

TRACING OUR WRITTEN HERITAGE CHALLENGES, PERSPECTIVES, QUESTIONS

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ABSTRACT

The paper reflects on the situation of many collections of manuscripts in the countries of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. It is based on experiences gained at the following places and in their manuscript collections: Yerevan (Armenia), Bucharest and Cluj (Romania), Sofia and Plovdiv (Bulgaria), Ohrid (Macedonia), Tirana (Albania), and Zadar (Croatia). The process of creating access to widely unknown collections is described as well as the questions of digitisation, conservation, cataloguing and scientific study. The objectives of the paper are: introduction into the specifics of manuscript heritage, creating sensibility for conservational requests, and contribution to digitising of manuscripts.

KEYWORDS:

mediaeval manuscripts, book conservation, digitisation

Introductory remarks

The countries of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe have become easily accessible in the last two decades. It is only now that we can have a critical look at the written heritage housed there in depositories of manifold kind and quality. There is a range of highly valuable sources within this part of the written European heritage. The most prominent among them are: manuscripts and incunabula (early prints until 1500). This article concentrates on manuscripts and manuscript collections especially in the Eastern and South-Eastern regions of Europe.

Experience of the last years has evidenced that nearly everything has to be done to make known and accessible vast, as well as small collections in remote places, to protect manuscripts from further degradation and to exploit them scientifically. There are even cases of „clandestine“collections, some of them being known but to a handful

of persons: I call them „hidden manuscript treasures“. The question is urgent in some sense, for the storage situation in several cases is highly critical (mostly because of moisture and humidity). And there is a further menace: selected manuscripts or parts of them (single folios) are increasingly considered as objects of commerce, mainly illegal commerce. This means that many good objects are lost for scientific studies for a long time, others are mutilated and some disappear forever.

Collections

Identifying collections

Although the number of places where manuscripts are housed is known, it is a permanent task to trace out the variety of small collections in remote places in order to finally get a more comprehensive knowledge of what we have. We should design a landscape of places with manuscripts. This is valid not only for the Western Balkan countries. Yet we do not have a repertory for any country in the region giving answer to the questions: Where are the books? In what places do we find them? And what do we find there? These questions are simple but fundamental. If we had such a map we could calibrate the work to be carried out. It would allow us to *systematically* match the situation. – I would like to compare this situation with a state which wants to impose taxes. First of all, it would be helpful to know the number of inhabitants, which means to organise a census. Let us have a census of manuscripts.

First message: *there is an inevitable necessity to design the map of places with manuscripts.*

Big and small collections

Besides the big national libraries, state archives, museums and university libraries we find a lot of small collections. Such small collections are often considered to be “minor” – obviously due to the small number of manuscripts. And frequently they are treated as being of marginal value, unimportant. We may distinguish between two cases of small collections:

- the case of a collection or a holding within a big library,
- the case of a separate collection in a remote place.

Let me give some examples.

Case one:

Even on the shelves of the impressive *Austrian National Library* in Vienna we will find manuscripts, which are obviously forgotten. Eleven

Syriac manuscripts are sheltered there. Indeed, the number is not overwhelming at all. This collection has been ignored somehow, up to this day, although there is a pretty well designed manuscript among them: the famous one, which was the *Vorlage* for the first printed New Testament in Syriac characters in 1555 by Widmannstetter. But we do not have a descriptive catalogue of the *Syriaca* here or at any other place in Austria. What we actually have is a meagre handwritten inventory list. I suppose we can find comparable situations in several other big libraries. **Second message:** *even in easily accessible and well established Western libraries we may find "hidden" manuscript treasures.*

Case two:

In Macedonia, on the Ohrid Lake, a small museum is housing a collection of 95 manuscripts. All of them are Greek, except four Slavic ones. Again, a descriptive catalogue does not exist. Among the Greek codices one is surprised to find a palimpsest manuscript, a *codex rescriptus*: more than 400 vellum folios destroyed and replaced by another Greek text. The first layer of the text has not yet been identified. By the way, in cooperation with the Ivan Dujčev Centre for Slavo-Byzantine Studies of the Sofia University we are going to promote the catalogue.

Ohrid is situated in a region where cultures have met. Latin, Greek, Slavic, Turkish and Albanian influences can be perceived in this area. This is evident from the buildings of the town. But some aspects of this reality are inscribed like sediments in the written heritage as well. We are still lacking a systematic study of what can be found there.

Case three:

Cluj, Koloszar, Klausenburg, is a lovely town in Siebenbürgen, Transylvania/Romania. There we may visit three fine libraries holding manuscripts. One among them is the Library of the Romanian Academy of Sciences – a modest building with the charm of the socialist architecture of the late sixties or early seventies. One cannot imagine what they have on their shelves, among others there is a range of Greek and Latin manuscripts, a collection of Arabic and Hebrew manuscripts as well as fragments, and – fully astonishing – some dozens of Persian manuscripts. I would never have expected such manuscripts to be stored at such a remote site, deep in the Romanian province. Of course, there are no good catalogues of all these objects.

