

TOWARDS AN IDEAL CHAPTER ON ORIENTAL MANUSCRIPTS CATALOGUING

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My interest in COMSt Team 4 workshops and activities is mainly due to my involvement in a digitization project of the Arabic manuscripts collection of the Central National Library of Florence. My first work experience with the collection took place in 2009 when, as a final stage of a post-university course in *Conservation and Restoration of Book Heritage*, I undertook a conservative census of that material. The existent catalogue of the collection was published in Florence in 1885 by Lupo Buonazia and during my screening of the Arabic fund I realized that it lacks of a proper physical and structural description of the *codices*, so the codicological and conservative aspects have been the most deepened in my project; this is also the reason why my conservative census results are now available inside the National Library as a supplement of Buonazia's Catalogue in a printed format. The opportunity of the forthcoming digitizing project Manumed offers the possibility to improve and correct, when necessary, the catalographic descriptions of the Arabic codices and to make them accessible to everyone; in this perspective the work in progress of COMSt Team 4 is for me very important to have a useful confrontation with more experienced scholars who deal with Oriental manuscripts heritage and know what are their peculiarities and descriptive problems.

The first session of the workshop was dedicated to the cataloguing tradition of Oriental manuscripts and underlined the historical evolution of cataloguing undertakings. The cataloguing standards in various cultural contexts illustrated by scholars (Turkish, Persian, Armenian, Georgian and Judeo-Arabic manuscripts either in Oriental and western libraries) pointed out the same trend: only in a very recent time a particular regard has been dedicated to codicological descriptions and only in this way the structural and historical characteristics of this particular material has finally received a proper catalographic representation. A particular mention has been devoted to digitizing projects by Prof. Delio Proverbio: in contemporary cataloguing undertakings, in fact, one of the most important aspects is the time employed to produce catalographic data, a problem which I think will affect also the

Manumed project. In this prospect any ambiguity in metadata description should be avoided because it could generate misleading or erroneous interpretations; in the meanwhile is true that in the present scenario, where catalographic undertakings referred to Oriental manuscripts are generally not so diffused, or anyway not sufficient according to the spread of these material, any attempt of description could be decisive in helping scholars in their studies and researches. Any attempt of catalographic description, even if it is only an inventory or a check list, is nowadays important and digitization technologies give us the possibility to confront, analyse and check the descriptive data also through the web.

In this evolving context it's also important to underline and to face some specific descriptive problems and some of these have been raised by Prof. Jost Gippert referring to Georgian manuscripts: the first one is the problem of *folia desiecta* and the second one is that of the palimpsests. The main problem linked to these phenomena is their catalographic representation: how can the re-established structure of a “distorted” codex be represented for example in presence of conflicting numbers of the foliation? How can fly-leaves be reintegrated in a catalographic description? Also in this case digitization can help, but a systematic methodology to describe these structural characteristic still remains a *desideratum*.

During the second session of the workshop new trends of cataloguing and possible solutions to the problems raised in the first session has been presented by Prof. Marilena Maniaci, Prof. Mons. Paul Canart, Prof. Patrick Andrist and Prof. Peter Gumbert who have collaborated in the publication of the volume *La descrizione dei manoscritti: esperienze a confronto* (Cassino, 2010). In their communications they illustrated the possibility of multi-structured descriptions for composite manuscripts which have been already employed in cataloguing Greek manuscripts. Their successful attempt is to treat and describe in a scientific way the complex and composite structure of many Medieval manuscripts, a characteristic that is typical also of many Oriental manuscripts. The modular structure of composite manuscripts is the evidence of their complex history and corresponds to their physical transformations (such as fly-leaves, added comments or indexes, filling of blank folios, fallen and lost parts, etc.) in opposition to the static nature of printed books. The methodology to analyse and describe the structural complexity of this kind of material is to identify and evaluate each stratigraphic level and its genesis: the approach is that of the archaeological stratigraphic analysis applied to the study of manuscripts. In this perspective the concept of ‘codicological unit’ has been replaced by the new ideas of ‘production unit’ and ‘circulation unit’ that correspond to each stratigraphic level of the manuscript history: these new concepts allow the reconstruction of the manuscript history and of its evolutions and can also be useful for the

study of history of collections and libraries. The method to recognize the different levels or units of production is to identify the traces of discontinuity in the manuscript structure (for example different paper, writing, folios dimension, sewing, discontinuous foliation and quire signatures etc.) and in the text (additions, mutilations etc.); the result of this analysis is a multi-structural but global description in which every level can be represented by a short or long description, but always independent from the others. Multi-structured descriptions turn out to be more coherent and, paying attention to each unit of production, represent the key for further information about the manuscripts history.

Assuming that all these considerations are valid also for digital catalogues, my attempt will be to apply this methodological approach to the description of the Arabic manuscripts of the National Library of Florence within the Manumed project. Many of the codices are in fact composite manuscripts and this could be a shared way to analyse and describe them in a scientific perspective. I believe that the studies on Oriental manuscripts could really take advantage from the results that the scientific community has already reached in the field of Western manuscripts; even if the kind of manuscripts is not the same and each one has its own peculiarities, there can be some common features and descriptive problems which can be face in a common effort and with shared methodologies and categories of analysis. In this case I think that the high competence and experience of the speakers gave to the listeners a decisive contribution for the studies and cataloguing of Oriental manuscripts.