

Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies

An Introduction

Edited by

Alessandro Bausi (General Editor)

Pier Giorgio Borbone

Françoise Briquel-Chatonnet

Paola Buzi

Jost Gippert

Caroline Macé

Marilena Maniaci

Zisis Melissakis

Laura E. Parodi

Witold Witakowski

Project editor

Eugenia Sokolinski

COMSt

2015

4. Syntactical description of manuscripts (PAn)*

‘Finding the breaks in a volume is the most directly relevant task of codicology, especially for those who are interested in texts... But the catalogue—made by a person who did see and handle the manuscript—should at least help the reader to be at least aware of at least the more important breaks. And very many catalogues are deficient in this respect.’ J.P. Gumbert (1995a, 62)

Built on the development of codicology and book historical studies, a new awareness of the ancient manuscript as a complex object gradually developed in scholarly circles in the second half of the past century (for a history of the study of the complexity of the codex, see Andrist et al. 2013, 11–44; see also Ch. 1 § 1.3.5). Scholars noticed that the way data were presented in standard scholarly catalogues often did not make it easy for the readers to understand the historical structure of the object, and sometimes even gave food to the suspicion that this complexity had escaped the attention of the cataloguers themselves (see Gumbert 1995a, 2010a; Andrist 2008). This led to the development of an important new paradigm in organizing the descriptions, which has been spreading in some recent cataloguing projects, a paradigm that needs explanation.

4.1. Most manuscript books are complex objects

Has any reader ever found a full manuscript, containing one text, written in one shot by one scribe in a very regular script, showing no writer’s, reader’s or owner’s notes or marks whatsoever, and still preserved in its original integral and unaltered binding? Maybe such an object, made in recent times, exists. But most of the manuscript books oriental scholars work with are from older times. For example, codices from the Middle Ages that are kept in today’s libraries always betray some—and usually quite many—changes to their original state.

Of course, the level of complexity varies a lot from one book to another. In some cases, it is limited to a few notes and a new binding, or to some restorations and a label with a shelfmark. But in many cases, books bear the scars of an adventurous life. For example, an original unit from the ninth century could be heavily annotated by several enthusiastic readers, then accidentally mutilated in the eleventh century, and immediately but poorly restored. In the twelfth century, a new owner maybe bound it in a larger volume together with similar texts, copied at various times by various scribes, putting his name on the first page. Another fifty years later, his grandson started a new text on the last two leaves, which were empty, and added a small quire in order to finish his copy, etc. There is almost no limit to the types and amount of changes ancient manuscript books may have lived through.

As a result, an ancient manuscript book can be compared to an archaeological site: the original leaves and each set of changes are strata testifying to the progressive making of the object as it is today. If a reader wants to understand the history of this book, he or she has to be able to recognize the various strata and their specific content, as an archaeologist needs to know which layer any object or stone found belongs to (for a similar usage of this metaphor, see Derolez 1974b, 31). In many cases these strata are easily identifiable by the direct users of the book, because they were copied by different hands using various scripts, with a different layout and sometimes even a different material support; older folium numbers or quire signatures often confirm the diagnosis, or even give a clue to the amount of what has been lost. In other cases, the strata are more difficult to identify, for example when a regular scribe, or two scribes with very similar hands, produced two different books in different points in time, which were only later—sometimes much later—gathered together. On the other hand, two scribes or two artists working together on the same project could have produced their respective parts on different quires, with a different ruling and layout, or different techniques: this is also a type of complexity, but it informs the analysts about the working methods of these people, rather than about discrete strata of the book.

As one sees, complexity is also a complex concept. There are several types of strata, and the four most common ones, which allow for describing almost every situation provided enough information is available, can easily be defined. The cases presented in this sub-chapter only aim at explaining the relevance of structured descriptions, and the vocabulary used here serves this purpose only (technical vocabulary and deeper, more thorough analysis are found in the various descriptive systems; for an introduction to them see Andrist et al. 2013, 11–44).

* This sub-chapter has benefited considerably from discussions with and remarks by J. Peter Gumbert, Marilena Maniaci and Paola Buzi, whom the author thanks warmly.

