Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies

An Introduction

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5. The physical description (PAn)

From a practical point of view, even at different levels of investigation, both analytical and summary descriptions are expected to include a description of the main features of the ‘objects’ to be catalogued. Even though there is no accepted definition of what exactly those main features are, they can be grouped in four categories, as a pragmatic way to overview them: 1) the manufacture of the manuscript and its physical features; 2) the contents; 3) the history of the manuscript after its making; 4) the bibliography related to these three categories. Mainly because of national traditions and field habits, there are no standard ways of organizing these categories or the features within each of them. For example, where should the miniatures and ornamentation in a codex be dealt with? Some would bring them up alongside the textual content; others would consider them at the same level as the writing; other would rather put them in a fifth category.

As a general tendency in the past thirty years, the physical description of the codex has received more attention than before, probably due to the spread of a codicological awareness and wider interest in the objects as such and their conservation. Consequently, the space dedicated to the physical features in each description has grown considerably; while the relevant information was traditionally condensed to a few points in a few lines, it is often now either a large paragraph containing all the features addressed—where the information is not always easy to find—or a series of paragraphs, one per feature, each with its own heading.

No matter how skilful the cataloguers or how big the cataloguing team can be, the heads of the cataloguing project are always faced with the need to make a series of choices, for example: (1) Which features are to be described, and which ones are not? (2) How deeply is each feature to be described? Which aspects thereof must be addressed? In reality, it is scarcely possible to give all the information specialists in the related fields need or would like to have. It is however possible to draw their attention to objects which can be potentially interesting to their work, allowing them thus to study them later according to their standards; (3) According to which formal rules are they to be presented? Usually, there are many possible solutions, which are not always fully satisfactory, as a few examples below will illustrate.

However, because of these many preliminary and sometimes unconscious choices, there is no such thing as ‘an objective description’ of any manuscript. Every description is necessarily a subjective interpretation of the object; but within the frame of these initial decisions, the cataloguers can strive to discriminate between what they observe and the conclusions they draw from it, criticize themselves, and systematically, clearly and usefully bring the data to their future readers. There are various ways of taking the many initial decisions, for example, again, according to the surrounding habits, or haphazardly according to one’s personal interest. But the description of a codex can also be seen as the place where a global historical assessment of the object can be made by a person who can actually see and study it—and in many cases this is the only chance in a long period of time for this assessment to be made. An awareness of this opportunity and potential, and a readiness to exploit them will help in making appropriate decisions, as the description of the physical features of the object is an important part of this assessment.

This short sub-chapter is only a brief and incomplete survey and discussion of some of the main physical features of the codex, as one finds them in catalogues. They roughly match the main features expounded in Ch. 4 § 4, because they also play a role in understanding the internal structure and constitutive history of the codex, but this is not the place to discuss them in depth.

One is struck by the excessive level of heterogeneity in the descriptive solutions regarding the physical features of the manuscripts, especially since the features described are essentially the same in the various cultural areas, and the solutions used are not all equally convincing. By sharing remarks and illustrating a few solutions among many possible options, the author’s double goal is to help cataloguers reflect on the meaning of a physical description before they start their work, and encourage them to define their own practice better, explain it clearly to their readers, use it systematically, and, as a result, more efficiently communicate the fascinating dimension of the physical features of ancient handwritten books.

He also hopes to contribute to bringing some harmonization to the way the most basic and universal features of the book as a physical object are described. More theoretical discussions and some examples of the potential scholarly use of this information can be found in specialized codicological studies (see Ch. 1 § 1). Some practical information can also be found in some general publications (for example, Géhin 2005; Clemens – Graham 2007, 129–133; Petrucci 2001); or in sometimes outdated cataloguing rules for

* The author warmly thanks Marilena Maniaci for her comments as he was preparing this subchapter.
national projects (for example in Germany, Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft 1992, as well as Riecke 2009; in Italy, Jemolo – Morelli 1990, De Robertis et al. 2007); or in introductions or ‘companions’ to more local cataloguing initiatives (for example, Del Barco 2011, vii–xvii; Layton 1987, liv–lxvi; Andrist 2007b). Peter Gumbert’s method of quickly and efficiently compiling an inventory of larger collections in a sound way could easily be adapted to the needs of oriental manuscript collections and deserves a special mention (see Gumbert 2009a, 2009b; see also Ch. 4 § 4.5).

