

Online Catalog of Manuscripts Conserved in Libraries in the Veneto Region

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INTRODUCTION

In 2003 the Veneto Regional Council set up a project to catalog all manuscript holdings in libraries in the Veneto region, in order to provide a freely accessible, uniform online open catalog (1) via shared cataloguing standards. The implementation of this project entailed coordinating its scientific and organizational aspects, as well as checking and revising the catalog descriptions. The Biblioteca del Museo Correr was in charge of coordinating the project, which had previously set up a cataloging project of its manuscript holdings in 2001, starting with its oldest holding, the Teodoro Correr collection. The coordinating team, composed of Paolo Eleuteri, Barbara Vanin and Francesco Bernardi, and later also Alessia Giachery, initially created a catalog data sheet model, which features a brief description that is suitable for the mainly modern material present in the libraries (2). It provides a brief codicological description and a more detailed description of the manuscripts contents. At the same time *Guidelines for cataloging manuscripts* (3) were set out, which provided the framework in terms of cataloging for the MANUS software system developed by the Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo Unico delle biblioteche italiane. Together with the Veneto Regional Council an initial group of libraries of various typologies were selected, which completely lacked catalogs or adequate tools to access their manuscript holdings. They were asked to present targeted cataloging projects.

THE PROJECT

In the first year of the project (October 2003 - December 2004) cataloging was undertaken using the MANUS system, with the aim of sending the data to the ICCU, which would publish the information in its catalog, accessible at <http://manus.iccu.sbn.it>. However, revi-

sion of the data sheets immediately highlighted the difficulty of achieving uniformity when working from “isolated” cataloging. This unsystematic form affected information retrieval for research, making it difficult for users to access data easily. Moreover, the ICCU could not guarantee prompt and immediate publication of the results of the cataloging. Bearing in mind these considerations, the Veneto Regional Council during the years 2004-2005 assigned to the Biblioteca del Museo Correr the task of creating a new online manuscript cataloging software system. The result was the *Nuova Biblioteca Manoscritta* (NBM) presented here, which is the name of the regional project site, the catalog, as well as the name of the cataloging software itself. Clicking on www.nuovabibliotecamanoscritta.it provides access to the catalog of manuscripts from the libraries taking part in the project (4), gives the reader information about the project itself, the technology used and the libraries. Furthermore, catalogers and administrators are provided with a login and password, to access the software for the cataloging of manuscripts via the Web. The NBM uses a browser via the Internet to upload the catalog records and enables several libraries to share cataloging by working on the same database. Indeed, all catalogers share data relating to name and title headings, and bibliography. This solution facilitates the retrieval of previously compiled information, and above all enables revisers to modify information, in the spirit of an open catalog that can be constantly improved upon.

The software, developed by Idoru s.r.l. in Padua, consists of a data input module solely for catalogs and a consultation module for the public. The NBM comprises a relational-type database and Web application, and the server-side application is installed on the Unix platform, whereas client application is accessible via a simple Web browser on each platform. The NBM software system precisely imitates the MANUS system for several reasons: the exhaustive information

following the guidelines laid down by the ICCU (5), integrated by the MANUS system, the need to transfer all descriptions previously compiled on the MANUS system to the NBM, and last but not least the need to continue sending data to the ICCU, exporting it from the NBM. This is another reason why the Veneto Regional Council cooperated with the ICCU, monitoring the updates and technical and scientific development of the MANUS system.

The catalog, which is freely accessible to users who click on the site, provides a simple search (any word included in each descriptive field, which can also be filtered by library) and an advanced search, where the user can search information by word within a single field and combined fields, by shelf mark, name and title headings of the published manuscripts. A search by text language and subject choosing from a predetermined list shared by the catalogers has also been provided.

From the point of view of shared cataloging that gathers together libraries that are typologically different, it was deemed necessary to administrate libraries and catalogers through a central coordinating team and for the same reason a work schedule was designed that could efficiently coordinate all the activities. Hence, different profiles for the members taking part in the project were defined and designated as follows:

- **Administrator:** Coordinates activities, is a technical and scientific consultant, revises and publishes the records, assigns and deactivates access passwords, and mediates discussion forums;
- **Reviser:** Corrects the data sheets, and directly modifies the lists of name and title headings and bibliography, if authorized by the administrator;
- **Cataloger:** Only has access to manuscript data sheets being cataloged and shares lists with other catalogers;
- **Librarian:** Views all manuscripts in the library, and can intervene on the data sheets produced by the cataloger in the library, if authorized by administrator.

The procedure for revision includes constant monitoring of the manuscripts and their different stages of completion. Revision is also managed via the Web. When the cataloger is compiling a data sheet, the manuscript is in *work in progress*. Once description has been terminated, the cataloger changes the state

to *completed*. At this point the reviser checks the data sheet and, if necessary, adds corrections, thereby changing its state to *be checked again*. The cataloger adds his/her own corrections and the sheet becomes *corrected*. After checking these corrections and if there are no other elements to be added, the reviser decides that the manuscript can be *published*. Whenever the manuscript needs updating or modifying, the published manuscript returns to the *work in progress* state, while for research the previous manuscript data sheet is still available until the new description is published.

At this point the main features of the NBM system should be outlined:

- Separate profiles for catalogers, librarians, revisers and administrators;
- Catalog data sheets conforming to the model set out by the ICCU;
- Identification of features common to manuscripts listed by type of binding, script and illustrator;
- Cross-reference among names by official, variant and alternative form;
- Fields designating language, subject, contents and literary genre (can be searched by the catalog);
- Internal description organized on different levels, with the possibility of assigning collective titles;
- Template containing manuscript data preview while in completion;
- Shared list of collections, names, provenance, titles, bibliography, old libraries and subject;
- Management of shared lists with sole insertion option (for catalogers);
- Management of manuscripts according to status: work in progress, completed, corrected (for catalogers);
- Management of manuscripts according to status: to be revised or published (for revisers);
- Management of images.

Working for two years on the project has enabled us to fully understand the difficulties and problems encountered when combining manuscript cataloging and IT. In Italy, there have been other experiments similar to the MANUS project (<http://manus.iccu.sbn.it>), and two of these in particular should be mentioned. On a regional level a project was set up in Tuscany, where around 2,700 medieval manuscripts dated prior to 1500 are available online. Cataloging has almost

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