Some strata are ‘paratactic’ constitutive parts of the book. They were produced independently from one another and could fairly easily be taken away without damaging their physical integrity or their content because they begin and end at boundaries between quires and, in normal cases, their content is also self-standing. For example, when two independent books were bound together, there are two strata, but both strata were produced independently of one another; they correspond to two different writing projects. Let us call them ‘primary strata’.

In other cases, like most of the restorations or added supplements on new folia, a new stratum on its own writing support is produced to supplement an already existing one. Both strata could be physically separated, but often with difficulty and damage. One can distinguish two situations:

a) first, when both strata remain autonomous as far as their content is concerned; this occurs for example when the owner of a volume, let us say an old Gospel book in good shape, has some extra texts entirely copied on new quires, for example more New Testament books, and has them then bound with the first book. As far as the projects are concerned, this ‘secondary stratum’ was never meant to stand alone, even though it can be withdrawn without damaging any of the contents. This situation is sometimes difficult to distinguish from two primary strata (or two phases of the same production), but it is important to differentiate between them, because, in a codex, a secondary stratum joined to a primary one implies the circulation of two books, while the presence of two primary strata implies the circulation of three books (see Andrist et al. 2013, 63, 66);

b) second, when one or both content(s) would be damaged if the strata are separated. For example, in the case of an ancient restoration of the first leaves of a codex containing the beginning of a text, on a new writing support, the leaves can theoretically be taken out again or unbound, and each of the two resulting parts is coherent as far as their production is concerned (providing there were no other modifications) but neither of the two resulting parts contains a full text. In the case of an added table of contents into an already existing book, for example, this new stratum can be cut off without damaging the main text; but the cut off leaves make little sense alone. In any case, the leaves of the original book clearly belong to the primary stratum. The new leaves, however, which were never meant to stand alone and are not textually autonomous, can be called a ‘tertiary stratum’.

Added written elements, small drawings in the margins or full texts copied on empty leaves are new contents on already used folia. Even though they can be very important, they are not materially independent production and cannot be physically separated from their host folia without damaging them. These are ‘quaternary strata’.

In some cases, the choice between the strata is not immediately obvious. For example, when a scribe starts a new content in an empty part of an existing book, then uses new folia in order to continue his work, one could think of a mix of a quaternary and tertiary strata. However, this is not the case, because both parts of the new content belong to the same new project and production, which must be clearly distinguished from the already existing production. Since this new production cannot be taken away without damaging the first stratum, it is considered a quaternary one. Another difficult case is that of the lower content of palimpsests. It may seem a special type of quaternary stratum because it is a peripheral production when compared with the main strata of the existing book. However, unlike quaternary strata, the lower production of a palimpsest is older than the main strata including the upper production. Besides, and even more importantly, the lower production implies the existence of another book that it used to belong to. As a result, palimpsests must be considered a special type of primary stratum.

In the past thirty years, codicologists have explored the stratigraphy of the codex from a methodological point of view, searching for new concepts and a new vocabulary to describe it (for example Munk Olsen 1998). This culminated in the first systematic proposal by J. Peter Gumbert in 2003, published one year later, who offered a complete set of concepts and a corresponding terminology, as a result of a long evolution testified by a series of publications (Gumbert 2004; for a survey of Gumbert’s evolution, see Andrist et al. 2013, 14–15, 17–18, 23–26). It is centred on the now popular notion of the ‘codicological unit’, defined in the first instance as ‘a discrete number of quires, worked in a single operation, containing a complete text or set of texts’ (Gumbert 2004, 25); a manuscript containing more than one codicological unit is called a ‘composite’ manuscript. Gumbert also coins a complex vocabulary to designate codicological units which underwent transformations. Even though this system is fully operative and represents a major step forward, it sometimes results in complex expressions or subtle distinctions, which are not

fully convincing (see Andrist et al. 2013, 41–44). Besides, the expressions ‘codicological units’ and ‘composite manuscripts’ are sometimes misused in publications by people who do not precisely understand them, creating regrettable ambiguities. New research was thus triggered, notably around the concept of the ‘production unit’, which can be applied indiscriminately to any stratum of the codex, no matter if it is delimited by a quire or a text boundary. In this new system, ‘production units’ are clearly distinguished from ‘circulation units’, which describe the full state of a codex at a certain point in time. The history of the codex can then be easily modelled as a continuum of circulation units which evolved according to added, removed or shifted production units or pieces thereof (Andrist et al. 2013, 59–81).