As catalogue descriptions can be structured in different ways, for example according to the whole codex, or the codicological or production units (see Ch. 4 § 4), the neutral expression ‘description unit’ designates here whatever part of the codex is being described.

5.1. Page / folium numbers

Before presenting some of the main features of the physical description of a codex, some recurring situations about the way manuscripts’ pages are sometimes numbered must be briefly mentioned.

The two usual ways to number pages in a codex are by folium (plus the indication recto or verso) or page numbers, starting at the beginning of the codex and ending at the end thereof. But it happens that these two methods are mixed within the same codex; and the numbers sometimes start afresh at the beginning of the production units or even of each text. No matter what the situation, the readers need to know about it immediately, since it is a key to understanding the description and, for the future users of the codex, to finding whatever they need in it. Whenever the codex to be described is neither thoroughly paginated nor foliated, it is strongly recommended to ask the responsible librarian to foliate it before beginning the description, in order to avoid mistakes and facilitate the location of the features described.

Cataloguers are often faced with special situations, including unnumbered folia (gaps), numbers used more than once (doublets) or unused numbers (jumps). Should then the codex be renumbered starting with the first problematic page or folium? Even though it could make sense to do so (as some libraries do), it brings new difficulties in cases where the codex has already been referenced in some publications. Modifying the numbering could result in making previous literature, including scholarly publications, hard or impossible to use correctly. However, if the codex has received no attention (or very little) in publications, renumbering it is harmless; as a preventive working method, the old numbers should never be erased, but just crossed out. If the problematic numbering is not modified, there are still several ways to create an unambiguous system where no two folia or pages have the same number, for example by adding one or two stars (or adding ‘bis’ or ‘ter’, or ‘a’, ‘b’... etc.) to the repeated numbers, and adding numbers (with stars, or ‘bis’, ‘ter’ etc., maybe even in square parentheses to stress their late inscription) to unnumbered pages or folia.

Another problem sometimes occurs with a codex bearing two or more numbering systems; there are even situations in western libraries where Hebrew or Arabic manuscripts have received a modern foliation according to the Latin order of the pages against an original foliation in the natural order of the content. Again, the cataloguers must make their readers aware of the situation at the beginning of the description and clearly tell them which system is being used in the catalogue.

The numbering system used in the catalogue, which must of course match the main or best visible system in the codex, can be expressed in different ways, for example through a small formula like ‘p. 1–16, f. 17–104, 104bis, 105–110, 121–216’.

5.2. Number of folia

There seems to be a consensus among catalogue writers that each description should include the number of folia at the beginning of it. Indeed, there is an obvious interest for the readers or the owners of a codex to know how many leaves there are in a manuscript, as it allows one to visualize ‘how thick’ the volume is and also possibly determine whether a leaf has been lost since the catalogue was published.

However, there are various ways and sometimes a certain amount of confusion on how to communicate this very basic information. Some include all the folia in their figures without differentiating the end-leaves, even though these belong to the binding of the codex (see below); as result, it is not possible easily to find out how many folia are from the more ancient time(s). Others exclude the end-leaves or even any empty leaf before the first text page and after the last one, so that the total number of folia remains a mystery.
In a modern catalogue, the readers can expect to distinguish clearly how many folia are used as end-leaves and in the main body of the book. Among several good ways of giving this information, one can mention short formulas with the structure ‘el body el’, which have been widely adopted albeit with many formal variations. For example, a simple codex made of 3 end-leaves, then 240 folia, then 3 end-leaves could easily be represented as ‘III, 240, III’. Using a similar convention, a more complex codex made of 2 end-leaves of the current binding, then 1 end-leaf of an older binding, then 160 folia of a first production unit, then 50 folia of another production unit, then 3 end-leaves of the current binding could be represented as ‘210 f. = (2; 1) 160; 50 (3)’. Some catalogues mention numeration problems in this overview, rather than separately (see above), for example: ‘210 f. = (2; 1) 160 [p. 1–200; 200bis–ter, 201–319]; 50 (3)’. In case of recurring problems, the resulting formula can be hard to read, no matter how correct it is.

