The Electronic Catalogue: A Specific Contrivance for Teaching Students Methods of Systematic Analysis of Handwritten Sources

by

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.01. A RATIONALE FOR TEACHING STUDENTS IN SOURCE STUDIES

No scholar engaged in the studies of medieval history and literature can ignore manuscript sources and, consequently, supporting disciplines of source studies, such as archeography (identification and content analysis of a manuscript), paleography (manuscript dating including watermark studies), and codicology (cultural heritage analysis of the manuscript). Hence, the need for improved academic courses in the disciplines and advanced training techniques in these educational fields becomes evident. The "Depository" IRS as the basis for the NLR MD electronic catalogue of manuscripts opens up new fields for a comprehensive attack on the problem. The current "Depository" IRS testing involves medieval Russian Slavonic handwritten books. The article below therefore outlines some basic methodological approaches to the use of an electronic catalogue in training students in source studies.

.02. DEFINING ARCHEOGRAPHY

The main purpose of archeography is identification and content analyses of a manuscript book. Studies of medieval sources have repeatedly faced the challenge of multiple "self-identifications" for the same item in different manuscripts, with varying incipients (varying first words of the text that possibly indicate different versions) or authors for the same work. For this reason, archeographic description involves authority research titles, also varying regretfully in actual practice because of the inadequate understanding of this great segment of written heritage. The electronic catalogue handles the problem of authority research titles for medieval sources, as both cataloguing and catalogue searches are carried out by means of the Directory of Unified Scientific (or Authority) Titles.

The Directory is an alphabetical list of titles recorded in the database. A unified scientific title for a medieval text is generated as a series of data on: 1) the genre of the work, 2) "self-identified" author, if any, and 3) the subject. This principle reflects the specific features of manuscript sources. Nonetheless, the anonymity of many medieval works made a tradition of attributing them to noted authors. Thus, while a number of manuscripts traditionally ascribe hundreds of homilies to St. John Chrysostom with confidence, only about a dozen of works of the genre can be reliably ascribed to him. That is why the search for a particular source should be done by means of multiple data fields.

.03. THE ELECTRONIC CATALOG AS A TEACHING TOOL

The electronic catalogue is useful in training for search techniques and text identification. Basic directories include data fields for text searching and identification. For example, a manuscript text might indicate St. Nicholas the Miracle Worker as the main character. The student's job is to identify the text, or, in other words, to find the analogous text in the catalogue and to define the unified scientific title. Using the Name Directory, it is possible to find a variety of sources that should be considered for identifying the text under study. The student performs an automatic search by means of the following hallmarks: the name (to be chosen from the list in the Name directory) and the corresponding code (author, translator, scribe, owner of the manuscript, etc.) In this case the "character" code is appropriate. Selection results present a list of manuscripts containing works related to St. Nicholas the Miracle Worker. These are different versions of the Life of St. Nicholas the Miracle Worker. Under display is the following information: 1) location marks (in case the location mark includes a bracketed symbol, it means, that the desired work makes only a part, though an independent one, of a manuscript convolution), 2) unified scientific titles, 3) the data on the work in each manuscript: foliation, incipient (initial words), title (as given in the manuscript)
and necessary commentaries on the text.

In this case the attention of the students should be drawn to the fact that a number of works, similarly authored, have certain differences in their incipients and titles. For instance, the Life of St. Nicholas, composed by Simon Metaphrastos, has some different incipient and title versions in catalogued manuscripts. Thus the catalogue gives an insight into the principal feature of medieval literature: concrete work may have dozens of existing copies, containing lexical and orthographic differences. Differences in structure of a substantial nature, however, suggest different textual versions. The Life of St. Nicholas is recorded in the catalogue in different versions, such as: 1) Metaphrastian, 2) Burial Tale, 3) the so called "Non-book" version, 4) the so called "Alternative" Life and 5) Brief Version. The record gives an idea of another very important aspect in the life of a medieval composition: new versions have emerged over time due to various historical circumstances (such as a martyr canonized, a monastery established, etc.), resulting in the existence of different versions. The electronic catalogue covers the totality of accumulated knowledge, providing for the linking of archeographic manuscript description and textual source studies in academic syllabi.

The authority title directory structure permits recording of basic information on the work and its version: time and place of production, if any, author, translator, specific version characteristics, the version's role in the work's history, etc. Thus, moving the cursor between different Life of St. Nicholas versions, the student can visualize findings from textual analysis of the source. In the same way, information can be obtained on authors, characters, owners and other persons listed in the name directory. The importance of such data can be hardly overestimated. Medieval sources themselves provide limited information on the personalities mentioned.

The basic electronic catalogue directories guarantee identification of any text in a manuscript. To facilitate actual description, the program provides text search by three hallmarks most widely used in practice: unified scientific title (including genre indication), incipient, and explicit (final words or sentences). The incipient, title, and explicit fields in this "Mini-selection" provide keyword search capability. This option is useful in archeographic classes. Thus, electronic catalogue options give students first-hand knowledge of basic archeographic categories derived from rich and diverse archival material.

.04. PALEOGRAPHY ([Return to Index])

Paleography is a discipline focusing on manuscript dating. The basic electronic catalogue directories cover the whole range of terms used in paleographic description of manuscripts, including writing material, writing types, decoration, binding and marginal notes. The iDepositoy! IRS structure provides the possibility of collecting and reproducing digitized manuscript fragments: writing specimens, illumination fragments, initials, binding decoration, embossed binding patterns, and components of binding design. All these can be easily reproduced in retrieval mode and, along with detailed directory terms, used in special paleographic classes.