Once it is admitted that most manuscript books are complex objects, a few questions, discussed in the following paragraphs, remain. What does this complexity mean to the user of the manuscript? How does it affect the cataloguers and their readers? Is it important, after all, that this complexity be totally or partially made visible in their catalogues? And if it is, what are the best ways to achieve it?

4.2. The importance of the awareness of the strata of the manuscripts

Any historical research on ancient manuscripts relies to a greater or lesser degree on the dating of what is studied. Most of the time, scholars need to know more or less precisely when—and where—what they study was produced. For example, for a philologist working on the critical edition of a text, it does make a difference if a crucial passage was written at the same time as the bulk of the other sheets, or if it is on a leaf restored some years later; in the latter case it could depend on another branch of the textual family and its variant readings should be evaluated differently. If he or she is studying the transmission of a series of small pieces, it is crucial to know if the series was copied together within the same project, or if it was gradually built up through centuries, and if it was partially damaged through time. For art historians, it is potentially very significant if two paintings from different artists are on two pages of the same bifolium, or if both were produced on two independent leaves, later than the date of the copy of the main text. A book historian working on the history of paper cannot escape the question of whether the sheets with undated watermarks were used simultaneously with the ones with dated watermarks, or at a much later time. Any study on the reception of an author or the transmission of an iconographic model is bound, of course, to a reasonable dating of the leaves concerned (see also Andrist 2014).

Dated colophons or notes can only be securely used when it is clear to which stratum they belong: were they written by the main scribe, or added by a restorer a few centuries later? As a result, if a place and time are mentioned, do they apply to the whole codex or only to part of it, no matter if it is written by one or several hands?

The codex is a complex object, and therefore it is, as a whole, an undated object. Any given or deducible date applies only to its own stratum; every stratum has its own date. What matters to most users is the date of the production of the text copy or the picture they are interested in, that is the date of the stratum to which the features they are working with belong.

From a traditional catalogue description, it is often difficult to visualize a codex and its strata, especially if no standard or electronic facsimiles are available. Cataloguers, on the other hand, are working directly on the book, so they are often immediately and intuitively aware of its main strata and, in case of doubt, they can easily check the object directly. It is thus one of the most important basic tasks of a cataloguer to give the reader precise indications about the main strata of the object in question, and their time and place of origin (at least approximately). Ideally everyone using a description in a catalogue should have a way easily to know how many strata the book is made of, their respective extent and the date and place they were produced. In reality, there are many complicated cases, and often there is not enough time for a complete analysis to be made within the scope of the cataloguing project. In this case, the reader ought to find at least correct information on the primary and secondary strata and a brief note explaining the situation.

4.3. Recognizing the major historical strata: the physical language of the codex

As mentioned above, some strata are easily recognizable at first sight; others are more difficult to identify. For obvious reasons, the gradual making of manuscript books leaves scars or marks in them, particularly at the boundary of two strata. Anyone who can ‘read’ and ‘interpret’ these discontinuities in a codex is also in a good position to identify its strata correctly and reconstruct its constitutive history. This is why the physical complexity of the codex can be compared to a language, with its own syntactical rules. One can thus also speak of the syntactical structure of the codex, and also name the strata ‘syntactical elements’.

Fundamentally, any discontinuity can be significant; but places where there are concomitant discontinuities, i.e. wherever several features of the codex change at the same point, are even more significant. As far as primary, secondary, and tertiary strata are concerned, the descriptive features that can reasonably be observed while preparing a catalogue are the following (more details and special cases are discussed in Andrist et al. 2013, 83–110):

The quires. Every primary stratum of a codex was originally delimited either by the beginning or the end of the codex, or by a quire boundary. Most are made up of a series of quires and consequently, if they are bound with another book, the ‘border’ between them is necessarily delimited by a quire boundary.

The quire types. Often, books are made of a series of quires with the same number of leaves, while the last quire may be shorter or longer, in order to fit the remaining content to be copied. A discrepancy in the quire type may point to a mutilation, or to the end of a constitutive part of the manuscript; but it could also be an original irregularity in the quire composition. Of course, the real cause must be further investigated.

Ancient ‘sequence marks’. Scribes, binders or owners used to indicate the order of the folia or the quires by ‘sequence marks’, for example folium numbers, quire signatures, catchwords, religious symbols. Any discontinuities (such as systemic change or apparent errors) in the system could be at the border between two strata.