5.3. Writing support (for a theoretical discussion, see Ch. 1 § 1.1.1–3)

In catalogues, this important feature is always dealt with, but the depth of details varies a lot according to the type of support, the time available and the peculiarities of the codex.

**Parchment:** not much extra information is generally given about parchment in catalogues. In particular, it is not usual to identify the animal. One sometimes finds information about the quality of the original material, for example, if it was a fine or a coarse sheet; if it was irregularly scraped when it was manufactured; or if there are holes or stains. If visible, it is also interesting to note if the parchment was treated with special products including colourings, and the exact extent of it in the codex. Remarks of this kind can be very subjective, and they should be used very cautiously.

**Paper without watermarks:** there are different types of paper without watermarks (besides the reference publications mentioned above, see also Irigoin 1993, Humbert 1998 and an abundant useful sometimes annotated bibliography in Le Léannc-Bavavéas 1998, see also Ch. 1 §§ 1.1.3 and 2.1.4). When dealing with such material, it is expected that cataloguers will give all the information clearly to identify the type(s) found in the codex and, if applicable, the section(s) of the codex where each one of them is used. Paper historians have stressed the following aspects: (a) **the texture:** if it is regular or not; if the surface is smooth or coarse; (b) **chain lines:** if they are visible; if yes, if they are grouped or isolated; if the distance between two chain lines is roughly constant; if yes, roughly how many millimetres; (c) **laid lines:** if they are visible; if yes, if they are straight or curved; if they are regularly spaced; how many millimetres 20 lines take; (d) **format:** projected dimensions of the original sheet, if determinable; (e) **zigzags:** in Arabic paper, a sign called a zigzag can very occasionally be found.

**Paper with watermarks:** watermark analysis, consisting of comparing watermarks in a codex against dated watermarks in albums, is usually rewarding as far as dating the corresponding production unit is concerned, even though doing it properly is often a time-consuming activity. However, a careless analysis often results into a too optimistically precise dating. The various methods of drawing watermarks and their correct interpretation have been described several times (La Chapelle – Le Prat 1996; including theoretical considerations, Irigoin 1968 and Harlfinger 1980b; see also Rückert et al. 2009, 67–73, and the introduction in Sosower 2004; a huge amount of bibliography as well as a watermarks database are available on the website of the Bernstein consortium, <http://www.memoryofpaper.eu/>).

**Combined writing supports:** the presence of combined writing supports is of major interest, and all the types (generally two) must be described. The way they alternate is significant for understanding the making of the book and should also be explained, for example ‘quires made of four bifolia of paper embedded in a bifolium of parchment’; or ‘two quires of parchment followed by four quires of paper’. One finds also embedded quires made of papyrus and parchment bifolia, or two types of paper bifolia of various paper thicknesses.

See also Agati 2009, 57–121; Déroche – Sagaria Rossi 2012, 43–50.

5.4. Quire structure (for a theoretical discussion, see Ch. 1, § 1.3.1–2)

Many catalogues of oriental manuscripts do not pay a lot of attention to the quire structure of the codex, even though it is a crucial information to perceive its internal organization, identify potential losses of folia and the clue to recognizing most of its production units (and, definitely, all the main ones). A precise collation is thus always needed. There are several ways to achieve this goal, again according to local or field traditions.
Using plain words is the easiest way and allows for any situation, but it takes much time and space, and the discontinuities in the quire structure do not usually appear very clearly. This is particularly true when only irregular quires are mentioned: for example, if a quire structure is described as 'all quaternions, except the second, the twelfth and the twentieth quires in seven folia, besides the fifth and sixth quires in six folia, and the thirteenth quire with an added leaf', who can easily tell if the text starting for example at the top of folium 104r is also at the beginning of a quire? Specialists have also designed specific formulas, two of which are frequently used in catalogues. Their principles and main advantages were described by Frank Bischoff in 1992 (see also Agati 2009, 166–172), but they have since been sometimes adapted to better suit the needs of the cataloguers (for example Layton 1987, lvii–lix; Andrist 2007b, 28).