Third message: *there are some small collections in remote places which deserve our attention, too.*

Clandestine collections

There is another category of collections, which can be considered as “clandestine” – manuscripts which are kept hidden. How can one talk about such collections? There are cases where just a few persons have knowledge of the existence of a local manuscript depository, a depository that should not be made public because of certain historical circumstances. We would find such cases in Turkey for example, but certainly, elsewhere, too, and not only in the countries of the Middle East. In several regions of the world there is still the danger of books being burnt or confiscated by the state, by local authorities, by religious fanatics and so on.

Fourth message: *there are collections we cannot and should not touch now.*

Access to collections

Once you have identified a collection the problem arises of how to create access to it. This is the key question, a question of crucial importance. There are various reasons why a responsible person does not want to open a collection. We are confronted with the most delicate situations: e.g. the collection of manuscripts in the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem. Here access is strictly denied. Permission depends on the one person in charge of the library. In some cases one may get the doors open only after years or never in a lifetime.

One might add here the question of the access to the Glagolitic manuscript treasure on the small island of Košljun in Croatia.

But these are not the standard cases. Finally – and this the result of our long time experience: *Getting access, working in a collection and working with persons on site is a matter of confidence and trust.* Let us consider this to be our **fifth message**.

Digitisation*Digital recording*

It is quite clear that the manuscripts in all collections have to be fully digitised. In the case of major collections [referring to quantity] this process will cover a long period of time. This situation would demand solutions beyond the main scope of a comparatively small research institute. The other case which is more frequent in the Balkan region is the collections housing several dozens or few hundreds of manuscripts each.

Just to indicate some of the main places where we have visited libraries in the course of the last years and where we have been working for a longer period of time (in alphabetical order):

Bucharest: Library of the Academy of Sciences, dozens of manuscripts

Cluj: University Library, Municipal Archives, Library of the Academy; hundreds of manuscripts

Etchmiadsin: Library of the Catholicos, some 1,000 manuscripts

Maribor: Episcopal Archives, hundreds of manuscripts

Ohrid: already mentioned, 95 manuscripts

Plowdiv: Ivan-Vazov National Museum, more than 300 manuscripts, mainly Greek

Sofia: Ivan Dujčev Centre for Slavo-Byzantine Studies: 451 manuscripts, Greek, Slavic, Turkish from the Ottoman period

Tirana: State Archives, 120 manuscripts, among them the famous Codices Beratinus I and II

Yerevan: Matenadaran, more than 14,000 manuscripts

So far, we succeeded in establishing cooperation with Sofia, Ohrid, Maribor, Yerevan and Tirana. These are the places where we started or we are going to start digitisation of manuscripts.

Our way of cooperation is to find funding to enable our partners to carry out the work. We are giving grants to persons doing the boring work of digitisation. This job demands special abilities: good concentration, and above all a good feeling for the sensitive objects – all of them are originals, all of them are unique. We are financing or co-financing technical devices, we are giving necessary support.

But digitisation is not that easy as it might seem. Dealing with manuscripts is not to be compared with conventional mass-digitisation. There are two demands to be dealt with: conservational aspects and scientific needs. I will focus on these exigencies in the following topics.

The sixth message: *Digital recording has to respect the main guidelines of care and conservation.*

Presentation on the web

After digitisation, it is always the question of what and how to present on the web. Is it necessary to provide all the data collected? We are in favour of the model of producing a sort of trailer of each manuscript for quick presentation. The complete set of data may be made accessible via

databases with a password system. Additionally, we would prefer access free of charge for scholars and non-commercial use. This is a question which can be answered in many different ways, of course. Anyhow, it is necessary to create Internet portals to provide information about the manuscripts which are already digitised.

Long-term storage and creation of metadata

I am not an expert in this field, but I have got the impression there is already a variety of good solutions. It does not seem necessary to me to reinvent the wheel. One could create synergies with the help of partner institutions. Perhaps I am mistaken on that point.

Care and conservation

The conservator's diagnosis

Upon the first encounter with a collection, it is of primary importance to scrutinise the storage conditions of the manuscripts and to check each single object. Thus, it has to be decided if any book conservation or even restoration is necessary, and if so, to determine what needs to be done. It is a normal situation that parts of a collection or single objects are damaged. In several cases present conditions might cause further harm.

One of the most menacing enemies of the librarian is humidity along with the invasion of insects. Let me describe the situation of the Ohrid collection when we came there for the first time in 2007. All the manuscripts were squeezed into hermetic safe-like metal boxes, possibly for safety reasons. There was no air at all circulating in these boxes. We diagnosed beginnings of cultures of mould and fungi, always a horrifying phenomenon for conservators. The situation is aggravating, for the climate near the Ohrid Lake is always humid. But there are hopeful measurements on the way.

