

CERL Seminar

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ManusOnLine. the Italian proposal for manuscript cataloguing: new implementations and functionalities

1. A retrospective glance

The first project of a census of manuscripts written in Latin alphabet and held in Italian libraries comes from an idea of Angela Vinay –who was the first director of the Central Institute for the Union Catalogue of Italian Libraries (ICCU) from 1976 up to 1987-, also supported by many scholars' and librarians' suggestions, who at that time felt the importance of a new approach to the cataloguing activities relating to manuscripts in Italy, which had been static for too many years. ICCU seemed as the most suitable body to promote and coordinate this kind of projects.

The proposal was set forth during the Seminar held in Rome in 1980: "Manuscript: the situation of cataloguing and a proposal for an organization of documentation and information"; the meeting was mainly attended by scholars involved in the study of manuscripts.

At that time there was no personal computer, no Internet, no e-mail: therefore, what could be imagined and realized was a description form which, on the basis of *flexibility* and *precision* should offer description elements either essential (census description form) or detailed (exhaustive description form).

The first attempt to transfer the census form in a PC s/w was made in 1990: that effort produced the s/w MANUS, that is online since 2007.

2. The goals of ManusOnLine

ManusOnLine (or, as we say, MOL) has been the first procedure allowing online manuscript cataloguing at national level; it is provided free of charge to libraries and institutions taking part in the project; ICCU manages data, but these data belong to the institutions that have produced them. It is based on a XML/TEI schema, which, in our opinion, is the most suitable format for structuring a manuscript description and for allowing data exchange.

Moreover, in the TEI standard the heading <MsDesc> may include both composite and homogeneous manuscript descriptions.

The goals of our census project are the following ones:

- to implement the Italian catalogue of manuscripts held in Italian libraries
- to manage online all functions related to the cataloguing of manuscripts, in order to improve knowledge and valorization
- to avoid fragmented information related to manuscripts as much as possible, by providing a procedure to be used at national level, that warrants stability and durability, since it is promoted by the Ministry of cultural heritage and activities and tourism itself.

3. The features of the procedure

ManusOnLine is made up of two sections: the first one is addressed to users, the backoffice to cataloguers. In the last one, MOL provides three different levels of responsibility, in order to carry out and coordinate cataloguing activities:

Level A is addressed to the librarians working in ICCU; through level A, they manage the database, insert and check the correctness of data.

These are the main features of the procedure:

- it gives the possibility of inserting the list of the collections with the related signatures, so as to allow the inventorying of manuscripts without describing them
- both collections of manuscripts and manuscript descriptions are included within the so-called *projects*, that are proposed and managed by the libraries taking part in MOL activities
- it allows two cataloguing levels, either essential (census description form) or detailed (detailed description form); the cataloguer may always change or add more data, and both kinds of description may coexist.
- medieval and modern manuscripts, as well as collections of letters can be catalogued by means of the description form
- it is possible to enrich the manuscript descriptions with digital imagines of relevant elements relating to the manuscript itself (miniatures, script, old signatures, provenance, owners, etc.); all digital images are identified by means of a stable URL.
- ManusOnLine also provides an Authority file that gathers the standardized names of persons, corporate bodies and places stored in the database
- MOL also gives the opportunity to get printed catalogues in Word format and the relating indexes for the participating libraries requiring them.

4. 2014: The *Guide to the s/w Manus online*

On the basis of the previous *Guida al software Manus*, issued in 2001, the new *Guida al s/w ManusOnLine* was published online in 2014, on the site of MOL, within the area devoted to cataloguing activities; it was conceived as a tool for better facing difficulties arising from describing manuscripts and collections of letters, but also, at the same time, for granting common rules at national level.

The *Guide* provides instructions on the correct way of inserting data in the various fields related to the external description, internal description and literature concerning the manuscript that is being described, and to the inserting of digital images; it explains how to add names related either to the external or internal description, selecting them from the Authority File, or to create them *ex novo*.