For example, in the case of a codex whose body is made of four quaternions, then a quaternion whose eighth leaf has been cut off, then three quinions, then a quinion to which two leaves have been added, the so-called ‘English formula’ would be

\[1–4^{t}(f. 32) + 5^{t}(f. 39) + 6–8^{t10}(f. 69) + 9^{t2}(f. 81).\]

Each bloc of the formula has three elements: the position of the quire in the sequence; then in superscript the number of leaves in these quires; then in parenthesis the number of the last folium in the bloc;

the so-called ‘German formula’ or ‘Chroust formula’ would be

\[4 IV^{f. 32} + (IV-1)^{f. 39} + 3 V^{f. 69} + (V+2)^{f. 81} + (IV-1)^{f. 39} + (IV-2)^{f. 81}.\]

Each bloc of the formula has three elements again: the number of quires in a row that shows the same basic quire structure; then the related quire structure (roman numerals designate the quire type; generally corresponding to the number of bifolia), to which the number of added or cut-off leaves is specified within parenthesis; then in superscript the folium number of the last folium in the bloc; an ‘improved German formula’ is preferred by the author because, like the English formula, it gives the position of the quires, and like the German formula, it puts the quires in the middle of the string and allows for a precise description of each quire, whenever its composition is known:

\[1–4 IV^{f. 32} + (IV–pos.8)^{f. 39} + 3 V^{f. 69} + (V+2)^{f. 81} + (IV–pos.8)^{f. 39} + (IV–pos.5)^{f. 81}.\]

Compared to the previous formula, the position of the quire in the sequence is now added in subscript as the first element of each bloc. Besides, the position of added leaves is specified according to their number, while the position of cut off leaves is specified according to their position in the quire.

an improved ‘English formula’ is being currently developed for the project MaGI: Manoscritti Greci d'Italia.

Nota bene: within the two main systems, there are slight formal variations according to the cataloguers or special situations; for example, ‘+’ signs are sometimes replaced by commas; sometimes, in the case of an irregular numbering system in the codex (see above), the starting folium of each bloc is also specified.

In the above examples, the ending folium numbers are always specified, even though many catalogues omit them. However, specifying them clarifies the formula and also allows cataloguers easily to check there is no inconsistency in their descriptions, since it is self-consistent: the ending folium number of each bloc must be equivalent to the number of folia in the bloc added to the ending folium number of the previous bloc (0 for the first one).

For parchment manuscripts in cultural areas where Gregory’s Rule is usually respected, it is useful to note whether the hair and flesh sides of the folia respect it, and indicate which side is the first one, because discrepancies could point to losses of folia. For watermarked paper manuscripts, the position of the watermarks is a clue to the type of folding used to make up the bifolia (or even the quires). A change of watermark position could be significant in the production history of the book.

See also Agati 2009, 149–174; Déroche – Sagaria Rossi 2012, 98–108.

5.5. Ordering systems (for a theoretical discussion, see Ch. 1 § 1.3.4)

As described above, the correct order of the folia or the quires was sometimes secured by various types of ‘sequence marks’ in ancient times. Even if these signs were often cut off during the binding or rebinding processes, describing them (or whatever is left of them) often allows for a better understanding of the work of the scribes as well as for checking the unity and completeness of the volume. This is why it is worth noting all the extant quire marks of the codex described, as well as any change of practice and discontinuities in sequences. For example, in the case of quire signatures, it is useful to indicate where
in the quires and on the page the marks are found, in which language, which numeric system (for example, ordinal or cardinal numbers; in full words…) and, if discernible, if they were written by the scribe or another maybe later hand. This last information is important for evaluating such situations where two otherwise autonomous parts are united by a single quire mark system. The author generally gives also the value of the first and last fully readable numbers and the place where they can be found, in order to allow the readers to do any cross-checking they wish.

There is again no standard on how to convey this information, even though it is usually given in full directly after the description of the quires. Some cataloguers have developed specific formulas which could help save space and time (Layton 1987, lvii–lix; more generically, Andrist 2004).


5.6. Ruling (and pricking) *(for a theoretical discussion, see Ch. 1 § 1.3.3)*

It is often difficult for cataloguers to decide what to describe as far as ruling is concerned, especially since recent research has confirmed that some of ruling aspects can vary a lot even within the same production unit (for example Sautel 2012). As a result, ruling is too often neglected in catalogues or even entirely omitted.

*Pricking*: information about the presence of holes made to guide the ruling of the pages is sometimes found in catalogues. However, if their position and some precise information on the ruling type is not also given, this information is not significant.

