

2nd International Workshop of COMSt Team1 - Codicology and Palaeography - “The Making of the Oriental Book”

REPORT

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On 14-15 October 2011 I participated to the 2nd International Workshop of COMSt Team1 (Codicology and Palaeography), entitled “The Making of the Oriental Book”. This meeting was devoted to some aspects of the material construction and to the organization of ancient codices, which were discussed in three different sessions: 1. *The Making and Structure of the Quires*; 2. *Numbering Quires, Leaves, Pages: Ordering, Referencing and 'Navigating Systems'*; 3. *The Preparation of the Page: Pricking and Ruling*. The sessions were organized like open conversations, during which team members and some external speakers gave short reports, followed by a brief discussion. I participated to the meeting both as a listener and as a speaker, presenting the preliminary results of the research I am doing on the Syriac manuscripts of the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana of Florence. The purpose of my visit was to learn about some material aspects of the various oriental manuscript traditions and to discuss, with some eminent scholars of the field, some major issues I have encountered during my research. I will summarize below the contributions and the remarks which I found most interesting for my research.

1. *The Making and Structure of the Quires*

Terminology - First of all a terminological issue was introduced. The vocabulary used in the different languages and scholarly traditions to describe quire structure display a considerable variation, except for a few basic terms. The multilingual translation of Muzerelle's *Vocabulaire Codicologique* is incomplete and outdated. Moreover, the semantic fields covered by corresponding terms in different languages seem not to coincide. A dictionary by Gumbert (excerpts of which are already informally circulating) is expected to give an important contribution to this issue.

Parchment - A major problem, in which the perspectives of the various traditions crossed and diverged at the same time is parchment cutting and folding. In this respect very interesting technical information was provided, concerning the Ethiopian tradition. Ethiopian manuscripts (still nowadays) are made of bovine parchment and the leaves are created using a template for cutting the skin.

Quire structures - Some traditions, such as the Latin, the Greek, the Armenian ones, are very consistent in following the so-called Gregory's rule, displaying always hair-hair and flesh-flesh in the quire structure. The Syriac tradition, on the other hand, almost never follows such a rule. Moreover, it appeared that the Armenian manuscripts are so well-preserved that establishing whether they follow Gregory's rule or not is almost a purely speculative exercise. On the contrary, e.g. Coptic and Georgian manuscripts, are often so fragmentary that knowing the general trend of those traditions with respect to the hair/flesh sides distribution can be crucial in reconstructing the codex structure. Ethiopian manuscripts tend to use Gregory's rule, but it is not known yet to which level of consistency. All the dated Hebrew manuscripts follow Gregory's rule. Gregory's rule is followed when the text has liturgical content, otherwise there is less care in respecting it.

As regards parchment/paper folding and the structure of the quires, the study of the Greek and Latin traditions provides the more systematic descriptions. It appears that both *uniones* (made of a single bifolium) and *ominiones* (single quires containing over 50 bifolia) are rare and quickly loose ground, whereas, from the 4th century onwards, the quaternion becomes the canonical structure. Greek medieval codices are almost all made of quaternions. This is a major difference from the Hebrew, Syriac and Arabic traditions, where the quinion is by and large the commonest type of quire. Georgian palimpsests provide very interesting evidence about how parchment re-use modified the quire structure. Writing on a palimpsest implied turning the page 90° and folding it in two,

writing orthogonal to the original direction of the text.

2. *Numbering Quires, Leaves, Pages: Ordering, Referencing and 'Navigating Systems'*

In both Greek and Latin traditions, pagination is not original and does not constitute a common practice. This may imply that the need of accurate citation was not felt as a priority in antiquity.

In Ethiopian tradition various ordering systems are used: catchwords, numbering, marking with crosses. The page and quire numbers are often placed between the two text columns and repeated elsewhere on the page. There is a tendency to transforming the numbers into decorations, through graphical extensions. In liturgical manuscripts there are also navigation systems, helping to trace important sections.

Syriac tradition knows only quire numbering until a late stage, page numberings are usually secondary, inserted by later users. In the oldest manuscripts old numerical signs are used, which quickly disappear, being substituted by letters. The quire numbers are placed at the bottom of the page, originally in the inner corner, subsequently in the middle of the margin. Peculiar to the Syriac tradition is the so-called four-points mark, which is found, in classical manuscripts, on the left margin of every recto, before the first text-line. The exact function of this mark is unknown. In this context I had the opportunity to present my own hypothesis about the possible meaning of the mark, which gave rise to a lively discussion.

3. *The Preparation of the Page: Pricking and Ruling*

The study of pricking regards the shape of the pricking marks, the instruments used and the position of the marks on the page. Very complex typologies have been elaborated to classify the pricking marks. Major distinctions refer to whether the folia are pricked separately or stacked together, and to whether the folia are pricked before or after folding.

In Greek manuscripts pricking marks are most often within the written area, at regular intervals, indicating the text lines. Armenian manuscripts also display pricking marks used to outline both the text columns and, in some cases, the single lines. In Syriac manuscripts, instead, pricking is less frequent and generally limited to the delimitation of the written area or of the text columns. More research into this field would be required.

The description of ruling should include the technique, the systems (hard point or blunt point; on each bifolium or on several at once etc.), the type (the way horizontal and vertical lines design their pattern on the page), the method (how the work is organized and performed). Ruling can be obtained by using a metal point which leaves a slight mark on the writing surface, or, in later stages, with ink.

Several oriental traditions make use, to a variable extent, of a ruling instrument called in Arabic *mastara/mistara*. It is a ruled tablet on which the leaf is placed and rubbed, so that the ruling is obtained by impression.

4. *Conclusions*

During the conference, I received hints on some aspects that have so far been overlooked in Syriac studies, but have been examined in depth for other traditions. Moreover, I had the opportunity to discuss some hypotheses and pose some problems to a group of eminent scholars, receiving crucial suggestions for my research. The results of my research on the Syriac manuscripts of the Biblioteca Laurenziana in Florence, will eventually be inserted in the catalog that prof. P.G. Borbone (a COMSt Team 1 member) has elaborated within the last years and which will be published within the next year. The suggestions and remarks that I received during the conference will be crucial to the organization and to the content of my work, and to the structuring of my contribution to the catalog.