5. The need of updating and adding new features

Since 2007 information technology has made great strides, and we felt the need of adding new features to those already existing.

Thus, last year in ICCU we organized the first meeting with the librarians of the institutions participating to our project, the title was: *A day to make ManusOnLine grow*; during the seminar we explained what carried out till that day, but, above all, we listened to the proposals and needs of our colleagues, young cataloguers and scholars.

That meeting was the 'cradle', so to say, of the new site; on that day many ideas for new features and for a different management of the Authority file arose.

6. A new graphic design

The new site offers a new, more friendly and easier graphic design, and an improvement in images visualization; it is easy to consult and is enriched with miniatures from manuscripts held in Italian libraries taking part in our census project.

7. The new features

The features I'm going to speak about now are only some of the new elements enriching the procedure.

A new, important tool opens up to possible co-operations also with libraries in other countries; it's an application which allows an independent acquiring and managing of specialized and international research projects, both during the entering of data and in the step of publishing them in the OPAC of that particular project as well.

It shall give the possibility of managing and coordinating projects that involve various institutions, even foreign ones. Therefore, it shall be possible to visualize the manuscript descriptions both in the MOL site and on the website of that particular project.

The cataloguers working in such a project will employ both the MOL form and Authority File; then, an export of the cataloguing descriptions in XML-TEI standard shall allow to visualize and search the descriptions in the OPAC of that particular project.

Furthermore, the exported data can also be enriched with specific contents and graphic customization.

It is important to point out that, in case one manuscript is described both by the library that holds it and by the cataloguers employed in these special projects, both descriptions will not overlap, but will coexist in the database, so that the different authorship shall be acknowledged.

The need of such a tool was felt in 2011, when the International Society of Franciscan Studies asked to employ ManusOnLine in order to catalogue manuscripts containing Franciscan texts and held in many Italian and foreign libraries and institutions. These descriptions, about 1.600, will be visualized in MOL and also in the website of the Franciscan society within a short time.

Furthermore, during the current year an agreement has been signed between ICCU and the Federico II University in Naples, in order to host in MOL the *Illuminated Dante Project*, whose scientific director is Gennaro Ferrante, University of Naples. The procedure and the expected outcomes of the project are supervised, among the others, by François Avril, Andrea Mazzucchi, and Marco Cursi.

The *Illuminated Dante Project (IDP)* aims to realize a codicologic, paleographic, and linguistic description of the illuminated manuscripts of the *Divine Comedy* and to carry out the analysis of the relationship between the illustrations and the text and/or the commentaries to the poem.

Moreover, it aims to create the most comprehensive database of ancient illustrations of the *Divine Comedy* in manuscripts (XIV and XV centuries), that can be searched and compared on the basis of codicologic, stylistic and iconological criteria.

The project has been conceived within a context of exegetical studies related to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, also by means of illustrations; it aims to select a *corpus* of illuminated codices, from which illustrations well related with the text from a hermeneutic point of view will be obtained. The descriptive elements will be gathered by means of the ManusOnLine form and database, thereafter they will be integrated with the images repository and the iconographical database, both hosted in the servers of the University of Naples (www.dante.unina.it). The image archive will adopt the IIF [pron. 'triple I-F'] protocol, in order to allow a more extensive interoperability of its content.

Another new and important function will be the implementation of the following five lists in alphabetical order, which can be queried by users: scribes, illustrators, provenances, and places of origin; the last one shall also include the names of corporate bodies and places collected in the database of the Authority File, together with the responsibility: places of copy. In the scribes list each name is supplied with images of the relating script, up to a maximum of three images.

A link to the viewer of Internet culturale (IC), the portal allowing access to catalogues and digital collections of Italian libraries, edited and managed by ICCU, has also been added: it allows the linking of manuscript descriptions stored in MOL to the images of the fully digitized manuscripts within the digital library in IC.

Two more new features are related to data import and export in XML-TEI format:

- The possibility of importing in XML-TEI format from other databases both single descriptions and whole manuscript collections as well
- The possibility for a single library of exporting a specific selection of descriptions, both in Word and in XML, thus producing a document with the related indexes.