*Ruling technique*: this is the most frequently mentioned aspect of ruling (even though the instrument used in this process is not frequently mentioned), and is usually and usefully done in a few words. Since variations or clear-cut changes in ruling technique within the description unit are potentially important for understanding the making of the codex, it is worth mentioning them, including where changes occur.

*Ruling type / ruling pattern*: some catalogues give information on what the ruling grids look like, but the way they convey it varies a lot. Some simply refer to a published ruling type diagram (as in Dukan 1988 or Lake – Lake 1934–1945, XI), while cataloguers of Greek manuscripts have for decades been in the habit of using ruling type formulas, following the pioneer work of Julien Leroy (1976), whose description method triggered other ones (for a discussion of the various methods, see Albiero 2011). Today Leroy’s more compact formula is the most used one, while Denis Muzerelle’s more analytical one is gaining momentum, because, unlike the first one, it is open and allows the reader mentally to visualize the grid easily and directly.

For example, let us consider the diagram shown in fig. 4.5.1. Leroy’s formula describes it as ‘22C1a’ (Sautel 1995). ‘22’ means there are 2 extra vertical lines (outside the 2 necessary ones) and 2 horizontal lines in the margin; ‘C’ means the lines used for writing start at the left end of the page and usually stop at the right vertical lines; ‘1’ means there is 1 text column; ‘a’ means the 2 extra horizontal lines are in the top margin. There is no extra letter about the two supplementary vertical lines, because they are equally positioned on either side of the text column.

Muzerelle’s formula describes it as ‘2-2/2-0/0/C’ (see Muzerelle 1994, 1999). ‘2-2’ describes the 2 vertical lines on either side of the text column; ‘2-0’ describes the 2 vertical lines in the top margin and the lack of lines in the bottom one; ‘0’ means that the first and last lines used for writing are normal; ‘C’ conventionally means the lines used for writing start at the left end of the page and usually stop at the right vertical lines.

*Ruling pattern*: should the effective ruling grid of the selected pages be also fully described, including the number and position of the lines, the space between them and the possible pricking holes? Ideally, yes. However, since the
pattern generally varies through the manuscript, it is less characteristic than the ruling type, and therefore should not be ‘preferred’ to it. For the same reason, it is better to follow the recommendation of the codicologists and give the information for one specific page rather than artificially reconstructing a ‘standard’ ruling pattern out of supposed average values, as explained below.

Ruling system: it is generally not described in catalogues, but codicologists have repeatedly expressed the wish that it should be.


5.7. Layout (besides ruling) (for a theoretical discussion, see Ch. 1 § 1.4)

Layout, dealing with the design of individual pages, is distinguished here from mise en texte dealing with the way a specific text is overall organized in the book (see Andrist et al. 2013, 95–100; Gumbert [2010b], no. 331.1; Déroche – Sagaria Rossi 2012, 191–226), for example how the main title and the chapter titles are distinguished from one another, if there is a conscious effort to begin the main chapters at the top of a page, or how the end of the chapters and the text are dealt with. In catalogues, the mise en texte is mostly not described, even if some elements thereof appear in the description of the decoration (see below). Basic aspects of the layout, including the number of columns and written lines per normal column are always explicitly given in catalogues, generally at the beginning; they allow the readers to visualize the pages and quickly compare the description units. More complete information about the writing space is generally also given, but often in an unsatisfactory manner. According to specialists, (1) giving the dimensions of the writing space is more useful if the dimensions of the margins are also given, so that it is possible to locate the ‘black’ and the ‘white’ areas on the page; (2) it is more useful to provide the description of a typical sample page, including the number of lines, rather than information about ‘average’ or ‘extreme’ situations; (3) for two-columns manuscripts, the dimension of the empty central space is also relevant; (4) the writing space should not be confused with the justification square, based on the ruling pattern; as a result, the justification space and the corresponding margins should be measured against the real written area, and not the ruled one; the right-end of the writing area(s) should then be measured on a typical line. Special situations can also be explained. Very few catalogues clearly distinguish them and give both pieces of information.

The way the ruling has been interpreted by the scribe is always an interesting piece of information, even though it is scarcely found in the catalogues: how many horizontal text ruling lines there are; how they effectively relate to the writing lines, for example if the text stands or hangs on the lines, if the first line and last lines are used, etc. Practical information about how to describe the layout is given below (see Sample page).

