

# The Open Catalogue of Manuscripts in the Malatestiana Library: Balance and Perspectives

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## ABSTRACT

*The reasons for the project of a special information system for manuscripts' cataloguing and publication is first explained. The features of the Open Catalogue of manuscripts in the Malatestiana Library, which is the first example of implementation for that information system, are soon after described. The evolution of the system during last years and a balance of the activities involving students, researchers and general users are then reported. At last the developments and future applications for the open catalogue are drafted.*

**Keywords:** manuscript, paleography, catalogue, Web, database, information system.

## INTRODUCTION

Many experiences laying on the Internet have been carried out in Paleography during last years and many changes were introduced in the discipline's methods. Furthermore, especially planned information systems have been more and more used and everyday work and study processes of the discipline were consequently influenced.

The proposal of the Open Catalogue of manuscripts takes its place among the studies introducing innovation in Paleography research and study with the ICT and aims at the creation of connections with information sciences (i.e., IS, IT and ICT disciplines).

### What Is Changed In Paleography Research Methods And Instruments?

ICT radically changed the approach scholars had with manuscripts for at least two reasons:

- a) the way manuscripts were analyzed,
- b) the medium scientist could adopt to share the results of their work,

in the first case it has to be noted that before the Internet researchers had to personally study manuscripts in archives or libraries; secondly they published the results of their research only by means of printed catalogues (before the use of web sites).

During last years the spreading of networking communication techniques produced relevant effects on the sharing of knowledge and information within the community of paleographers. First of all the Web was used to publish the images reproducing manuscripts pages, but it increased also the number of on line historical magazines, the collections of bibliographies, the use of on line databases etc. (Cartelli and others, 2001).

The above considerations and the proposals coming from newly defined disciplines like informing science (Cohen, 1999), led the authors to the definition of a special information system called "Open Catalogue". This system, which is described in the following section, has been adopted and carried out from the staff of the Malatestiana Library, an ancient Italian library hosting a consistent number of manuscripts.

## CATALOGUES OF MANUSCRIPTS AND THE OPEN CATALOGUE

The history of manuscript cataloguing began between 17th and 18th century and notwithstanding the great work made by paleographers in these centuries an enormous amount of manuscripts still remains uncatalogued, if not unknown.

The main trouble with the study of old, handwritten books can be summarized as follows:

- a) people simply don't know of manuscripts' existence (with respect to texts, where bibliographies and Internet resources make relatively easy to find a printed book, the same doesn't happen for manuscripts),
- b) every manuscript is a unique book (i.e., there are no duplicates for it). Even if the text in two manuscripts is the same, as in the case of a model and its copy, they are never equal; two books can in fact be different for scripting style, physical appearance and even text, because a handwritten copy always contains some changes with respect to its source.

As a consequence the creation of a catalogue of manuscripts is a really difficult task, it requires a deep competence in a lot of fields, from philology to history, from history of art to paleography, from literature to library science.

In the authors' opinion time has come for a radical change in catalogue publishing. First of all the Internet can make available great part of the manuscript heritage all over the world (i.e., a good example for the new way of catalogues' publishing can be found in the choice of CDF in Germany, reported from Overgaaau, 2001); furthermore it is possible to give scholars new and more powerful tools to improve their work and let them create *Open Catalogues* (i.e., catalogues in progress, constantly changing with the continuous contribution of new information).

### The Open Catalogue of Manuscripts

When the structure of the Open Catalogue was hypothesized two separated environments were planned (Cartelli & Palma, 2002): a former one where researchers and scholars had the scientific liability of the materials to be published and a latter one where people could occasionally or systematically obtain information (i.e., it couldn't be used to produce new data).

The above separation affected the way users could access the system and led to three different and separated access levels:

- a. system and scientific administrator level; one or more persons with the scientific responsibility of the catalogue, who can enable researchers and scholars to access and manage the materials to be published (they can also manage the data produced by everyone),
- b. scholars and researchers level; allowed people who can insert, modify, delete and display the materials to be published (manuscripts' descriptions, notes, images etc.),
- c. general users level, where only the answers to specific queries can be obtained (i.e., the descriptions and images of manuscripts, bibliographies, notes etc.).

