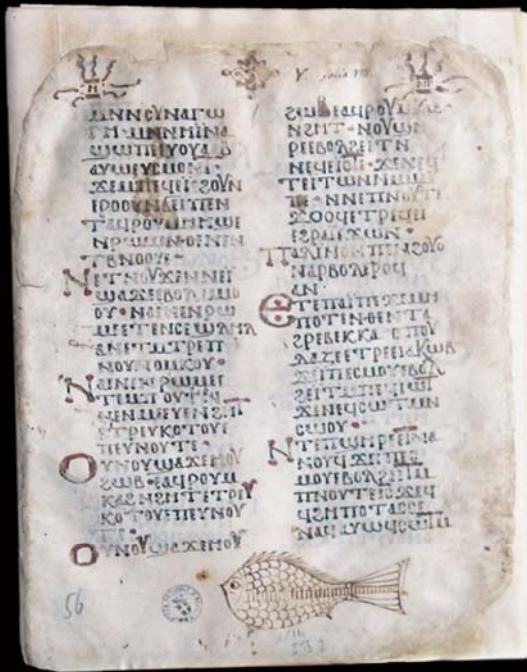


COMPARATIVE ORIENTAL MANUSCRIPT STUDIES (COMST)

Standing Committee for the Humanities (SCH)



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Micrographic 'carpet' page of masoretic notes in a manuscript of *The Prophets*, the earliest dated Hebrew Codex. Tiberias (Palestine) 904/905. Cairo, Karaite Synagogue.

Cover page:

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Introduction

Manuscript studies, as the discipline dealing with material hand-written text witnesses, are of fundamental importance for the study of all literate and literary cultures, and scholars working in the different branches of philology, including Oriental studies, have long been aware of this fact. Over the past decades, numerous studies devoted to various issues of manuscript studies have emerged, focusing on codicology, palaeography, text criticism, and also issues of manuscript preservation and restoration.

The most progressive trends in approach and methodology have, as a rule, been pursued by scholars of 'Occidental' disciplines: text-criticism with scholars in Romance, Biblical and Classical Studies at the forefront; codicology, which has evolved into 'manuscript archaeology' under the impulse of Latin and Greek manuscript studies; digital philology, which has evolved particularly rapidly in the Classical and Medieval European fields.

As for Oriental studies, the development has been uneven, leading to varying research standards and practices in different regional sub-branches. The application to Oriental studies of what has been recently achieved in Classical and Medieval philology, particularly insofar as the application of computational tools to the philological problems is concerned, is in its early stages. The benefits so far have affected those fields that have a closer relationship with Biblical Studies (e.g., the edition of the Syriac Peshitta), while for other languages and cultures the discourse is, with a few exceptions, in its initial phase.

The ESF Research Networking Programme Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies (COMSt) brings together scholars from different disciplines across Europe to compare experiences and research results in the history of written civilisation, manuscript description/cataloguing, textual and material analysis, and manuscript preservation, conservation and restoration. In the process of networking it will be possible to compare the methods used and, eventually, elaborate unified approaches to manuscript studies for Oriental cultures, using the achievements of non-Oriental disciplines. The aim of the COMSt programme is to enable academic dialogue between scholars working in the same sub-discipline of manuscript studies applied to another language or region, as well as interdisciplinary communication. It is expected to consolidate European research traditions and stimulate further scholarly exchange in the field of Oriental Manuscript Studies, with the focus on the Mediterranean and North African cultural areas, thereby building up a long-lasting and efficient network that will continue to bear fruit beyond the end date of the current Research Networking Programme.

The running period of the ESF COMSt Research Networking Programme is five years, from June 2009 to May 2014.

Aims and Objectives

The ESF Research Networking Programme COMSt aims to facilitate cross-cultural academic dialogue and active exchange in the field of Oriental Manuscript Studies with the focus on the Mediterranean and North African cultural areas. The first ever attempt at European-level coordination of its kind, COMSt aims to establish a standard methodology for Oriental Manuscript Studies, too often confined to a narrow sectorial and regional dimension. It is also expected to make scholars more sensitive to the neighbouring fields and enable teamwork on regional and thematic levels.