Other interesting aspects of the page layout include non-rectangular pages, pages with marginal commentaries, or with strongly varying written lines. The same overall principles apply in all these cases, where a higher quality of information is reached if one or several real sample page(s) are described rather than generic unqualified situations. For example, what can a reader deduce from a description telling there are 4–30 written lines per page? On the one hand, incompletely used pages, for example at the end of a text, should not be taken into account; on the other hand, in case of conflicting information within the description unit, one can always write, for example, ‘25–30 written lines, generally 28 or 29’.


5.8. Sample page (for the ruling pattern and the layout)

As mentioned before, codicologists agree that the description of the effective ruling pattern and the effective layout, if done, should represent one (or a few) carefully selected typical page(s), rather than an ‘average’ or reconstructed ‘normal’ grid or text area. There are various ways to describe a page layout and a ruling pattern. One can again give all the figures one after the other with an explanation, but there are also several possible methods allowing for a more or less easy to visualize representation of it, like Muzerelle’s method to describe the ruling pattern of a specific page, which can also be adapted to describe its layout, as sketched now.

Describing the ruling pattern: according to Muzerelle’s method all the horizontal then vertical distances between the lines are given, together with a series of signs both symbolizing the lines and indi-
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cating their position relative to the text area (see Muzerelle 1999, 155–156). For example, in the above example (fig. 4.5.1), assuming it is the recto side of a page, the measure could be ‘10 < *5 ≤ 119 ≥ 5 > 15 [× ] 8 ; 5 ; 15 ≤ 160 ≥ 28’.

It means there are 10 mm from the left edge of the page to the first vertical line, and 5 mm to the second line; these 5 mm are used to accommodate initials (sign *) and this second line actually limits the writing space (≤), which is 119 mm wide; the right vertical lines are also 5 mm distant from one another, and the right margin, which has been significantly trimmed (|), is 15 mm broad. After the sign ‘x’, the distance between the horizontal lines is described on the same principles. However, the author always provides vertical information before horizontal one.

Describing the page layout: the method used by the author is inspired by Muzerelle’s method for ruling patterns. The following example describes the written space for a two column page; both vertical and horizontal dimensions are taken in the middle of the page:

‘(p. X) m columns, n lines –
total height of the page × total width of the page –
(size of the top margin) vertical writing area (bottom margin) ×
(size of left margin) left column (central empty space) right col. (right margin)’.

In practical terms, this could take the shape ‘(f. 36r) 1 col., 22 l. – 167 × 109 mm – (21) 116 (30) × (17) 28 (5) 28 (31) mm’.

The cataloguer can then take advantage of the fact that this method is self-controlled: adding all the vertical information should result with the same value as the total height; the same is true with the horizontal figures.

In practice, both pieces of information can easily and meaningfully be combined, for example in Andrist et al. 2013, 162:

‘Pages: (f. 102r) 1 col., 29 l. – 264 × 218 mm =
text: (43) 162 (59) × (26) 107ca (85ca) mm.’

