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## The Institut de recherche et d'histoire des textes and libraries. From microfilm to digitisation, from paper cards to authority files

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François Bougard

**The Institut de recherche et d'histoire des textes and libraries.  
From microfilm to digitisation, from paper cards to authority files**

*The origins: the context and the mission*

The Institute for Research and History of Texts was born in a library in 1937<sup>1</sup>. Or rather from the observation by Félix Grat (1898-1940), its founder, of the working method of the Benedictine monk Henri Quentin (1872-1935). Charged by Pope Pius XI with part of the work of revising the Vulgate, Quentin studied the manuscript tradition in the Vatican Library. To do this, he had to review the preserved witnesses, especially those prior to the eleventh century, i.e. nearly 700, in order to determine their mutual relations. Quentin rightly believed that many of these witnesses had not been taken into account and exploited as they should have been. To recover the authenticity of a text transmitted in multiple successive copies, it was necessary to examine each of these copies for itself. And rather than moving from one library to another, Quentin would bring them to him, asking that photographs of the manuscripts be sent to him. The intellectual approach and the process seem very commonplace today, but it was not so in the 1930s.

Félix Grat, a former student of the École des Chartes, took up Quentin's idea and method. He was helped by the fact that, in that same year, 1937, a version of the microfilm medium invented in the middle of the 19th century was developed for the reproduction of documents for long-term archiving. The use of microfilm in archives was introduced at that time, while in Paris the Bibliothèque Nationale created its own microfilm office: it was one of the main topics of conversation during the World Congress of Universal Documentation, one of the many events organised in the framework of the Universal Exhibition organised in Paris on the theme of "Arts and Techniques applied to Modern Life", in which Julien Cain, General Administrator of the Bibliothèque Nationale (1930-1964) played an important role. The film used was acetate, which was replaced in 1955 by polyester film, which is remarkably stable and durable. In the preface to the catalogue of an exhibition of facsimiles organised in October 1940, intended to show that the reproduction of medieval manuscripts made it possible to give them a second life at a time when the outbreak of the war meant that they had to be kept in a safe place far from Paris, Julien Cain presented the advantages of mass reproduction with arguments that one can easily imagine were shared by Félix Grat: "We make available to scholars and researchers documents that it may be important to compare with each other, which is generally difficult for the originals [...]. The use of photography has made it possible to compile methodically classified collections, and 'microfilm', which has

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<sup>1</sup> On the history of IRHT, see Holtz, Louis: Les premières années de l'Institut de recherche et d'histoire des textes. In: *La revue pour l'histoire du CNRS* 2 (2000), pp. 2-26 ; Id., *L'Institut de recherche et d'histoire des textes, premier laboratoire d'histoire du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique*. In: *Cahiers du Centre de recherches historiques* 36 (2005) (<<https://journals.openedition.org/ccrh/3046>>, accessed 27 April 2022 ); Bougard, François: L'IRHT: quatre-vingts ans de documentation et de recherche. In: *Académie des inscriptions & belles-lettres. Comptes rendus des séances de l'année 2018, avril-juin*, pp. 673-715.

made great progress in recent years, will be used even more when reading devices are more widely distributed”.

The IRHT was thus born of a happy conjunction between philological research and technical innovation. The programme that Félix Grat had initially assigned to it focused on classical Latin manuscripts, the witnesses to which he had been photographing in Spain since 1933. From the outset, however, the focus was on “the manuscript tradition of texts of all languages”: this gave the IRHT its personality, through the rapid creation of study sections dedicated to the various languages of the Mediterranean region: Latin, Greek (which had become Eastern Christian: Coptic, Syriac; for a time Slavonic), Arabic, Hebrew, and Romance. Thematic sections were quickly created to take into account the disciplines dedicated to the study of manuscripts: codicology, library history, diplomatics, palaeography. The direct link with manuscripts is still evident from the fact that, during the early days of its existence, the IRHT was housed within the two main French conservation institutions: the Bibliothèque nationale, next to the manuscript reading room (1937-1940), then the Archives nationales (1940-1960).