The writing support. Changes either between major categories (paper, parchment, papyrus) or, within a category, for example between different types of paper or different qualities of parchment, can be significant. Manuscripts using mixed materials, for example quires made of bifolia of paper embedded in a bifolium of parchment must naturally be dealt with at the level of the recurring sequence and not at every discontinuity of material support (two per quire).

The ruling technique. For example, if a part of the codex is blind ruled and another is ink ruled.

The layout, understood as both the resulting grid from ruling (the ruling pattern), and the way it is used. The ruling type can change, but also, for example, the number of written lines, or the way vertical lines in the margins are used.

Scribes, hands, and writing systems. For example if all the titles are written in a special characters and red ink, then suddenly they are written in normal characters and ink.

The decoration principles and characteristics, if any.

The content. Most importantly, where the content changes, and where fully or partially blank leaves are located.

Concomitant discontinuities are more significant. The most important components are definitely quires: a new text at the beginning of a new quire should immediately suggest that there could be two originally autonomous parts; also, a new scribe at the beginning of a new quire should raise the question if both persons were working together on the same project, or if one of them restored a mutilated codex many years later. Blank leaves at the end of a quire within the codex also call for an explanation. Some other concomitant discontinuities are not so important. For example, a change of ruling type almost always occurs at the beginning of a new quire, and a change of hand often means also a change in writing system, but neither is necessarily significant.

The list is just an indication; some features are not applicable in some cases, while other discontinuities could be meaningful (the ink; the presence and estimated frequency of glosses, if any; the style of the miniatures, if any; and so on).

Quaternary strata are usually distinguished by their special position, script and/or content, which represent also discontinuities against their surrounding context. But this is not the place to analyse them more deeply.

Several factors play a role in identifying the strata. Among them, the nature of the considered features: for example, a major change in layout is hard to hide, while a change of ruling system is often hidden and difficult to see. Another factor is the ability and knowledge of the cataloguers. For example, if a cataloguer is also a good palaeographer and has some experience in dating writings, he/she will more easily see the changes in scripts and hands from different centuries. It takes also some skill and practice to see significant changes in ruling types; this is also why it is advisable that cataloguers work in a network of specialists with complementary skills (it is also important they stay in touch with the progress of research in the various areas they need for their cataloguing work, and, from time to time, as possible, try to describe a particular codex as profoundly as possible, in order to improve their skills). Naturally, the state of

the art in related studies plays a significant role. Even if one has good skills as far as recognizing script is concerned, these will be of little use if there are no palaeographic studies in one's field.

Finally, there is the time factor. In a catalogue project the available time often does not allow for checking every aspect of every feature. For example, fully identifying all the watermarks of a codex takes several days.

This is why it is important that cataloguers plan ahead which aspects they are going to check systematically, and which they will apply only to specific objects, depending on circumstances and experience, giving the most attention to the potentially more significant discontinuities (see Ch. 4 § 5.2). In the introduction of the catalogue, the readers should be informed of the choices made.

4.4. Rendering the complexity of the described codex: syntactical types of descriptions

There are various ways to structure a catalogue description of a codex, but not every way makes it possible to inform the readers efficiently about its strata. In the following pages the traditional scholarly structure of a description is first considered, then four alternative types of description, whose overall structure allows a clearer representation of the physical complexity of the codex, are presented.

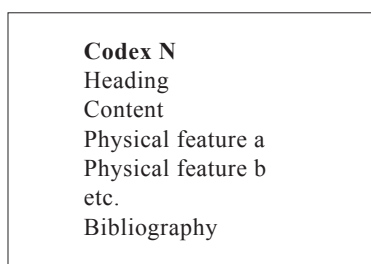
4.4.1 Traditional structure of a codex description

The traditional scholarly catalogues from the second half of the twentieth century represented major progress towards giving the readers a way to perceive, at least partially, the primary strata of the codex. One major reason for this progress was the systematic analysis of the quires (collation), since these are very important for determining the structural parts of a codex, as explained above. Provided the cataloguer worked precisely and the reader carefully compares the quire boundaries against other discontinuities in the description, the latter can often get a good idea of the primary and secondary strata of the codex; but it is work that the reader has to do himself, on his own initiative. (In the best catalogues of this type, most of the tertiary and quaternary strata, like restorations or marginal notes, are also mentioned in specific paragraphs or side comments. But this is by no means always the case, and when it is, it is not always done systematically).