Finally, a virtual keyboard is going to be at the cataloguer's disposal within a short time; it shall allow the inserting of special characters, in particular all characters of the Greek alphabet, thus including accents and breathings; this shall allow cataloguers to describe manuscripts written in alphabets others than the Latin; some attempts were made some years ago by the Central national Library and by the Angelica Library in Rome, and by the Trivulziana Library in Milan as well: some librarians catalogued in Manus the collections of the Greek manuscripts held in those libraries.

8. The MOL Authority File

The MOL Authority File includes the authority and reference records related to persons, families, corporate bodies and places, as well as their names so as they appear in manuscripts.

If the MOL database is the heart of our project, the Authority file can be considered its lifeblood; it allows cataloguers to find the name of an author, an owner, an illuminator, etc., and select it in order to insert that name in the description of the manuscript they are cataloguing.

The Authority list doesn't only include authors, editors, places, but also persons who were linked in some way to the history of that particular manuscript; it can always be increased by cataloguers, who, however, must pay attention not to duplicate records.

During the meeting in 2015 the initiative of implementing the Authority File by establishing a working group was launched; the Group, made up of ICCU librarians and experts, began its activities in May 2015.

Two are the tasks we decided to carry out:

- 1) The correction and the maintenance of the Authority records in the MOL Authority File
- 2) The drawing up of the *Guidelines for the management and compilation in ManusOnLine of Authority entries related to names of persons, families, corporate bodies and places.*

These *Guidelines* proved to be fundamental for the correction of the records which are already stored in the database, but, still more, for the correct inserting of new records.

In order to carry out the standardization of the A.F., we decided to subdivide the authority entries into categories, and to every member of the Working Group a category of names was assigned: popes, kings, emperors, saints, and so on.

Since September 2015 more than four thousands and ninety names have been corrected, and more than 1 thousand seven hundred have been merged: that's a good result, but much work is still to be done.

In June the draft of the *Guidelines* has been published, we are now working at the final edition.

The participation to the Working Group of two colleagues who are involved in the management of the SBN Authority File was of great importance: the coordinated activities carried out both by experts of ancient handwritten material and of modern material was fundamental for the issuing of the *Draft*, since the rules for choosing the preferred form of the names are the REICAT, the Italian cataloguing code, and the codes, characters and punctuation are taken from the SBN guidelines for ancient and modern books.

At present, a theoretical reflection on authority lists related to manuscript cataloguing is lacking: this draft seems to be, as far as we know, one of the few attempts to solve the problems that cataloguers have to face when they draw up the authority records related to names linked to manuscript descriptions.

In the *Guidelines* an important chapter is that related to the standardization of those names that cannot be identified, and in our database there is a great quantity of them; in fact, there is a great number of names of persons appearing in manuscripts that can't be find anywhere but only in those manuscripts which provide their evidence. Thus, the manuscript description which the new authority entry is created for is the only source that can justify the existence of that particular name. Such names can only be entered in a standardized form within the authority list, but later they could even be identified.

We recommend the cataloguers to apply the *Guidelines* and to share their experiences with us; we are firmly convinced that the more this tool shall reflect the experiences of those who are 'working in the field', in state libraries, but also in civic and ecclesiastical ones, the more useful and suitable for describing manuscripts in MOL it shall prove to be.

9. Conclusions

The firm foundation of Manus on line is the daily work carried out by the libraries cooperating in the project: we couldn't achieve these results without a great spirit of cooperation among all partners; without a careful, patient and mutual attention among all of us: in the deep conviction that no work carried out individually would have allowed such a result.

I would like to end my contribution with a sentence taken from Bertold Brecht, that I sometimes quote because it wonderfully gives expression to the attitude we must go on keeping:

"The actor shall study together with the other actors, shall build up his character together with the other characters, as the smallest social unit is not one, but two human beings: also in Life we build up each other".

Lucia Negrini