5.9. Script (for a theoretical discussion, see Ch. 2 § 1).

Script is usually mentioned in the catalogue descriptions. However, there is no common practice in the catalogues, nor, on the theoretical level, any widely admitted objective way of describing it or even a widely accepted terminology. Some would like to have a full description in words, while others deem it too much linked to specific scholarly traditions and would just date the script (if possible) and publish a picture of it. In-between, there is a long continuum of different possibilities. Let us share some subjective considerations on this very subjective and sensitive topic from a cataloguing point of view. (a) For sure, no matter which solution is preferred, a picture of the script will definitely make more sense to most of the readers than whatever is written, especially if the script on the picture is legible. In fact, many palaeographers prefer to get a 100% sized small part of a written page, or a good sized picture on the internet, than a strongly reduced full page in print. As a result, no matter what the basic description options are, it is a good idea, if possible, to publish also a sample of each script. (b) Most of the oriental traditions have some words to designate broad types of scripts (see Ch. 2) and it would not make sense not to use them in catalogues. For those cultural traditions where the story of script is advanced enough, it also makes sense to suggest a copying date and/or place according to the script, and compare it to the other dating elements. If one does not feel confident enough in dating scripts, it is not wrong to ask a specialized colleague. (c) Writing in a codex is often based on a system of several scripts used in different textual situations, often combined with a change of ink or size (see Andrist et al. 2013, 95–100); for example, there could be one script for the main body of the text and some others for the various levels of titles, the first words of the text or the chapters, the marginal commentaries, the colophon, etc. (d) Before cataloguers choose to give a full description and/or use a technical terminology, it is worth asking themselves how clear the resulting paragraph will be to most of the readers, at least to people working on the same cultural world. As terminology also evolves, including new meanings for old words, it is in any case necessary to provide some bibliographical references in the introduction, which will give much later readers a chance to understand the description correctly. (e) Describing a script, or a script system, is not the same as describing the way it is executed or its quality (see Ch. 2 § 1). Information on both these things is interesting and may contrib-
ute to a subjective evaluation of the quality of the production unit. Nor is it the same thing as identifying a scribe; as a result, information on the script is expected even if the scribe is named in a colophon or was recognized by the cataloguer or another specialist. (f) As far as assessing the codex is concerned, it makes sense to distinguish how many script systems as well as how many different hands there are, and where (or according to which ‘rules’) they change. If a secure result cannot be reached, because of the peculiarities of the scripts and the hands, the available time and/or the competence of the cataloguers, it is best not to give this type of information.

5.10. Decoration (see also Ch. 1 § 1.5.1 and Ch. 4 § 3.2)
The state of the description of decoration in catalogues is much like the script:
– usually catalogues give some information about it, especially when it has to do with miniatures or the use of coloured ink;
– there is however no common practice among cataloguers;
– neither is there any widely accepted objective way of describing decoration in words nor any standard general terminology (at least not in all the cultural areas, even when art historians are involved). Admittedly, the decoration of some codices is a complex achievement and its description cannot be fully done in a standard catalogue (but see Ch. 4 § 3.2 on specialized catalogues). As a result, there are various scholarly traditions, generally using their own terminology;
– pictures generally communicate it much better than any verbal description;
– evaluating the decoration in a reasonably subjective way in a catalogue is usually accepted, since it helps visualise the quality level of the description unit;
– a technical analysis is potentially useful for dating and locating the description unit;
– decoration often also works as a system adding sense or legibility to the main content and ‘usability’ of the book, as it often underlines the structure of the content and the hierarchy within each text copied (see also Ch. 1 § 1.5.1 and other tradition-specific relevant paragraphs in Ch. 1). For example, as far as the non-illustrative decoration is concerned, the title and beginning of a text is often particularly enhanced by decorative elements, while chapters and smaller text units can begin with various levels of coloured and decorated initials, which help the readers both better to understand the text and more quickly to find particular parts of it. Thus, describing the major aspects of the decoration also allows the readers better to understand the strategies of the people producing this unit as far as the mise en texte is concerned.

There are several reasons why the interest in the decoration is traditionally greater than in the script: because of its visual impact; or the implied monetary value, both at the time of production and now; or the greater fragility of the codex; sometimes also because of its significance for the history of art.

The author’s current way to avoid too subjective a description and present usable information is inspired by Canart 2005, and follows the following principles: (1) firstly, miniatures are singled out and described with the help of an art historian, or very briefly on the basis of existing publications; (2) secondly, the main elements of ornamentation are classified (in the typology of the relevant cultural area); (3) each major element is described individually, giving its location in the codex, position on the page, measurements, used motifs and colours; (4) other and more common elements (common initials, rubrication, ornamental patterns, etc.) are described en bloc.

For an example of a specialized catalogue, see Hutter 1977–1997; her cataloguing practice is explained at the beginning of each text volume.

5.11. Bindings (for theoretical considerations, see Ch. 1 § 1.7)
In the cataloguing habits of the oriental cultural areas, there is a fairly widespread tradition of mentioning the binding of the codex. However, it is usually limited to the most visible external aspects thereof, while specialists, mostly restorers, have developed very complex protocols for the technical description of all the analysable elements of binding (see for example Grosdidier de Matons – Vinourd 2010; see also <http://www.studite.org>). It is of course not expected that standard catalogues should provide such descriptions, but, depending on the available time, a systematic description of the following not-too-difficult to observe elements (or at least a relevant subsection thereof as far as the cataloguing project is concerned) should be considered, since they are useful to describe the codex, and usually interesting to book or art historians dealing with bindings as well as people in charge of the long-time preservation of the codex.
5. The physical description (PAn)

**General technique and type:** plain information if the binding is a modern or an ancient one, a western or an oriental one. Giving the type, if known (‘half binding’, ‘Limp vellum binding’ etc.), helps to visualize the codex.