The structure of this type of description can be summarized through the representation in Skeleton 1. Technically, there are many formal variants of this structure, depending on whether the content is described before (as here) or after the physical features, and how paragraphs and small capitals are used, etc. There are also many ways to apply it (see for example Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft 1992; Jemolo – Morelli 1990). But the general principles stay the same.

Since the various categories of information are presented for the whole codex at once, concomitant changes are not obvious, sometimes even difficult to identify. And the conclusion that there are several strata remains fragile because it is a deduction based on the catalogue only and it is not confirmed by someone who has seen the codex (unless there is a clear statement somewhere in the description, of course).

Besides, experience show that descriptions often are not precise enough, including too many errors in the quire analysis; or a 'main hand' and a 'secondary hand' are mentioned, without specification of the folium extent of each; or information about layout is given for one page only, whereas the codex is composed of three main strata. The situation can be dramatic when this type of situation occurs in a catalogue of dated manuscripts, where the given dates should provide landmarks for further historical research, for example history of the scripts, the material supports, the transmission of a text and so on; there are cases where the date written by the hand responsible for a small later addition is presented in the catalogue as the date of the manuscript.

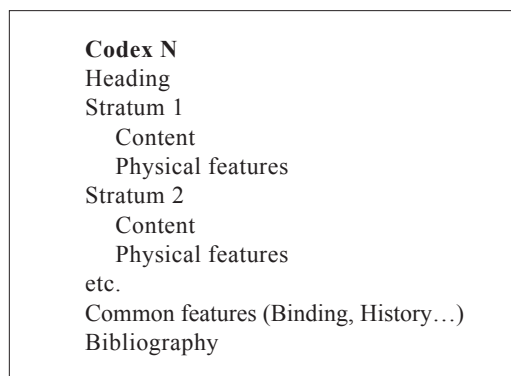


Skeleton 1: basic structure of a traditional scholarly description.

Even if these kinds of situation are not the most frequent ones, they disturb the research and demand new catalogographical solutions. The question about how to represent the main syntactical elements of a manuscript book correctly and usefully in a catalogue description has occupied a number of people since the last decades of the twentieth century. Several systems have been suggested and experimented with, and each of them definitely, though not equally, allows the user to understand the syntactical structure of the codex better.

4.4.2 Syntactical description type A (type 2a in Andrist 2014)

The clearest and easiest way to convey the structure of a codex in a description is to describe each main stratum fully, one after the other, within a more global description of the codex. The resulting basic structure of the description is represented in Skeleton 2.



Skeleton 2: basic structure of the syntactical description type A.

As far as manuscripts in Greek scripts are concerned, this structure was already used by Paul Canart for the description of collections of fragments (Canart 1970; see for example his description of Vat. gr. 1892, 528–540). Since then, this method has been used more broadly, for example in the catalogues of the Bibliothèque nationale de France (see its first mention in the *Catalogue général des manuscrits latins*, see Bibliothèque nationale 1975, 3; for example codex Paris, BnF, Latin 3548B, 46–52. For COMSt-related manuscripts, see for example the description of Paris, BnF, Syriaque 434 in the catalogue of Syriac manuscripts, Briquel-Chatonnet 1997, 178–183).

After a series of pioneering theoretical studies (see the cataloguing rules version 2.0 in Andrist 2003 and the study in Andrist 2006), the catalogue of the Greek manuscripts in Bern applied this structure type systematically, using primary, secondary, and some tertiary strata as description units (Andrist 2007a; for a detailed explanation, see the cataloguing rules 3.0 in Andrist 2007b; for further theoretical developments, see Andrist et al. 2013, 135–169).

Since then, this method has been taken up by various paper and online catalogues or descriptions. One can mention for example the catalogue of the French and Occitan manuscripts in the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin (Stutzmann – Tylus 2007; see for example the description of MS 338, 50–61), where the same structure is also found quite extensively but, unfortunately, not systematically; or the beautiful series *Manuscrits en caractères hébreux conservés dans les bibliothèques de France* (see for example the description of codex Paris, BnF, Hébreu 673 in Bobichon 2008, 54–63), including colour plates *ad locum*, and the relevant bibliography after each descriptive section.