### *Reproducing, documenting and cataloguing manuscripts*

Very quickly, the IRHT also embarked on an activity of systematic reproduction of French medieval manuscripts, according to the mission assigned to it by Félix Grat. Julien Cain had him carry out a photographic campaign throughout the country from the summer of 1947. These expeditions, carried out in a CNRS truck converted into a laboratory, led in 1954 and 1955 to two major exhibitions in Paris devoted to painted manuscripts from the 7th to the 16th century<sup>2</sup> and aroused a certain amount of enthusiasm. In 1962, a journalist envisaged, for example, that one day the manuscripts photographed by the IRHT could be read on another planet, fixed “on gelatin and for posterity”<sup>3</sup>. The reproduction on microfilm of the manuscripts of France (excluding the National Library of France) was completed after several decades and concerns municipal and university libraries, religious institutions, historical societies, as well as archives and museums. Access to this treasure, supplemented by reproductions of manuscripts acquired from foreign libraries (for a total of nearly 80,000 microfilms), was one of the main reasons for researchers from all over the world to consult IRHT until the end of the 20th century.

The heroic days of microfilm have been succeeded by direct digitisation, now under an agreement with the French Ministry of Culture. However, it took several years before the decision was made to digitise the entire content of the manuscripts (rather than just their illustrations), which only really began in 2010. Today, nearly 20,000 volumes have been digitised in full or in part and are gradually being integrated into the Bibliothèque virtuelle des manuscrits médiévaux (BVMM, <https://bvmm.irht.cnrs.fr/>), using the IIIF protocol; work is continuing at a rate of 100,000 to 150,000 views per year **[more than 30 000 shelfmarks : 13617 repro intégrales, 11554 décor, 5876 partiel]**. In the meantime, the widening of the field of research has led to the digitisation and accessibility of painted incunabula, ancient inventories, and archives of scholars: so that the name BVMM has become misleading and will be replaced in the near future by “ARCA. La bibliothèque numérique de l’IRHT”.

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<sup>2</sup> Les manuscrits à peintures en France du VII<sup>e</sup> au XII<sup>e</sup> siècle, avant-propos et notices par Jean Porcher, préface de Julien Cain. Paris 1954 ; Les manuscrits à peintures en France du XIII<sup>e</sup> au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle, préface d’André Malraux, introduction de Julien Cain. Paris 1955.

<sup>3</sup> Saleck, Maurice: La science au service du passé. Demain, des cosmonautes emporteront (peut-être) avec eux des manuscrits rémois du X<sup>e</sup> siècle. In: L’Union 5535 (12 September 1962), p. 3.

As well as providing access to the manuscripts themselves, the IRHT has carried out and continues to carry out documentation, cataloguing and research activities that are not limited to France. Documentation on the manuscript book is what has given rise for a very long time to the constitution of paper cards providing information on the most diverse aspects of the manuscript and its history: authors and works, incipit, explicit, colophons, heraldry, owners (persons and institutions), bibliography, to mention only the main ones. In other words, several hundred thousand cards, which have long made the IRHT famous, but which also had to be modernised. As early as the 1970s, the question of automatic processing was raised. Today, most of them have been transferred to databases, but the task is far from over. The list of the main working tools now online gives an idea of the variety of what has been created and continues to be updated:

