individual COMSt teams, of the meetings they held, of the problems they encountered and of the results they achieved were presented in detail by the Team Leaders (and Handbook Chapter Editors). Marilena Maniaci spoke about the experience in comparative Oriental codicology. She emphasised the importance of a unified codicological approach to the study of manuscripts of the different traditions, and the positive influence the COMSt experience has had over the studies on the language traditions involved in the network and on general codicology itself. Paola Buzi about the Oriental manuscript cataloguing practices and the way the work of her work team was organised. She specifically mentioned the contribution to comparing and harmonising the efforts in digital cataloguing, and the necessity of a syntactic or archaeological approach to a manuscript description. Caroline Macé and Lara Sels described what the outcome of the workshops, discussions and Handbook editorial work have been in the field of critical (and otherwise scholarly) text editing. Macé dwelt on the importance of the correct definitions (what is critical), and Sels highlighted the importance that became particularly evident during the COMSt work of developing a specific approach to editing



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texts existing in more than one language. Used to be seen as auxiliary material, the text in the source language must receive a more central role when editing the translated version.

The current state of the art as reflected by COMSt activities and the forthcoming Handbook in the field of Digital and Scientific approaches to manuscript studies was illustrated by Jost Gippert (Frankfurt), Caroline Macé (Leuven) and Ira Rabin (Berlin). J. Gippert reviewed the history of encoding to the current standards (Unicode, while the advice was to avoid using the Unicode private area to generate new symbols as this goes against the whole idea of a Unicode font being readable in the same way on any computer). He also presented a methodological overview of digital cataloguing practices, recommending XML encoding against a far too rigid relational database. An important desideratum should be the development of data mining facilities that would scan for metadata and import the information in a cataloguing environment that would thus collect the information on manuscripts already existing on the web. C. Macé illustrated how digital tools (e.g., stemmaweb, collate) can assist a philologist in preparing a critical edition. I. Rabin presented a summary of what knowledge natural scientific analysis, in the first line non-invasive imaging techniques, can provide for manuscript scholars.

Finally, Stéphane Ipert (Arles) and Laura Parodi (Genoa, her communication read by Paul Hepworth) reported on the progress of the COMSt team Conservation and Preservation. S. Ipert illustrated the kinds of damage one meets in Oriental manuscripts, including the damage from human maltreatment, and summarised the course of the workshops he convened during the first three years of the programme. L. Parodi concentrated on the Handbook editorial work.

An important aspect of the conference was the openness of the network to external evaluation. Thus, chapter drafts had been circulated among independent referees of high international repute who deal with traditions other than those covered by COMSt (mainly Latin / West European). Thus, a new comparative dimension was brought in (East-West) and at the same time constructive criticism was received to be considered for the Handbook manuscript revision.

The keynote presenter, Agostino Paravicini Bagliani (Lausanne – Florence), granted the COMSt members and guests a glimpse into the COST Action Medioevo Europeo (<http://www.medioevoeuropeo.org/>) he has been chairing. An experience comparable to that of COMSt but centred on medieval European culture(s), it has offered an additional insight in the networking possibilities in manuscript studies. An important networking research project has been the development of the portal called TRAME: Manuscript texts and traditions of the European Middle Ages (http://www.fefonlus.it/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=230:trame&Itemid=188&lang=en) in order to achieve interoperability between the numerous databases and online services managing information on Latin manuscripts from around Europe. The difficulties of creating a single authority file for authors, or for texts, were highlighted. Several case studies on description and edition of Latin manuscripts were then presented.

A comparative and critical perspective on the results of the Team Codicology was offered by Peter Gumbert (Leiden) who entitled his talk “Our Common Codicology”. He was impressed by the results achieved though it is still a long way to fill the gaps and encouraged the COMSt members to work towards a universal codicological vocabulary to avoid ambiguities in terminology, as imprecise terms may mean imprecise comprehension. He also provided his view on the history of the folding practice in forming manuscript quires.

The work of Team Cataloguing was reviewed by Marco Palma (Cassino), an authority in Latin palaeography and author of catalogues of Latin manuscripts. He was impressed by the sheer numbers of the Oriental manuscripts in question, and above all by the numbers of those yet uncatalogued. He also expressed the doubt in how deep a syntactic manuscript description may be in cases when a large amount of previously unexplored manuscripts must be documented quickly, especially in the conditions of fieldwork.

Francesco Stella (Siena) provided a thorough page by page analysis of the draft of the chapter on Critical and Scholarly Text Editions. He called the attention to the divide between a scholarly edition in general and a critical philological edition in particular. An edition can be archetype-oriented, reader-oriented and transmission-oriented.

The work of the team Digital approaches to manuscript studies was reviewed and enhanced by Manfred Thaller (Cologne). After an overview of his experience in manuscript research online, whether editing or cataloguing, he suggested that the COMSt should develop to a full-blown research infrastructure as it has been a perfect example of the potential of the collaborative research, and this potential should be explored for other major initiatives.

The chapter on Conservation and Preservation was reviewed by Kristin Rose (Cambridge). She underlined that the experiences of treating western manuscripts are very similar to those in dealing with Oriental manuscripts, and that just like the authors of the chapter she is a strong advocate of holistic collection care. She lauded the COMSt initiative for providing a floor of scientific exchange between conservators, codicologists and philologists.

The conference also offered space to short presentations of ongoing projects in manuscript studies not yet introduced to the COMSt community whether during the conferences or on the pages of the Newsletter. The posters included Chiara Barbati (Vienna) on the Christian Sogdian Book Culture, Zisis Melissakis (Athens) on the new online interactive catalogue of the Greek manuscripts of the monastery of St. John on Patmos, Bernard Outtier (Paris) on the Georgian flyleaves in Armenian manuscripts and Samuel Rubenson (Lund) on the Early Monasticism and Classical Paideia project.



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The conference concluded with a round table dedicated to the future possibilities in Oriental manuscript studies, with the participation of all invited speakers and team leaders as well as Michael Friedrich (Hamburg), Christian Brockmann (Hamburg), Arianna Ciula (London).

III. Assessment of the results and impact on the future direction.

The results and the impact on the future direction were summarised during the final round table. The discussion themes included the added value of a comparative approach in the field of manuscript studies; the choice of “Oriental” traditions to be confronted and the terminology to use to define them (the Eurocentric “Oriental” to be avoided); and most importantly the development of a universal language wherever possible, towards an interoperability and interactivity between the various resources. Even a shallow hypercatalogue would also be a great assistance to researchers. Another desideratum should be the development of Guidelines for institutions and archives dealing with manuscripts. Cooperation is also necessary in the field of digital images; an effort should be made in getting libraries digitise their holdings and putting the images online in public domain.

The conference confirmed the impression of the entire COMSt experience that it is most important that the network continues to live and bring fruit. It has been agreed that the cooperation shall be maintained at least in the form of the regular Newsletter and mailing list and ways shall be explored to form an Association of Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies or a similar body that shall form a basis for development of common research initiatives – or as an authority when issuing Guidelines as those mentioned above. A possibility could be also developing a collaborative project within the framework of Horizon2020. Common training in manuscript description and study is needed, and could be a basis for a common application.

The editorial meeting that took place immediately after the conference contributed significantly to the actual taking shape of the forthcoming Handbook of Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies that, it is hoped, shall become an indispensable tool for scholars and students alike.