The COMSt programme will give researchers the possibility to merge and re-evaluate results achieved in individual and national-scale research projects, often unknown to those beyond the borders of a single country or discipline. Many spheres of Oriental Manuscript Studies are similar for different language/cultural areas, and the compatibility of methodology as well as the applicability of methods developed for Occidental manuscripts will be established. Relevant efforts have been dedicated to cataloguing, preservation and critical analysis of Oriental manuscripts, particularly those in the Near Eastern and North-east African regions, given the conditions under which the documents are often stored. The criteria for when and how a manuscript should be preserved and protected will be discussed in the course of the COMSt programme. Digital recording is in many cases the only guarantee for survival; and the efforts for digitisation of Oriental manuscripts in Europe will be wherever possible centralised and coordinated by the COMSt programme members. Not only will this for the first time facilitate exchange between the representatives of different regional fields of specialisation on a common methodological basis (for example, codicologists working with Coptic texts will meet those specialising in Syriac and compare their achievements), it will also connect those working independently in different subfields of manuscript studies (for example, specialists in restoration will meet philologists familiar with the content and the textual value of manuscripts, digital philologists able to make use of the connection between a deeply encoded edition and digital images of the relevant manuscript sources). In the course of cross-disciplinary cooperation, similarities and differences between different Oriental written cultures and the study of them will be revealed.

Teams and Topics

At the time of its launching, the COMSt programme includes scholars from thirteen European countries who are organised into five teams, each focusing on one of the following areas of manuscript studies: 1) Material aspects: codicology, palaeography; 2) Manuscripts as text witnesses: philology as text criticism; 3) Digital philology: text recognition, encoding, electronic editing; 4) Manuscript cataloguing; 5) Manuscript preservation: conservation, restoration, preservation, digitisation. Each team will unite researchers working on different ancient Oriental written cultures, mainly Arabic, Coptic, Aramaic and Syriac, Ethiopic, Armenian, Georgian, Byzantine Greek, etc. Teams will organise regular workshops devoted to specific aspects of these topics and eventually contribute to the creation of a joint digital resource and a methodological textbook. Interdisciplinary team meetings, bringing together scholars working in different COMSt teams but on the same language material, will enrich the ensuing debate. The COMSt programme will also invite scholars from outside the programme to join in the virtual discussion.



Every Person Shall Say by Shenoute, with an illumination showing Shenoute. White Monastery, Egypt, parchment, 10th or 11th century. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Manuscrits Orientaux, Copte 1305, fol. 128v.

Team 1: Material aspects: codicology, palaeography

Team 1 will deal in the first place with codicology, or the archaeology of the book, and with palaeography, or the history of scripts and writing practices. Whilst codicology involves the study of the material and physical history of codices and, in more practical terms, the study of codex production in all relevant contexts, including attempts to identify scriptoria, modalities of circulation, economic aspects, etc., palaeography deals with the peculiarities of writing, its general development and dating, as well as the social aspects involved in the practice of writing. The points of discussion will range from the state of research in different regional fields to material carriers (parchment, paper), physical shape (scroll, codex), indigenous vs. imported materials, etc.

The team will work on all aspects of manuscript preparation, from the chemical or physical preparation of parchment and paper to writing materials and tools and binding techniques, with particular attention to comparing approaches and the state of knowledge about writing techniques and traditions, scriptoria, schooling and the social role of scribes and calligraphers.

Since the issues of manuscript illumination techniques and models, periodisation and interpretation of images and symbols, the personality and social role of the illustrator, canon and artistic freedom are, in the Oriental context, the subject of art history, art historians will be invited to team workshops.

Team leader: Marilena Maniaci, Università degli studi di Cassino, Dipartimento di Filologia e storia.
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Team 2: Manuscripts as text witnesses: philology as text criticism

Team 2 is expected to work on a unified approach to manuscripts as text carriers. It will unite scholars focusing on the philology of different Oriental traditions. The main goal of text criticism is to establish the original reading of texts and their transmission history, by comparing and analysing their different witnesses, also with the consideration that material philology can establish physical relationships between them. While the disciplines of team 1 can help to establish criteria for dating manuscripts, text criticism is the procedure for establishing the correct form of a text at a given stage of its textual history, and as such is an essential part of literary history and historical studies, as well as constituting a major chapter in the history of culture and humanities. The philology of documentary texts, dealing with official records, charters and grants, is a specialised form of



Persian poetry by Abū'Abdallāh Mušarraf al-Dīn b. Mušliḥ al-Dīn, known as Sa'dī (d. 691 H. [1292 CE]). Paper, 17th century. Leipzig University Library, Manuscript or. 325, fols. 40v-41r.

text criticism aimed at establishing the authenticity and historical significance of documents, but on the basis of common methodology. Team 2 will work towards establishing cross-cultural standards for critical text editions. It will collaborate with team 3 on introducing computer-supported technologies in philological work and with team 4 on unifying the approach to manuscript cataloguing incorporating the description of texts.