One also occasionally finds online descriptions based on the same principles (see for example the description of codex Paris, BnF, Grec 1823 in the database ‘Archives et manuscrits’ of the Bibliothèque nationale de France where, after the general features, the description breaks down into four ‘Sous-unités de description’ (<<http://archivesetmanuscrits.bnf.fr/cdc.html>>); partially reproduced in Andrist 2014, where other examples in European online catalogues are also mentioned); the new version of the database *Pinakes* fully allows for this structure. However, as far as we know, no electronic catalogue has been entirely organized on these principles, so far (see Andrist 2014).

In this description type, the structure of the description matches the main structural articulations of the codex very well, and thus allows visualizing it. Related elements are described side by side and it is very difficult to mix information which is not contextually relevant. By presenting all the historically related elements of the various features at once, it almost mechanically reveals part of the most important internal history of the codex. This descriptive principle could also allow for a new generation of catalogue

databases, where, providing it is strictly implemented, electronic searches including a date would retrieve all the relevant available data, and only those.

However, in such descriptions ‘per stratum’ there is a risk of losing the general vision of the codex, especially in case of long ‘full size’ descriptions. This is why, in some of the catalogues based on these principles, the initial headings have been expanded into an overview of both the codex and the description (such is the case of the catalogues of the Greek manuscripts in Bern and the Hebrew manuscripts in Paris, in both of which this expanded heading is called a ‘chapeau’; see Andrist 2007a and Bobichon 2008).

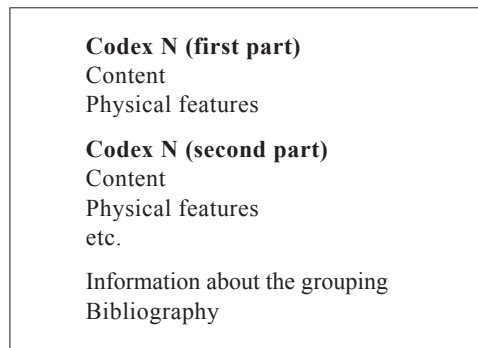
4.4.3 Syntactical description type B (type 1d in Andrist 2014)

A more radical way to use the main strata as the basis for the description is to dedicate a full description to each primary stratum, independently from the other ones, as if it were an independent book, including all the usual descriptive features.

Gumbert is the first theoretician of this type of description. Since the early eighties, he both developed a precise definition of the parts of the codex around the concept of ‘codicological units’ (see above) and published the first practical method, called IIMM (presented below), of using these parts as the primary units for compact descriptions of every type of codex.

The same structural principles are also sometimes used for online descriptions, for example in the database of Syriac manuscripts *e-ktobe*, about some manuscripts made of several primary strata, but, unfortunately, not yet systematically (<<http://www.mss-syriaques.org>>; see for example the description of Paris, BnF, Syriaque 434 in five units).

This structure (see Skeleton 3) is very easy to implement but, as a result, the one-to-one relationship between the number of the descriptions and the number of volumes being described is lost. In online databases, it is more difficult for the user to get an overview of the manuscript, particularly when the online description is obtained as a result of a search; database designers must always provide a way to set internal links to the related descriptions of the same codex within each description, as is for example convincingly done in the relevant *e-ktobe* descriptions (in the printed IIMM catalogues, this function is done through marginal arrows).



Skeleton 3: basic structure of the syntactical description type B.

4.4.4 Syntactical description type C (type 1c in Andrist 2014)

An acceptable compromise between the traditional structure and the syntactical description types A and B consists in numbering each stratum to be described (for example in the heading) and then systematically dividing each usual descriptive feature into as many strata as there are, explicitly using their stratum number.

The use of this structure (Skeleton 4) was suggested by Pamela Robinson as early as 1980, as she was working on Insular mediaeval manuscripts and developing her theory of the ‘booklets’ (Robinson [Pa.] 1980; about this publication and further studies of Pamela Robinson, and their impact, see Andrist et al. 2013, 12–14, 33, 42).

More recently, it was convincingly applied in various catalogues, for example in the catalogue of the Panagia of Chalkē (Kouroupou – Géhin 2008; see for example the description of cod. 90, 259–260) or the catalogue of the Greek manuscripts in Munich (Hajdú 2003; see for example the description of Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cod. graec. 113, 43–48).