- Bibale, <https://bibale.irht.cnrs.fr/>. describes the history of the transmission of manuscripts and the texts they contain through the study of ancient and modern collections and their owners. The notices describe the manuscripts preserved today, provided with ex-libris, heraldry or other marks of provenance, but also the manuscripts attested by the most diverse documents: inventories, catalogues, accounts, chronicles, correspondence, etc. The corpus of data, which is increasingly being extended to include printed documents, is a tool that federates not only the provenance data known to the IRHT, but also that proposed by the participating French libraries. Bibale also manages the authority repository of all the people in the IRHT databases and other databases with which the IRHT collaborates: <http://personnes.irht.cnrs.fr/>.
- Initiale, <http://initiale.irht.cnrs.fr/>, is a catalogue of medieval illuminated manuscripts linked to the IRHT's reproduction campaigns in France. It also includes post-medieval manuscripts, incunabula and early illuminated prints.
- Jonas, <https://jonas.irht.cnrs.fr/>, is the directory of texts and manuscripts in Old and Middle French and Occitan. It takes into account all the collections worldwide.
- Pinakes, <https://pinakes.irht.cnrs.fr/>, collects the manuscript tradition of Greek texts prior to the 16th century from library catalogues around the world.
- E-ktobe, <http://syriac.msscatalog.org/>, gathers information on the texts, material aspects and history (colophons and notes) of Syriac manuscripts from any period and any place.
- Iter liturgicum Italicum, <https://liturgicum.irht.cnrs.fr/>, is a directory of Italian liturgical manuscripts preserved either in Italy or in libraries and archives around the world.

This material has converged and continues to converge in the catalogues, which sometimes take into account entire collections, whether the contents of the manuscripts or their bindings; sometimes authors or thematic groups of works; sometimes ancient libraries. The most important catalogue, in terms of the investment it has represented, is that of the classical Latin manuscripts of the Vatican Library – more than 3,000 entries – which five volumes were published between 1975 and 2010, with a cumulative index to be published in 2022<sup>4</sup>. It was followed from 2011 by the catalogue of the Vatican library's French manuscripts, i.e. about 400 records, which is now being completed. For France, mention should be made of the ongoing work on the catalogue of Hebrew manuscripts of the Bibliothèque nationale de France<sup>5</sup>; for manuscripts of municipal libraries, those of Autun,

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<sup>4</sup> Manuscrits classiques latins de la Bibliothèque Vaticane. Paris 1975–2010, available on line on Persée, <https://www.persee.fr/collection/dirht>. A similar undertaking extended to all French libraries was unfortunately not completed: Jeudy, Colette, Riou, Yves-François: Les manuscrits classiques latins de bibliothèques publiques de France, I: Agen-Évreux. Paris 1989.

<sup>5</sup> Manuscrits en caractères hébreux conservés dans les bibliothèques publiques de France. Turnhout, 2008–2016, 7 vol.. The content of the paper volumes feeds the online catalogue BnF Archives et manuscrits. After a break due to the death of Philippe Bobichon (1954–2020), the programme has now been relaunched as part of the

Chambéry and Orléans, as well as the catalogues of dated manuscripts of Cambrai, Laon, Saint-Quentin and Soissons, or the catalogues of medieval bindings of Autun, Vendôme, Orléans and Reims<sup>6</sup>. A current project aims to list and catalogue the oriental manuscripts of French libraries, excluding the BnF. Less well known, because they remain in manuscript, are the descriptive notes of the Hebrew and Arabic manuscripts of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, the work of Georges Vajda (1908-1981), which are now available online at BnF Archives et manuscrits.

For authors and groups of works, let us mention the catalogue of Chrysostomian manuscripts, *Codices Chrysostomici Graeci*, of which eight volumes have appeared since 1968; the catalogue of Latin astrological manuscripts preserved in Paris and Munich; or the catalogue of Latin medical manuscripts from the early Middle Ages preserved in France<sup>7</sup>.

As far as ancient libraries are concerned, attention was focused on the Cistercian libraries, the flagship of which is Clairvaux. The study by André Vernet (1910-1999), centred on the publication of 15th and 16th century catalogues and the identification of surviving manuscripts, kicked off a wave of work which had in common the history of the collections from their origin to their dispersal following the Wars of Religion and the closure of the monasteries during the Revolution, the publication of inventories and the catalogue of preserved manuscripts: Thus for the libraries of the abbeys of La Charité, Cheminon, Montier-en-Argonne, Pontigny, Vauluisant, Clairmarais<sup>8</sup>. For Clairvaux, most of whose manuscripts are now in Troyes, this work is still in progress<sup>9</sup>. A similar undertaking was recently carried out in the library of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul for the manuscripts of the monastery of the Holy Trinity of Chalki<sup>10</sup>.