One of the most complicated aspects of paleography is handwriting and writing types. The basic directory lists the terms, describing writing types in Russian Slavonic manuscripts: the ustav, semi-ustav, cursive, ligature, semi-ustav with cursive elements, semi-ustav with ligature elements. Digital specimens of different writing types, displayed on the monitor, trace the evolution of writing. They illustrate paleographically relevant changes in the ways of writing of individual letters. Selection of various writing specimens from any number of manuscripts provides a way to trace the trends in writing evolution. Their analysis is necessary for manuscript dating. As an example, for ustav writing they are: gradual loss of geometrical letter shape, upward shifting of transverse letter components, deformation of looped letter components, and modified way of writing in some letters. This information is of particular importance in training for 10th to 14th Slavonic manuscript dating – manuscripts on vellum are primarily dated by handwriting.

A reliable complex of digitized samples can be obtained, using as search option hallmarks the type of writing and chronological boundaries (or dating). Students pay attention to a unique characteristic of writing of a certain period. For example, according to the 11th century Russian writing tradition the Cyrillic alphabet letter “Ѧ” was written with all the components within the line limits. But since the 12th century the letter had gradually projected its vertical bar beyond the line. Thus, the electronic catalogue without handling original documents illustrates with its records paleographic (dating) relevance of a persistent characteristic in a specific period of time.

Rich information presented by the electronic catalogue is a valuable aid in training for writing identification, starting from systemic comparison of the ways of letter writing. We may choose a number of handwritten materials produced by one scribe. For example, the Solovetsky Transfiguration of our Saviour monastery monk, Bogolep, worked at the end of the 16th century for the monastery's library. Using search options the students display digitized specimens of Bogolep's handwriting. All the manuscripts were written by Bogolep in semi-ustav. Using the enlarging facility, the students can also observe ipersonali letter writing characteristics in all cases. The program provides detailed enlargement of individual letter components or characteristic pen strokes, which helps to specify authentic features of a certain scribe's way of writing. Thus, the IRS gives students an opportunity to arrange a collection of handwriting types of renowned historical figures. The data is used for selecting autographs of medieval connoisseurs ("knighniks").

.05. WATERMARK STUDIES ([Return to Index])

Paper-supported manuscripts can be dated not only by handwriting, but primarily, due to their accuracy, by watermarks. Watermark studies as a part of paleography have acquired the status of an independent discipline quite recently. The field
Codicology is a comparatively new academic discipline that examines 1) the phenomenon of the book as a piece of cultural heritage, 2) processes of book production and history, and 3) activities of book-making centers and binding shops. It focuses on comprehensive study of large manuscript segments selected by specific characteristics. Codicology is directly related to database creation that identifies specific manuscript characteristics. This suggests that undergraduate knowledge of electronic manuscript catalogue structure and search techniques is a necessary condition for academic training in codicology. The electronic catalogue supported with an efficient search engine accumulates comprehensive and structured information on manuscripts, and can generate a list of manuscripts by specified codicological characteristics. For instance, a manuscript provenance database will offer a set of manuscripts from a single book center.
In the above example, the manuscripts show some codicological features in common, to be analyzed over a range of manuscripts recorded in the "manuscript provenance" field within the electronic catalogue system. Use of such hallmarks as date, place of creation, and marginalia can expose a set of dozens of manuscripts coming from a single book center, for example, from a major North Russian monastery, the Solovetski cloister. Using the owner/depositor data, one can derive a set of manuscripts coming from an individual person or a private library. Thus the NLR's Solovetski Monastery collection contains a set of manuscripts bearing the bookmark of Father Superior Dosiphey (incidentally, the earliest in European book history). All the manuscripts were commissioned by Father Superior Dosiphey for the Solovetski Monastery library in Novgorod in the late 15th century and share a number of codicological traits typical for the late 15th-century Metropolitan scribery in Novgorod. Therefore a necessary condition for setting up a codicological problem is the correct selection of a manuscript with specified indicators. In the present state of the art, this is accomplished with an electronic catalogue, an important tool in codicological research and a major aid in discipline teaching.

07. CONCLUSIONS

The electronic manuscript catalogue covers all the currently available archeographic, paleographic and codicological manuscript information in source studies. The supporting directories provide a full range of terms, along with graphic diagrams for individual components of manuscript records. The image files contain digitized images for handwriting specimens, watermarks, decorative designs, and bindings. All these constitute a radically new resource for basic academic training in paleography, codicology, handwriting and watermark studies, as well as undergraduate workshops in the disciplines, avoiding handling of original document. Catalogue records represent, both in scope and structure, a fundamentally new visual teaching aid for manuscript dating techniques, using paper information, binding dating by process technology, writing typology, handwriting authentication, book-making school indicators, decorative design components and notes of individual manuscript history. Of no small account is the fact that students gain first-hand knowledge of the principal uses of the electronic manuscript catalogue. Each catalogue block implements a systemic approach to manuscript component description. In turn, the general structure offers an effective, terminologically sound but fairly versatile system of manuscript analysis in description. Thus, using the catalogue gives the student a consistent picture of medieval and modern manuscript, opening new vistas for systemic analysis of a manuscript source, both in content and in the "storage medium" for the content.