COMSt Launching Conference
Missionsakademie an der Universität Hamburg
Hamburg 1-3 December 2009

Short Visit Grant scientific report

Dr. Simone Isacco Maria Pratelli - Università di Pisa (Pisa, ITALY)

Purpose of the visit
As a PhD student in Hebrew and Syriac, with special reference to literary issues, philological problems and codicological aspects as well, the purpose of my participation to the COMSt Launching Conference was to meet renowned scholars and researchers in all the disciplines involved in the field of Oriental studies, and to size a real opportunity to understand and to have an active role in the planning of a cohordinated academic work aiming to the elaboration and integration of separately achieved results in an unitary combinated pattern.

As far as I am concerned, Oriental studies are a manifold scientific field whose only possibility to evolve relies on the interdisciplinary sharing of information: this is why I submitted an application to the meeting, being the need to upgrade my academic education and to know which the "state of the art(s)" is a primary goal.

Work carried out
After a short presentation of ESF as an international academic network promoting research in all scientific disciplines and of COMSt specific organization and aims – above all the publication in five-years of a handbook as the best synthesis and most positive result of this international collabortaion – the meeting schedule was mainly arranged on plenary frontal sessions devoted to the presentation of the main ongoing projects related to COMSt research fields (with particular attention to cataloguing issues and inventorizing tasks) and to the communication of relevant queries, while the most remarkable aspect was the shared need of a coherent effective system of encoding, dispalying and managing of data (bibliographical, codicological, historical, literary, linguistic).

All the participants have been asked to join to one among five main scientific teams covering the major branches of research in Oriental manuscript studies: *Codicology and palaeography*; *Philology and text criticism*; *Digital philology*; *Manuscript cataloguing*; *Manuscript preservation and restoration*. Each of these teams had also the time to meet in special parallel sessions for further and more detailed discussion on specific tasks and technical issues, establishing urgent problems and defining possible planning strategies.

With special reference to the work of the Philology team I had the chance to join to, the equal contribution to textual philology of strict *criticism* on one hand and of *history of transmission* on the other has been pointed out, the main difficulties to deal with remaining those related to:

- the defintion of texts (and their witnesses);
- the definition of critical edition (and of the methodological issues to be taken into account while editing ancient texts);
- the definition of the needed inventories helping the philologist in his research (model-editions, commentaries and *lexica*, collections of standard text patterns);
- the need of a systematic, complete and up-to-date bibliography.

Core of the second part of the parallel Philology session was the discussion on the opportunities and further goals deriving from a collaboration with other teams:

- with Philology team: integration of internal and external data in the chronological collocation of texts and material witnesses; research on cross-cultural standards for critical text editions;
- with Digital Philology team: definition of the nature of the matter and of the relation between manuscript, text, printed edition and on-line edition; formalization of input and encoding systems; definition of the nature of the single datum and of the way it should be treated;

- with Cataloguing team: the role of printed *versus* digital manuscript catalogues in philological research.

Main results

The most important result of the meeting clearly appeared during the plenary sessions, as different european academic centres often do not choose identical methodologies while carrying out research projects in the same matter, so that the quest for a common working area – and even for an agreement about the real needs of each discipline and the strategies to achieve any purpose – can be a more complex problem than expected.

An effective example could be taken from the conclusions presented by the team-leaders as a whole:

- there is no agreement in the choice and in the outlining of a unitary terminology, even for cross-team communication;
- there is also a lack of agreement on the real purposes and approaches of each scientific investigation and on the tools that should be used;
- there is a need to open the collaboration to other and even more experts (for example in turkish and persian studies);
- a common and standardized set of rules is still wanted;
- the creation of a unified style in editing bibliographies and in translitterating titles and ancient languages is a fundamental issue, as well as the creation of on-line databases for all the participants promoting the sharing of results, problems and initiatives.

Nevertheless, all of the members felt the urge to find a reasonable solution in the five year-time of this international collaboration project, relying also on computer analysis and other digital devices (on-line inventories and search-engines, indexes and blogs), with the aim of publishing the handbook whose sections and chapters will be edited by the single teams. Periodical meetings will be organized in the next years, with presentations of the work carried out and of bibliographical complete sections, reports on the major progresses achieved and introduction of new participants admitted to the project.

Future collaboration and scientific work resulting from the grant

My present activity as a PhD student is not strictly related to the COMSt project and to the work of its teams, as I am just at the beginning, but it is my intention to follow the activities of each team and to participate, whenever it is possible, to future congresses and meetings, especially connected to the research carried out by the Codicology and Philology teams, in order to improve my knowledge and my skills while working on critical edition of Syriac texts and analysing the manuscripts transmitting them.

Any comments

After the visit I have a more precise idea about the principal academic centres interested in the project (all around Europe, and even further, in Israel) and about the theoretical models, the actual practices and the tools involved in the organization and in the carrying out of research.

Anyway, the central challenge for Oriental studies is still the outlining of a formalized, effective and interdisciplinary methodology, as many are the scientific fields and the practices involved: while codicology and cataloguing on one hand and textual criticism and digital philology on the other can work side by side and find a common ground, this is still far from being actual in the case of codicology and philology, also because the respective results and data are not always put into account by scholars.

This is a real condition in Classical studies, and the COMSt project is the best chance for Oriental studies too.