#### *Some research programmes: from the damaged manuscripts of Chartres to Biblissima*

For a long time, the activity of reproducing manuscripts and the work of cataloguing or studying ancient libraries were carried out in parallel, without many points of contact, even though, as we have seen, the first microfilming campaigns led to two exhibitions at the Bibliothèque nationale. Today, we are trying to link these two aspects more closely. The simplest approach is to use the images in exhibition catalogues, such as those organised on the

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project BiNaH: Bibliothèque Nationale "Hebraica": Hebrew Manuscripts in Paris, directed by Emma Abate. See also the *Codices hebraicis litteris exarati quo tempore scripti fuerint exhibentes*. Turnhout 1997–2006, 4 vol.

<sup>6</sup> Heid-Guillaume, Caroline, Ritz-Guilbert, Anne: *Manuscrits médiévaux de Chambéry: textes et enluminures*. Paris 1998 ; *Catalogue des manuscrits d'Autun: Bibliothèque municipale et Société éduenne*, dir. by Claire Maître. Turnhout 2004 ; *Catalogue des manuscrits médiévaux de la Bibliothèque municipale d'Orléans*, dir. By Élisabeth Pellegrin and Jean-Paul Bouhot. Paris 2010 ; Muzerelle Denis: *Manuscrits datés des bibliothèques de France, I: Cambrai; II: Laon, Saint-Quentin, Soissons*. Paris 2000, 2013 ; *Reliures médiévales des bibliothèques de France*. Turnhout 1998–2009, 5 vol.

<sup>7</sup> *Codices Chrysostomici Graeci I-VIII*. Paris 1968–2018; Juste, David: *Catalogus Codicum Astrologicorum Latinorum*. Paris 2011–2015, 2 vol.; Wickersheimer, Ernest: *Les manuscrits latins de médecine du haut Moyen Âge dans les bibliothèques de France*. Paris 1966.

<sup>8</sup> Vernet, André: *La bibliothèque de l'abbaye de Clairvaux du XII<sup>e</sup> au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, I: Catalogues et répertoires*. Paris 1979; Turcan-Verkerk, Anne-Marie: *Les manuscrits de La Charité, Cheminon et Montier-en-Argonne : collections cisterciennes et voies de transmission des textes, IX<sup>e</sup>-XIX<sup>e</sup> siècles*. Paris 2000; Peyrafort, Monique: *La bibliothèque médiévale de l'abbaye de Pontigny, XII<sup>e</sup>-XIX<sup>e</sup> siècles: histoire, inventaires anciens, manuscrits*. Paris 2001; Bougard, François, Petitmengin Pierre: *La bibliothèque de l'abbaye cistercienne de Vauluisant. Histoire et inventaires*. Paris 2012; Staats, Sarah: *Le catalogue médiéval de l'abbaye cistercienne de Clairmarais et les manuscrits conservés*. Paris 2016.

<sup>9</sup> *La bibliothèque de l'abbaye de Clairvaux du XII<sup>e</sup> au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, II: Les manuscrits conservés*. Paris 1997, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Binggeli, André, Cassin, Matthieu, Cronier, Marie : *Catalogue des manuscrits conservés dans la Bibliothèque du Patriarcat œcuménique: les manuscrits du monastère de la Sainte-Trinité de Chalki*. Turnhout 2019, 2 vol.

*Trésors enluminés* in Lille, Toulouse, Angers and Rouen from 2013 to 2017. The survey carried out at the Chartres Municipal Library, on the other hand, is the most accomplished. The library was bombed on 26 May 1944, resulting in the loss of almost half of the manuscripts, either by fire or by the water needed to extinguish the fire. Most of the manuscripts that did not disappear now only remain in the form of fire-damaged fragments: sometimes entire sheets, but sometimes very small snippets, arranged in no particular order. Since 2005, they have been the subject of a long-term research programme that includes restoration, digital reproduction, rearrangement of the works, identification of the texts and comparison with 19th century catalogues. For some manuscripts, the information can be completed thanks to old black and white reproductions, some of which were rediscovered not so long ago. Almost 250 items, ranging from almost intact manuscripts to carbonised blocks and curled up fragments, have been identified so far and have thus become accessible for research<sup>11</sup>.

