

FINAL REPORT – MAURO NOBILI

"Cataloguing Projects of Oriental Manuscripts: Evolution of Descriptive Criteria" (COMSt, Team 4)

22-23 September 2010

Uppsala University

On 22-23 September 2010 I attended the Workshop of COMSt Team 4 – Oriental Manuscript Cataloguing entitled "Cataloguing Projects of Oriental Manuscripts: Evolution of Descriptive Criteria". The workshop was held at Uppsala University. Being involved in the project *Series Catalogorum* by the Istituto per l'Oriente (Roma) and the CNRS (Paris), a cataloguing project of collections of "Oriental" manuscripts from different regions of the Islamic world, I found the meeting especially stimulating.

The first day overview of recent catalogues of Ethiopian, Arabic, Syriac, Coptic, Greek, Old Slavonic and Old Russian manuscripts by Witold Witakowski (Uppsala), Irmeli Perho (Copenhagen), André Binggeli (Paris), Paola Buzi (Hamburg) and Per Ambrosiani (Umeå, Sweden), offered a general sketch of many different typologies of descriptions.

At the same time, being acquainted only with West African manuscripts which do not show generally elaborated decorations, I also found interesting Ewa Balicka-Witakowska (Uppsala) contribution. She presented a paper on the cataloguing of illuminated manuscripts from the point of view of an art historian which called my attention on this other dimension of cataloguing.

The overview showed the different criteria used in the presented catalogues. These catalogues span from simple lists of titles and authors to deep descriptions of manuscripts' textual and codicological structure. While the contributors do not seem to agree on the basic fundamental features of a catalogue, my point of view is that a good catalogue, i.e. a full scale catalogue, need to be as more a precise as possible according to the cataloguer's skills and cannot omit a deep analysis of the text – or the texts in case of miscellanea – and an exhaustive bibliography. However, the cataloguer must find a good balance between accuracy and clarity of description, considering that, usually, the catalogue user is not a cataloguer. The discussion that followed the first analysis of catalogues also expressed the need to elaborate authority files for personal names, places and also a database of titles and title variants.

Another issue that was raised during the meeting was the dichotomy between paper catalogues and digital ones. I do not think that the support may modify the cataloguing criteria and any improvement that digital technologies could offer is welcome, such as combining images and

analysis or the elaboration of fascinating systems of displaying data as in Matthew Driscoll's contribution.

However, the widespread accessibility to digital materials should not entail the impoverishment of manuscripts descriptions as some cases show. Furthermore, a case of an online catalogue which gives space to user comments posed the problem of collaboration of specialists in the elaboration of catalogues. My point of view is that, while a need or a chief cataloguer is necessary, it is possible to have more specialists cooperating on the same manuscripts, especially if the textual section is split (and in case, assigning different language sections to different language specialist) from the codicological one. I am at the moment collaborating with a team of three cataloguers for the elaboration of the Kahle collection of Arabic manuscripts (University of Turin), one for the Arabic manuscripts, one for the Turkish manuscripts, and one codicologists, and this "experiment" is proving very useful.

However in my opinion, the main problem emerging from the conference, and undermining the future of the project, is that the members do not share a common cultural background in the field of cataloguing and codicology. Thus the accepted proposal to the Team posed by one of the hosts members to offer a basic bibliography on these subjects, and the following email by Alessandro Bausi including an interesting and thorough bibliography, are a promising prospect.

Finally, I do not think that is possible to offer an universal template for the elaboration of a catalogue that would work for different manuscript traditions and documents typologies, and my opinion is supported by the well known Italian specialist Armando Petrucci.