We were confronted with a similar situation in the Albanian State Archives in Tirana. There they reserved a new room for the manuscripts, but again without sufficient air circulation.

You may compare these places with the former situation in the Franciscan monastery here in Zadar. We are convinced that you can solve the humidity problem in a good way.

The seventh message: *creation of good storage situation is a prime concern.*

Conservation versus restoration

The question always arises: what shall we do with a damaged book? One cannot give a general answer. Each case has to be decided individually. Conservation is cheap in general, restoration is normally more expensive.

The eighth message: *whatever you do, try to preserve any information that could be useful to understand the contents, the production or the use of the book.*

The ninth message: *whatever you do, it should be reversible.*

Preparing a manuscript for digitisation

In several cases it is immediately evident, that a manuscript cannot be digitised in the form it was found. That is particularly true of fragmented manuscripts and mutilated single folios. These objects have to be prepared for the process of digitisation, which is stressing the object anew. Another important preparatory step should not be skipped: cleaning the object. That is what your students have been doing during the last year in the Library of the Franciscan Fathers, under the auspices of Marijana Tomić and Father Tomislav.

Digitisation as an instrument for the conservator

Digitisation is a very useful instrument for conservators themselves. They have to record all measures they have taken. When doing so, conservators are able to create veritable databases about bindings, ink corroded papers and all other kinds of damage and non-damage phenomena which one can find in a manuscript.

Laboratories for book restoration

The situation concerning laboratories here and in the neighbouring regions is somewhat desperate. We saw so many places where there is no laboratory at all and some places where there exists a laboratory, but ... it lacks everything: materials, instruments, working technical devices. We cannot bridge this gap easily. Regarding the situation here in Zadar, we cannot imagine, that a central national laboratory (e.g. in Zagreb) is able to treat the huge amount of books, not to mention the books from Split and Dubrovnik and elsewhere. It seems to me absolutely necessary to enable collections to do what is to be done in their own locations. Thus, in the future subsidiarity should be the prevailing principle.

[In parentheses: All the laboratories I have visited (in Sofia, Yerevan, Plovdiv and Tirana) are headed by chemists. All the staff I saw there –the department for book restoration in the Matenadaran comprises 14 persons – are female. Is this a good message? No, it is not. All of them, at all the places mentioned are the worst paid.]

Of course, it is essential but not sufficient for the exigencies of this job to be a good chemist. The restorer has to acquire different additional skills, binding techniques in particular. It is important to study these techniques and the materials used for historical bindings, because the bookbinding is the immediate and organic protection of the book.

Scientific work

The catalogue – a scholarly task

I always admire former generations of scholars who were able to spend half of their life in libraries in order to elaborate the catalogues. And there is a number of descriptive catalogues of the highest scientific level. All the newly discovered, newly opened collections have to be made public. In many cases we just have inventory lists, providing only poor information, often not much more than the title and the shelf-mark.

An example:

In the University Library of Cluj one must distil the existence of the Armenian collection out of several hundreds of file cards written in a neat and fine hand of the late 19th century – in Hungarian language. Even for the archivist it is hard work to identify the objects. It still remains a prominent task to work on detailed manuscript descriptions.

Another message: *describing manuscripts is a scholarly task of prime importance.*

The reading behaviour

There seems to be a conflict here. Scientists nowadays normally are not interested in a library or in a collection as such. Usually they are not even interested in the book as a book. They are users of a library, readers of books, they want to study and compare texts, very often they are looking for illuminations – sometimes even ignoring text and context, they are working on decoration, on this and that. Repeatedly I could even see that scientists – the main users – were not aware of conservatory demands, e.g., they open a manuscript like a paperback of our days.

Text and picture are just two factors of the complex reality of a manuscript. And certainly, the codex in its digital form is a working instrument, extremely helpful, but it is the shadow of a book with a somehow reduced reality.

Another message: *let us re-appreciate the library as a library, the book as a book.*

The role of librarian or archivist

I conceive the librarian's role as some kind of facilitator, one who promotes things in the processes of creating access, in creating awareness for the complex reality of the book and the library, among the users and public. The librarian is not only the preserver of the objects of a depository. He/she is the key person in a library, who should develop projects, records and so on. He/she could invite colleagues and scientists to fill the manifold gaps which occur in libraries.

Another message: *the future librarian is a convinced networker.*

In the final section of this article I would like to stress some more scientific aspects since I am deeply convinced, they are worth to be dealt with. I do not speak about the editing of texts, the customary work of scholars working on or with manuscripts.

Research on manuscript fragments

To my knowledge, at present there is not even one institution worldwide dealing systematically with research of manuscript fragments. This is surprising in view of the large quantity of surviving fragments. At our University Library alone we have some 1,500 items. We find them mainly as part of the bookbinding and as fly-leaves.