A programme such as the one for the damaged Chartres library is only possible thanks to the availability and competence of the staff in charge of the heritage collections. This is also the case at the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève in Paris, where the IRHT has launched a systematic digitisation of the manuscript collections, which is scheduled to last three years and will be accompanied by an exhibition and a conference on the new uses of the collections linked to the development of digital humanities. However, it must be admitted that availability and competence are not always present, due to the small number of people in charge of the libraries and the no less small number of people who have received research training. However, digitisation has greatly contributed to changing the approach to old collections, by making it possible to enhance them, starting with virtual exhibitions. The creation of the “Équipement d’excellence” *Biblissima: Observatoire du patrimoine écrit du Moyen Âge et de la Renaissance* (2012-2021), which in 2021 became *Biblissima+: Observatoire des cultures écrites anciennes, de l’argile à l’imprimé* (2021-2029), has also been a formidable lever for developing contacts between the IRHT and libraries and, more generally, between the world of research and that of conservation institutions. Its funding has enabled the Chartres programme to make considerable progress. Similarly, the partnership projects supported by *Biblissima*, associating libraries and researchers, have benefited several concerted initiatives: in Saint-Omer, for the study of the library of the abbey of Saint-Bertin; in Sées and Alençon, for the library of the abbey of Saint-Martin; in Toulouse, for the library of the Dominicans; and in Paris, for the manuscripts collected by Cardinal de Richelieu. The best configuration is that which leads to a collaboration between the library, the IRHT and the university, as will be done in Tours, where the digitisation of the manuscripts is beginning.

The proliferation of work and initiatives endorsed by the IRHT since its creation can sometimes give the impression of an uncoordinated proliferation. But, on the whole, the upheavals imposed by the digital revolution have been mastered and have resulted in an ever stronger integration with the libraries. To facilitate access to the various tools and projects, everything related to manuscripts now also has a common point: Medium, <http://medium-avance.irht.cnrs.fr/>, which is the standardised directory of shelfmarks for medieval and Renaissance manuscripts, incunabula and ancient books. Created in 1981, Medium, whose merger with the BVMM within “ARCA. La bibliothèque numérique de l’IRHT”, takes into account not only the books and documents of which the IRHT possesses a reproduction, but also those that it lists, either because of the research that is carried out there – for example, it contains the shelfmarks of the 40,000 manuscripts listed in the fascicles of the *Bibliographie*

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<sup>11</sup> The project is led by Dominique Poirel and Claudia Rabel: <https://www.manuscrits-de-chartres.fr/fr>. See also Rabel, Claudia: A virtual Renaissance for the manuscripts of Chartres damaged during World War II. In: What do we lose when we lose a library?, ed. by Mel Collier. Leuven 2016, pp. 161–166.

*annulle du Moyen Âge tardif* between 1991 and 2021<sup>12</sup> –, or through an agreement made with a foreign library wishing to give greater visibility to its collections. The next project, which will be carried out with an international consortium of which *Biblissima* and the *Bayerische Staatsbibliothek* are members, will be the assignment to each manuscript book preserved throughout the world of a permanent identifier, the *International Standard Manuscript Identifier (ISMI)*, which will make it possible to link all of the resources of the libraries and the work carried out on the manuscripts in their care<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Jean-Pierre Rothschild, *Bibliographie annuelle du Moyen Âge tardif*. Turnhout 1991-. *BAMAT* is now available online, on *Brepolis*.

<sup>13</sup> Bougard, François, Cassin, Matthieu, Duba, William, Fabian, Claudia, Flüeler, Christoph, Turcan-Verkerk, Anne-Marie, *International Standard Manuscript Identifier (ISMI) : pour un registre électronique des identifiants des livres manuscrits*. In: *DigItalia. Rivista del digitale nei beni culturali* 2020, 1, pp. 45–52,