**Outer dimensions:** the three basic measurements. Ideally, the information distinguishes the width of the board and the width of the object, including the thickness of the spine.

**Sewing:** number of sewing stations; sewing supports; materials used.

**Endbands (if any):** the material; the colours and patterns of the threads, if any.

**Boards (if any):** the material (wood, cardboard); if visible, the technique how the thread(s) or supports are fixed.

**Spine:** its shape (rounded, straight…); how many raised bands, if any.

**Covering and decoration:** the material, colour and extent of the covering (the outside and the inside of the boards); the decoration (embossed ornamentation, gilding, etc.). Specialists are always interested in a full-size reproduction of the tooling.

**Clasps (if any):** the position, material and working system of the clasps; state of preservation.

**End-leaves and paste-downs:** the number of front and back end-leaves (if not already given), and a description as of any writing support. In the case of paper, an analysis of the watermarks, if present, can result in a good dating of the binding; however, one must make sure the sheets were not reused from an older binding or added during a later restoration.

**Edges:** if the edges are angular or rounded; if they were decorated (coloured, gauffered…).

**Remains of previous bindings:** traces of previous bindings, if any, including unused holes in the gutter, reused end-leaves, traces of clasps, etc. Other elements in the codex can indirectly also point to previous bindings, such as trimmed marginal notes, ancient quire signatures or similar.

**Inscriptions:** possible notes or ancient shelfmarks on the spine or the end-leaves and paste-downs often preserve important information for tracing the history of the book. Presenting them all at the same place in the description, rather than together with the description of every element, helps see them and evaluate a possible relationship between them.

**Date of the current binding:** based on the previous elements, an assessment of the date of the current binding is often possible. Since the current binding is necessary younger than the latest standard main copying, dating the binding provides a terminus ante quem for the latest scribe’s work. Inversely, dating the copying provides a terminus post quem for the binding. However, there is a priori no other direct chronological relation between both aspects, because, ever since the Middle Ages, manuscripts were often rebound. Unless it can be shown that the quires were bound shortly after being copied and the current binding is the original one, dating the scripts and the binding must be based on two independent analyses. Besides, since decorative elements are sometimes added by new owners in a later time (including the Middle Ages), one must be very careful when using visual elements (stamps, coats of arms, etc.) to date the binding.

As far as describing the binding is concerned, seeking the help of conservators could save the cataloguers a lot of time and guarantee the correct use of standard terminology. Since the general terminology varies among ‘schools’ and is subject to evolution, it is useful, in the introduction to the catalogue, to inform the readers about the system used and give some bibliography. See also Agati 2009, 347–381; Déroche – Sagaria Rossi 2012, 247–280; Szirmai 1999; Mouren 2013.

### 5.12. State of preservation

Many catalogues give an evaluation of the state of preservation of the manuscripts, but there is no rule as far as the place where the information is to be found. Some catalogues combine it with every relevant feature (writing support, binding, etc.), while others make it in an independent paragraph. The depth of the information varies also according to the scope of the cataloguing project.

### 5.13. Conclusion

A good physical description should be reliable and consistent. Reliability is important because both the ethics and the needs of manuscript studies require that one should give and receive information that reflects reality as closely as possible, even though, ultimately, studying the codex itself is the only way to get closer to the full reality of it. Consistency, both in the choice of the features to be described and the
way to do it, is central because it allows the reader to go through all the main features of the codex, and compare the manuscripts on a sound ground. However, systematic consistency is not a goal in itself but a means to understand and communicate better the physical reality of the codex and allow further research. There are exceptional objects and situations, where one needs exceptionally to convey ‘extra-systemic’ information. However, the cataloguer should never intentionally neglect any of the features that are included in the cataloguing project.

The physical make-up of the codex is definitely a language that is worth learning and using. Describing it systematically makes the cataloguer notice details and gather information that can help to assess and ‘communicate’ the codex better.

References