The advantage of type C is the possibility for the readers to know quickly all the relevant data in a manuscript for any feature they are interested in. Since catalogues are mostly used by specialists in a particular field, they are thus able to find more quickly all the primary data they need: philologists see all

Codex N
Heading
Content
1. ... of stratum 1
2. ... of stratum 2
etc.
Physical feature (a)
1. ... of stratum 1
2. ... of stratum 2
etc.
Physical feature (b)
1. ... of stratum 1
2. ... of stratum 2
etc.
Common features (Binding, History...)
Bibliography

Skeleton 4: basic structure of the syntactical description type C.

the content at once; art historians immediately find the miniatures and the decorative elements. There is, however, a major risk that they overlook the other features of the same unit, or lose sight of the chronological and contextual discrepancies, and make undue links between the elements they work on. Besides, anyone interested in visualizing each historical unit of the codex as a whole must, for each one of them, browse through all the features of the description.

Syntactical description type D (= type 2b in Andrist 2014)

Type D (illustrated by Skeleton 5) is one type of hybrid solution out of several existing ones. It has been sometimes advocated and used firstly by people interested in text history. It consists in presenting the textual content according to type C, and some or all other features according to type A, in order to get a quick overall access to the contents of the codex. In fact, any feature could be handled so, depending on the cataloguer's interests.

Codex N
Heading
Content
1. content of stratum 1
2. content of stratum 2
etc.
Stratum 1
Physical features
Stratum 2
Physical features
etc.
Common features (Binding, History...)
Bibliography

Skeleton 5: basic structure of the syntactical description type D.

This type is acceptable, providing the strata are also clearly distinguished in the Content section (or any special section). Some rare examples of this type are found in the catalogue Cleminson et al. 2007 (see for example the descriptions of Budapest, OSZK, Quart. Eccl. Slav. 17), where the features Layout, Hand, and Ink are sometimes described per stratum, contrary to the features Content or Paper, described globally, but structured per stratum.

4.4.5 Choosing a syntactical model

The first beneficiaries of any of the syntactical models presented above are the cataloguers themselves, because the structure of the description immediately pinpoints any omission. Besides, it helps them see the main discontinuities in the codex and thus suggests some aspects of its history. As a result, syntactical descriptions clearly contribute to a higher quality in a catalogue, and provide its users with a more accurate and legible presentation of the codex.

But choosing a syntactical model implies also some thinking about which type(s) of strata should be used as the basic description units. All the primary and secondary strata only? Some of the tertiary

strata as well, such as restoration leaves? Or should these be always described together with the strata they are now linked to? In any case, an acceptable descriptive solution must be found for the tertiary and quaternary strata, such as added slips or long notes; they must be either integrated with the relevant main description units, or grouped in some extra common feature unit.

In order to ensure some coherence throughout the catalogue, it is advisable to write up these decisions at the beginning of the project, then stick to them through the cataloguing process and finally inform the users in the introductory pages of the printed or online catalogue.

4.5. *Illustrated Inventory of Medieval Manuscripts (IIMM)*

As mentioned above, in the last thirty years Gumbert has developed, published and used the first method for making small size descriptions based on the structural parts of the codex (see Gumbert 1984, 2009a and 2009b including the description *Rules*). According to this method, called IIMM and meant to produce enriched inventories rather than regular catalogues, each primary and secondary layer is described autonomously, in four paragraphs, each of them taking up one to four lines (most often one line) with, on the opposite page, a full-size black and white picture of a small part of the manuscript.

A look at pages 44 and 45 of his last published IIMM catalogue (Gumbert 2009b) confirms the interest of his method: on these two pages, seven manuscripts, amounting to ten codex layers are described. For example:

BPL 78 is a one-layer manuscript:

Paragraph 1 (one line) gives the shelf-number, the origin and the date.

Paragraph 2 (one line) gives the content.

Paragraph 3 (two lines) gives the physical description, using many abbreviations.

Paragraph 4 (one line) gives the bibliography to the manuscript.

Besides, a 4 × 7 cm full-size reproduction of an extract from f. 2r is given on p. 45.

BPL 76C is also a one-layer manuscript, but the information in the first paragraph uses four lines.

