Cataloguing practices in the Ethiopian and Eritrean Manuscript Studies

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Manuscripts cataloguing is indisputably a task of crucial significance in Ethiopian and Eritrean studies. Not only scholarly cataloguing is a fundamental prerequisite for the conservation and safeguard of the cultural heritage of a given civilization (and Christian Ethiopia and Eritrea are no exceptions), but it offers a solid an adequate basis for scientific inquiry in a variety of disciplinary fields, such as textual criticism, codicology, palaeography, linguistics, history, art history. The close link between cataloguing and the other disciplines is clearly evidenced by the fact that all the major specialists in Ethiopian philology, like August Dillmann, Carlo Conti Rossini and others, also compiled catalogues, and some scholars, such as Stefan Strelcyn and Ernst Hammerschmidt, decided from a given moment onwards to devote their intellectual efforts almost exclusively to cataloguing.

The nucleus of historical catalogues compiled by the 'golden generation' of Orientalists between the nineteenth and the early twentieth century was expanded from the second half of the twentieth century by research projects of microfilming of Ethiopian and Eritrean manuscript collections. These initiatives have resulted in the creation of large and accessible archives of photographic copies and extensively contributed to a substantial increase of the catalogued material. Since the twenty-first century, manuscript cataloguing has finally entered the digital age. The major features of the contemporary cataloguing practice are the development of online e-catalogues, which have replaced or complemented more traditional outputs like printed catalogues, and the production of high-resolution colour images. The advantages are evident, both for users and cataloguers. While users can benefit from searchability and wide usability of data and images, cataloguers can take advantage of low production cost and possibility of updating and correcting the information multiple times. Besides, cataloguers have been able to reflect more deeply on the historical complexity and stratigraphy of the artefacts to be described.

In the last decade various academic initiatives have been launched that exploit the potential of IT to produce digitally based repositories of data. Within the field of the Ethiopian and Eritrean manuscript heritage, two projects are currently operating with different scopes. They are "Beta Maṣāḥǝft: Manuscripts of Ethiopia and Eritrea", based at Universität Hamburg (2016–2040), and CaNaMEI ("Catalogo Nazionale dei Manoscritti Etiopici in Italia"), based at the University of Naples "L'Orientale" since 2019. Although both initiatives approach the Ethiopian and Eritrean manuscript patrimony in a cataloguing-oriented perspective, the two projects have employed different strategies and methodologies to meet the challenges of describing complex artefacts such as manuscripts. The need therefore emerges for these initiatives to dialogue with each other so as not to fragment and/or multiply the information collected and made available to users. The conference provides an opportunity to reflect together and exchange idea on selected topics suitable for understanding Ethiopian manuscripts and their change during the time, and for developing a correct and

harmonized cataloguing approach. These topics pertain to the definition of textual, physical, historical and functional features and have been acknowledged on the basis of, on the one hand, some specificities of the Ethiopian manuscript culture and, on the other hand, a still inadequate understanding of specific phenomena that limit their appropriate categorization and, consequently, their convenient cataloguing description. Participants are kindly invited to present case studies on (but not limited to) the following subjects:

- **Data interconnection**: Data gathering produces lists of personal names, place names, work identifiers, bibliographic titles and other typologies of information, as well as sets of digital images of the artefacts. How can these data be interconnected in order to create a user-friendly network and facilitate scholarly research? Which tools should be used to dynamically optimise the internal interconnectivity of digital information? How can new data be connected to already available and independently developed databases?

- **The stratigraphy of manuscripts**: How textual and material layers are interwoven? Is there eventually a relationship between the core-content, the writing support, and the secondary layers? If so, what is the nature of this relationship and what can we learn from it in terms of manuscript function, both in a synchronic and in a diachronic perspective? Does the contiguity to the core-content of a manuscript confer authorization or legitimization to the texts of the secondary layers? What are the fundamental discontinuities needed to define an additional text? Is it possible to sketch a typology of the additional texts added in the blank pages and empty margins of the manuscripts?

- **The boundary of a text**: To what extent textual variation breaks the boundary of a text? Where does the boundary between recension and rewriting of a text start? Which role do the form and syntax of titles play for the identification of a text and of its versions? Should the difference between recension and rewriting be marked in a text repertory like the *Clavis Aethiopica*? Can catalogues provide a solid base for undertaking the work of critical editions of the text described? Are there any autographs in the Ethiopian manuscript culture?

- **Multilingual manuscripts (and inscriptions)**: Is it possible to detect the stages of both physical and textual production of multilingual manuscripts? Were these manuscripts written or copied by more individuals or by one person able to master different scripts and languages? And from a single model or multiple ones? In case of collective work, did the translators and scribes work parallelly or seriatim? And what does this suggest in terms of workflow? Does the plurality of languages and scripts expressed in a manuscript mirror the presence of a multicultural setting of production and use? Do the single languages and scripts reflect a particular use of the manuscripts in specific domains of knowledge (religious, administrative, scientific, esoteric, scholarly, and the like)? As far as the Gəʿəz-Amharic manuscripts are concerned, how many typologies can we recognise? Besides translations, does the interference between the two languages result in rewritings, overlaps and textual contaminations that must be taken into account in the work of cataloguing?

- **Multiple-text versus composite manuscripts**: Does the lack of definition of 'Composite manuscripts' limit our understanding of these artefacts? Does the dichotomy 'Multiple-text' and 'Composite' manuscripts hide features that may be shared between the two types, such as coherence of the initial project or perception of specific manuscripts in a given cultural context? Cataloguing Composite manuscripts on the basis of its codicological aspects (i.e. production units) is always the correct approach? Or does it put intentions of the collectors and function of the manuscripts in the shade?

- **Codicology, layout and palaeography**: What should be implemented in the analytic description of peculiar layouts in which some texts are shaped (e.g. graphs, tables, diagrams, magic texts written in spiral shape, and the like)? Is there a relationship between specific texts and their visual organization? How to express in catalogues the relation between texts, layout, and the use of the manuscript or of its discrete components (for instance, manuscripts or texts used in therapeutic rituals, private devotion, education, archival purposes, and the like)? What is the status on quantitative codicology? How far have we got with

the possibility of applying statistical analysis to Ethiopic manuscripts? And what is the state of the art on palaeography? Are we able to propose absolute dating based on the shape of the Ethiopic characters and their evolution during the time? Can we introduce new chronological subdivisions in addition to those already set up or refine the existing ones?

- **Non-literary texts (land administration and archival documents)**: Which are the main codicological and textual characteristics of manuscripts transmitting non-literary texts? Are the documents transmitted in a specific manuscript related among them, for instance in terms of content, persons, places (and the like)? Is there any relation between non-literary and literary texts transmitted in the same manuscript? Is there any material and/or textual evidence certifying the recognition of the legal value of administrative texts? And what about their legal value preservation throughout the time and revocation at a certain point?

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Please send us a provisional title by 31 July to the following email address: m.villa@unior.it.
Time allocated to each paper: around 30 minutes.
Please note that the CaNaMEI project will cover accommodation for the speakers in an affiliated hotel. Travel expenses to/from Naples will be reimbursed.