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Some thoughts on the cataloguing of medieval manuscripts

To write about the cataloguing of medieval manuscripts could soon become stating the obvious and carrying coals to Newcastle: so much has been written about it, both on the theoretical aspects and the actual practice.¹ The general, methodological principles are well-known and there is a wealth of examples of concrete applications available in the form of innumerable, widely different catalogues. Indeed, various aims can be pursued in the cataloguing of manuscripts, resulting in, for instance, a ‘general’ scholarly catalogue of all manuscripts of a particular library or in a specific collection. In such a catalogue attention will have been paid to both the contents, the form or the external appearance and the history of the manuscripts, while the (principal) literature on the manuscripts will also have been indicated. It could also concern an exhibition catalogue in which in the description of the exhibits the decoration and the illustration of the codices are particularly emphasized, while information on the contents is much sparser and in which especially art-historical publications are incorporated and referred to. An entirely different catalogue will accompany a completely different exhibition, for example an exhibition devoted to the collecting of manuscripts by one or more scholarly amateurs of that type of books: the accompanying catalogue can throw light on the mutual contacts between these collectors and their relations with antiquarian booksellers and auctioneers. Then again, another category is the catalogue consisting of a series of descriptions of all manuscripts that constitute a corpus for the purpose of specific scholarly research. In such a catalogue particularly those aspects will be described that underpin the results of this research and make them verifiable. In short, the typology of manuscript catalogues shows many varieties and the catalogue descriptions will always be geared to the purpose for which the catalogue was made.² In the present contribution, however, I will restrict myself to formulating some stray thoughts on web-catalogues (deliberately I do not speak of ‘the web-catalogue’, for in this field too there are of course different categories). The element ‘web’ already implies that it concerns a catalogue which is constructed,

¹ A solid contribution to the flow of publications was and is being supplied by my teacher J.P. Gumbert.
² For a general survey of catalogues see A. Derolez, Les catalogues de bibliothèques (Turnhout 1979) [= Typologie des sources du Moyen Âge occidental, 31] and more specifically on catalogues of medieval manuscripts: L. Reynhout, ‘Pour une typologie des catalogues de manuscrits médiévaux: contribution à un inventaire collectif en Belgique’, in: Archief- en Bibliotheekwezen in België, 61 (1990), pp. 5-37. See also the Post Scriptum.
made available and consulted through the Internet. However, the term ‘catalogue’ is not quite felicitous because what I am referring to – certainly with regard to the form or technology – is a database rather than a catalogue. But since what I have in mind – certainly as regards the function – are still aspects of a catalogue in the sense of ‘a well-organized list, preferably as complete as possible, of objects’ (in this case: manuscripts), I do speak of a web-catalogue, if only to avoid a designation such as ‘database-like catalogue on Internet’. After all, in the web-catalogue I am referring to, the ‘text of the descriptions’ is fragmented into several collections of data that can be searched similar to databases. Because here the catalogue-function is put first and foremost, I shall not deal with the often beautiful websites showing and discussing almost everything pertaining to one manuscript or to some highlights in a library. Obviously links can be made from a web-catalogue to similar digital presentations, so that these presentations will be incorporated into the web-catalogue, but I am here primarily concerned with a catalogue containing data on thousands of manuscripts. It is hardly beyond doubt that the web-catalogue has a promising future where cataloguing or making medieval manuscripts accessible is concerned.

The descriptions in most ‘general’ traditional, printed and digital (or digitized) catalogues are based on what could be called a ‘linear model’. A description of this type has a beginning and an end and in the intermediate section a more or less fixed series of aspects is described. A ‘linear’ description reads like a continuous story which gives a good impression of the manuscript described as a whole. Of course there is no objection whatsoever for anyone using such a description to look only at specific aspects, such as the contents or the decoration: the division into paragraphs and the addition of subheadings do not only structure the description, in actual practice they also enable the user to make such an eclectic use of the information offered. By extension a printed catalogue or a digital catalogue containing linear descriptions could also be called ‘linear’. This certainly applies to the printed catalogue in which the descriptions are consecutively arranged, basically according to the *numerus currens* of the shelf marks. Digital catalogues however, are usually based on other principles, such as alphanumeric organizing principles. But even then series or clusters of largely corresponding shelf marks will automatically be grouped together as a result of

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3 This is one of the major differences from descriptions of especially modern books: here the focus is on the contents, the book as artefact features much less prominent.

4 A similar arrangement is the point of departure of the *Richtlinien Handschriftenkatalogisierung* of the *DFG*, 5th enl. edn. (Bonn-Bad Godesberg 1992): ‘Die Anlage des Kataloges soll sich prinzipiell nach der Reihenfolge der Signaturen bzw. der Aufstellung der Handschriften richten’ (p. 9). Cf. also Otto Mazal, *The Keeper of Manuscripts, with a chapter on restoring the text*, trans. Th. J. Wilson in cooperation with M. McNamara (Turnhout 1992) [= *Bibliologia, Elementa ad librorum studia pertinentia*, 11], p. 17: ‘The shelf mark of the manuscript in the library constitutes the organising principle for structuring the catalogue’.