BPL 81 is a three-layer manuscript. The description of the whole codex includes:

Three independent descriptions, one for each layer, but limited to the three first paragraphs of a normal description. Each description is marked in the left margin by an arrow pointing down.

At the end of the series, an extra bloc gives general information about the codex. It is marked in the left margin by an arrow pointing up:

Paragraph 1 (one line) gives the date when the layers were grouped.

Paragraph 2 (one line) gives the bibliography to the whole manuscript.

Three sample pictures, one for each layer, are given on page 45.

By doing so, Gumbert prevents the reader from dating the Hymns of SS Peter and Paul (in part 3, dating from the eleventh century) to the tenth century like part 1, or imagining that the copy of the *Regula canonicorum* (in part 2) was once on the bookshelf of Airvault of Poitiers (part 1).

Even though Gumbert inventories ‘Latin’ manuscripts, IIMM can be used, as it is or with very slight adjustments, for any kind of oriental codex. As a result, IIMM provides an unconventional way to do very compact, systematic and clear ‘syntactical’ descriptions of any codex.

4.6. Misconceptions about syntactical descriptions

Before concluding, it is worth addressing some recurring questions and misconceptions about syntactical descriptions.

1. Contrary to a widespread idea, a syntactical description is not necessarily a long one. IIMM is a good counter-example. For any given ‘depth’ of description, a syntactical description does not result in many more lines than an equivalent traditionally structured description, even when applied to codices of more than average complexity. And it does not necessarily take much more time, as soon as the cataloguer’s eyes are accustomed to reading the language of the codex.

2. As we have already seen, syntactical descriptions are not restricted to printed catalogues of ‘text manuscripts’, but can be used for any kind of description, including for decorated manuscripts, and any kind of cataloguing project, including thematic catalogues or on-line ones. It is foremost a matter for the cataloguer to get into the habit of seeing and representing the codex syntactically. Where electronic catalogues are concerned, none of the above solutions is linked to any particular software or language

or database type, even though some software can make it easier to implement them. In many respects, electronic descriptions are not another world, because they address the same objects, with the same needs for exactness, even though electronics provides more opportunity for retrieving data or making links to images or electronic resources.

3. Syntactical descriptions do not compensate for the shortcomings of the cataloguing team, even when implemented online. The quality of the catalogue, its adequacy to the objects described and the relevance and systematics of its data always depend ultimately on the qualities of the people writing the descriptions.

4.7. Conclusion

Syntactical descriptions were born from the need to understand the strata of the codex better, and to make them better visible. After a few years, they have proved to be a new and improved way to understand and ‘communicate’ ancient Greek and Hebrew manuscripts. There is no reason why Syriac, Armenian, Arabic, and other catalogue readers should not also benefit from it.

As we have seen, the codex is like a language with its own rules, made of small significant details, recurring elements and more or less important discontinuities. When understood properly, this language informs the readers about the stratigraphy of the codex and, ultimately, its history. As Gumbert wrote in a recent email, ‘the stratigraphy of an excavation is not the same as the history of the site, but it is a diagram which provides the facts that are the basis of that history. And the history cannot be drawn in a diagram, but has to be told. But it cannot be told if the basic facts have not first been clearly set out. Similarly, the stratigraphy of a codex is not the same as its history... but it provides the basic facts; and the history of a book cannot be given in a schematic model, but can only be told’. The syntactical description types presented above are privileged ways to express this diagram unambiguously, tell this history in a closing section of the description, and share them with people who usually do not have access to the ‘excavated codex’.

References

Andrist 2003, 2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2008, 2014; Andrist et al. 2013; Bobichon 2008; Briquel-Chatonnet 1997; Canart 1970; Cleminson et al. 2007; Derolez 1974b; Gumbert 1984, 1995a, 2004, 2009a, 2009b, 2010a; Hajdú 2003; Kouroupou – Géhin 2008; Munk Olsen 1998; Robinson [Pa.] 1980; Stutzmann – Ty-lus 2007. Web sources: Bibliothèque nationale de France, *Archives et manuscrits*, <<http://archivesetmanuscrits.bnf.fr/cdc.html>>, last access May 2014; *e-ktobe: manuscrits syriaques* <<http://mss-syriaques.org>>, last access May 2014; *Pinakes* <<http://pinakes.irht.cnrs.fr/>>, last access May 2014.