What can we expect from this research work? First of all, we do not expect to find *the* one old text, the *Urtext* of anything, or the missing link in various textual traditions. No, dealing with fragments in a more systematic way helps us to virtually reconstruct the traces of a *hidden library*, a library that sank down hundreds of years ago. We have the dispersed remnants of it in our books. Thus we would learn more about the production of books and libraries in mediaeval days. We would learn more about the circulation of books and fragments.

In the beginnings of book printing the shelves of the libraries were emptied, many of the parchment volumes were cut into pieces and stripes. The material, parchment, was still useful. For the book-binders

this waste-material was a lucrative object of commerce. We might put the question: what sort of books did they select to be destroyed and re-used? And there is a further advantage to study these mutilated objects: the amount of palaeographic material increases considerably.

Research on palimpsests

There is, of course, the very special case of palimpsests, re-written parchments. There was a European project on this subject, entitled “Rinascimento virtuale”, directed by the Humburgian colleague Dieter Harlfinger. It concentrated on the Latin and Greek palimpsest manuscripts. This could be no more than a starting point.

In nearly all collections we may find complete codices, quires and single folios of this type. Some weeks ago, the young archivist of the Tirana National Archives, Sokol Cunga, discovered the palimpsest of several pages in a Greek manuscript, and I have already mentioned the palimpsest of Ohrid. There is another one in Sofia – already edited, another one in Plovdiv... So, what is the purpose of such studies?

Again, they give us access to a small semi-hidden library, having been thrown away centuries ago at a very early date. And again the question: why did they single out this or that book to be destroyed?

Research of watermarks

Several persons and institutions have been working on watermarks in the last decades. Watermarks allow us to trace the way of paper used for manuscripts and prints. Often they are the only hint for dating documents. What we need in this field is more cooperation and coordination. There are existing databases waiting to be fed. Our colleague David Shaw indicated the WILC website.

Research on binding techniques

Although we have the wonderful and comprehensive study on binding techniques done by Alexander Szirmai, our knowledge on these matters must be increased, for there are so many regional and even local practices and peculiarities. Knowing the historical binding techniques and the materials used is the condition *sine qua non* for good contemporary restoration.

Research of colophons

One of the most neglected objects of research is the colophon. Colophons are notices added by scribes at the end of texts. Eastern manuscripts abound with such *postscrip*ts in quantity and quality (length). They provide valuable information on the context of the emergence of a book. Although Western manuscripts normally do not have extensive colophons, they deserve to be studied systematically.

Research on bi- and trilingual manuscripts

A rather specific topic seems to be the study of bi- and even trilingual manuscripts. But there is not just a philological desire to promote such investigations. In all these Eastern and South-Eastern regions of Europe and beyond, we are confronted with multiculturalism. Let us try to exploit this aspect also: intersection and interference of cultures. In this area let me indicate a very special case: manuscripts of a certain language but written down in an inappropriate alphabet, e.g. Greek writing in Latin letters, or Slavic in Greek. In the last years we started collecting such resources.

Palaeographic repertoires

As there is a good number of mediaeval scriptoria already identified, let us focus on palaeographical concerns. What we are deeply yearning for are palaeographic repertoires for nearly all scriptural traditions. Palaeography is a privileged means helping us to identify texts from which we ignore any context.

Final remark

What you are doing here at the Zadar University, in the monasteries, in the archives and libraries is wonderful. I would say this is a strong local initiative. What we further need are regional and national efforts. And even that will not be sufficient. Let us think big, let us approach a project of European size. We found already so many willing partners in all the countries I mentioned. And I am really glad, that the Zadar University is among them, with so many young colleagues working on various relevant topics.

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U POTRAZI ZA NAŠOM PISANOM BAŠTINOM IZAZOVI, PERSPEKTIVE, PITANJA

Sažetak

U radu se prikazuje stanje mnogih zbirki rukopisne građe u zemljama istočne i jugoistočne Europe. Temelji se na iskustvima rada u sljedećim mjestima i njihovim rukopisnim zbirkama: Jerevan (Armenija), Bukurešt i Kluž (Rumunjska), Sofija i Plovdiv (Bugarska), Ohrid (Makedonija), Tirana (Albanija) i Zadar (Hrvatska). Opisuje se postupak stvaranja pristupa pretežito nepoznatim zbirkama te pitanja digitalizacije, zaštite, katalogizacije i znanstvenog istraživanja te vrste građe.

Cilj ovoga rada je to da uputi u specifičnosti rukopisne baštine, stvori osjetljivost za potrebnu zaštitu te pridonese digitalizaciji rukopisa.

Ključne riječi: srednjovjekovni rukopisi, zaštita knjiga, digitalizacija