Codicology or the Archaeology of the book?

A false dilemma

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Among the basic disciplines which my appointment as Reader in Auxiliary Historical Studies at this University entitles me to teach to students of history and other interested persons, codicology, the study of ancient and mediaeval books, has acquired a special importance.

It seems only reasonable, therefore, that in this inaugural lecture we should try to investigate together what codicology means, or might be taken to mean, and how this term came to be applied to a field of study whose roots lie deep in the past.

For those who have never heard of codicology I shall start by giving a brief explanation of the term.

‘Codicology’ derives from the Latin noun codex; also spelt caudex, which originally meant a tree-stump, and later on a block of wood or a board. Etymologically it appears to come from the Latin verb cudere, to cut or hew. Codicology is thus the science of the codex.

By ‘basic disciplines’ I mean those which provide the methodical basis for a main academic subject. This is in opposition to the view expressed by H. J. de Vleeschauwer who, in his Le problème des sciences auxiliaires et son importance pour la Bibliothèque (in: Mousaion XX, pp. 41-42, Pretoria 1960), understands by basic disciplines (sciences de base, sciences fondamentales, Grundwissenschaften) those central disciplines around which are grouped the ‘sciences d’emprunt’ (grosso modo what J. M. Romein in his Apparaat voor de studie der Geschiedenis, Groningen, 3rd edition, 1957 calls ‘aangrenzende wetenschappen’ or ‘circumjacent disciplines’), i.e. the auxiliary disciplines stricte sensu (‘disciplines principalement d’ordre technique, dont toute la raison d’être consiste à la construction d’une science de base et qui trouvent dans celle-ci le but unique de leur existence’) and lato sensu (‘sciences autonomes, ayant leur but en elles-mêmes, mais rentrant occasionnellement dans la matière de la science de base, lorsqu’il y a matière à appliquer l’une à l’autre’). De Vleeschauwer cites as an example of the latter, historical studies as compared to librarianship. Under a auxiliary disciplines in the strict sense he reckons instrumental disciplines such as the ‘classical’ aids to historical studies: diplomatics, numismatics, sphragistics, etc. In this system codicology would belong to the auxiliary disciplines in the wider sense, and the archaeology of the book to those disciplines in their more restricted meaning. See also A. von Brandt, Werkzeug des Historikers, Stuttgart 1960 (Urban-Bücher 33), a critique of which occurs in De Vleeschauwer’s own book.

About the first century B.C. the term *codex* was used to refer to small wooden tablets covered with wax which were used together with or instead of papyrus scrolls for making notes, writing letters, doing schoolwork, transcribing legal acts, and the like. By a process of analogy small blocks of wax tablets\(^1\) joined together by rings, and bundles of papyrus or parchment sheets folded or otherwise joined together, also came to be known as *codices*, with the result that as the scroll, or *volumen*, gradually made way between the second and the fifth centuries A.D. for the 'book-block', consisting of gatherings made up of parchment leaves — usually in some kind of cover — the name *codex*, suggesting as it did the resemblance between the wooden block and the book-block, began quite naturally to be used for this kind of written work.

Note that at this time the term *codex*, like the terms *volumen* and *rotulus*, referred in the first place to the form of the written work and not to the fact that it was written by hand. This was only natural since *artificialiter scribere* or printing did not yet exist\(^2\).

The use of the Latin word *manuscriptum* in the sense of *codex* seems, therefore, to be of fairly recent date. According to Alphonse Dain\(^3\) it does occur in the third century A.D., but then only to indicate that the written work was autographic or authentic. We have to bear this in mind when we translate the term *codex* by 'manuscript' or 'manuscrit', because — belonging as we do to an age of printing — we tend subconsciously to set up an opposition between the

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1 Wax tablets were still being used in the 15th century. MS. 19.295–97 in the Royal Library at Brussels contains a miniature portraying Ruusbroec sitting under a tree and writing on a wax tablet. Opposite him is a scribe copying a text from a wax tablet onto a sheet of paper or parchment. See also W. Wattenbach, *Das Schriftwesen im Mittelalter*, Leipzig 1958\(^4\).

2 Albert Labarre (*Histoire du livre, 'Que sais-je?'* No. 620, Paris 1970, p. 14) has pointed out that the transition from scrolls to codices which took place between the 2nd and 4th centuries A.D., was in fact more significant than the introduction of methods of mechanically reduplicating identical copies in the 15th century. The changeover from scrolls to books is often linked to the gradual ousting of papyrus by parchment and to other material and technical influences. But these explanations are inadequate: there were codices made of papyrus and scrolls made of parchment. The factors suggested were undoubtedly influential up to a point, but other, purely practical circumstances, such as the fact that it was quicker to look up a reference (biblical or legal for example) in a collection of leaves than in a scroll, equally certainly played their part. Curiously enough we are once again living at a time when these practical considerations are making their presence felt — for example in the use of magnetic tapes (I almost said scrolls) combined with television for the instantaneous retrieval of information. Although as a historian one can get maddened by his habit of quoting out of context, Marshall McLuhan's fascinating *The Gutenberg Galaxy, the making of the typographic man* (Toronto 1962) contains valuable information and insights on this matter, such as ought to make even codicologists take a fresh look at their subject. In passing I would like to remark that McLuhan does not — as is often claimed — visualize the total disappearance of books as such, but postulates their integration by electronic media, with a resultant diminution of their rôle as communication media.