As regards the structure of the Open Catalogue it was based on five sections, to be intended in a flexible manner (i.e., the presence of each section depends on

the resources the library will have at its disposal and on the different solutions it will adopt for them) (Cartelli & Palma, 2003):

- a) the first section is devoted to documents explaining the history of the library and its manuscripts;
- b) the bibliography ordered by shelfmark and, eventually, alphabetically and chronologically, is housed in the second section;
- c) in the third section the descriptions of the manuscripts, i.e. previous printed catalogues or ancient handwritten catalogues (suitably digitized) and new descriptions (according to nationally/internationally defined standards) are stored;
- d) the fourth section contains the images of the highest number of manuscripts in the library (possibly all);
- e) the fifth and last section is made of a communication subsystem including electronic blackboards, chats, forums and special Web solutions granting the easier acquisition, writing and editing of texts among the members of a selected community of scholars interested in the materials in the library.

### MALATESTIANA LIBRARY AND THE OPEN CATALOGUE OF MANUSCRIPTS

In the *Malatestiana libraria*, designed and built in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century by Malatesta Novello, Lord of Cesena, 343 manuscripts, which give witness to his tastes and cultural inclinations, are housed. Malatesta Novello enriched the ancient volumes (about fifty) of the Franciscan convent with an invaluable collection of manuscripts which were especially copied and illuminated, and with codices which were purchased, received in donation, dedicated, or already part of his family's patrimony.

Further manuscripts come from the collection of Giovanni di Marco, the physician of Malatesta Novello (53 codices), from the choral books of the Cathedral (7 books), from the books of the Franciscan convent (8 books), from the Piana Library (59 manuscripts, which were the private library of Pope Pius VII), from the town library (12 manuscripts collected from dissolved religious houses in 19<sup>th</sup> century).

The staff of Malatestiana Library decided to adopt the idea of the open Catalogue and decided to find the resources for building it, mostly because it looked interesting and useful to have a *catalogue in progress*. The advantages of this choice were both immediate and evident:

- the possibility of proceeding in a programmed and gradual manner;
- the ability to retrieve all the information already acquired even in a partial and non-final form;
- the opportunity to extend the research to ancient sources that were difficult to access;
- the increase in the interactive updating of the information available by qualified specialists and scholars.

The web site for the Open Catalogue of manuscripts in the Malatestiana Library can be accessed from the portal of the Forlì-Cesena county (<http://www.malatestiana.it/manoscritti/>). The database accompanying the site was autonomously constructed with a personalized wwwisis 5.0 application.

The catalogue is made of four parts:

- the first part credits people working to the project and its carrying out,
- the second section contains general texts on the Library and the manuscript collections (i.e., the history of the library, Cesena humanistic culture, the scriptorium, the illumination, the collections etc.). First of all classical texts suitably digitized have been put on line, now special works and degree theses are adding to the former ones together with descriptions of the Library coming from foreign visitors,
- the third part lets users access manuscripts according to shelfmark, author and title. For each codex the description and the bibliography are reported. A program for a regular updating and retrieval of recent and previous bibliography, according to the resources of the Malatestiana Library and its goals has been

planned. At the end of October 2006 every user will find the reproductions of 42 codices, although the Library staff plans to offer a complete reproduction of all the manuscripts;

- the fourth section plays a fundamental role in this project hosting users' requests, opinions and articles. Here, scholars or persons interested in the Library's manuscript collection can contribute with their observations, as well as publish their contributions online. Recently this section was enriched with two special functionalities:
  - a) collaborative bibliography, by which everyone entrusted with the access to the section can insert his/her personal bibliographical records in the page,
  - b) works in progress on two manuscripts, by which a community of study and research is granted the permission of accessing all the texts in the area.

The open catalogue neither excludes nor acts as a supplement to printed work, which is always possible and even desirable, because this has a particular type of diffusion and is permanent by nature. Instead, the open catalogue is updated constantly by the Library staff, particularly by those who are involved in manuscript preservation. It is their duty to actively administrate the site and to promote research even encouraging interested specialists to provide critical contributions.

### CONCLUSION AND FUTURE TRENDS

Main remarks on the work carried out from Malatestiana staff during last three years is reported below:

- institutional librarians coordinated the work in the library and in the site and produced descriptions and bibliographies for the manuscripts,
- continuous contacts were kept with public and private institutions and with scholars interested in the study of manuscripts in the Malatestiana library,
- young and highly qualified people (i.e., people coming from special humanistic studies) was involved in the production of manuscripts' descriptions and other texts.

Furthermore, the use of web technologies contributed in changing the way of studying and working in paleography by introducing social-constructivist elements in everyday activities. Examples of communities of learning and of communities of practices based on ICT use were in fact detected.

At last it has to be noted the presence of factors influencing knowledge construction and development both on individual and social bases.

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