Team leader: Johannes den Heijer, Faculty of Humanities, Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium. Email: johannes.denheijer@uclouvain.be

Team 3: Digital philology: text recognition, encoding, editing

Team 3 will deal with a field intrinsically connected with that of team 2 as it will discuss and refine the methods and technical means of digital philology: the state of research; possibilities and difficulties of manuscript digitisation; automatic text recognition; text comparisons; peculiarities for Oriental manuscript traditions; script recognition software and critical text editions software. Means for public access to digitised forms will be explored. Since the practical outcome of team 3's activities is of paramount practical importance for team 2, both groups will work in close cooperation. On the decision of the team leaders the teams may conduct their annual

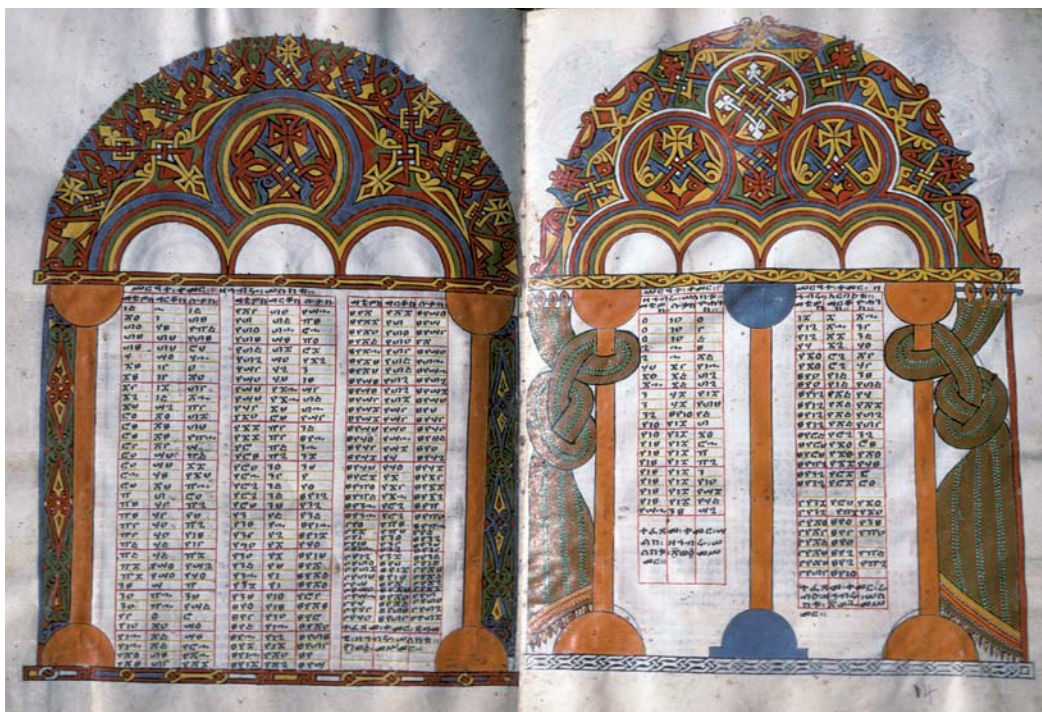
workshops together. In cooperation with team 4, open source manuscript databases and on-line catalogues will be implemented.

Team leader: Jost Gippert, Dept. of Comparative Linguistics, Frankfurt University, Germany. Email: gippert@em.uni-frankfurt.de

Team 4: Manuscript cataloguing

Team 4 will, with the methodological and technical support of teams 1, 2, and 3, concentrate on cataloguing issues. Recently numerous cataloguing activities have been underway in Europe, with the aim of making information available to a broad circle of users and scholars working in different areas of cultural, religious and literary studies (e.g., Witkam 1989; Six 1989, 1994; Layton 1987; Kévorkian – Ter-Stépanian 1998; Störk 1995, 1996; Wagner 1997). A comparison of both older and more recent catalogues reveals large discrepancies in the criteria used for both physical and content descriptions of manuscripts. The cataloguers as specialists in the language and culture of the texts of the manuscripts seldom have training in standard codicological cataloguing procedure, an average level of which is not simple to define. It is important to guarantee, however, that all documents are described according to a unified standard and provide the maximum of information in brief on

Teams and Topics



Gospel book of the church of Gännätä Maryam, Ethiopia. Canon tables. Parchment, ca. 1500, fols. 13v-14r.
Photo courtesy of Michael Gervers

shape, binding, materials used, dimensions, contents, incipits, marginalia, ornaments and illuminations, as well as available bibliography and the place of the codex in previous studies, text editions and information on availability and accessibility (in digital or microfilm form). Team 4 will establish the necessary elements of description and contribute to the creation of electronic catalogues.

Team leader: Witold Witakowski, Dept. of Linguistics and Philology, Uppsala University, Sweden.
Email: wwitakowski@hotmail.com

Team 5: Manuscript preservation: conservation, restoration, preservation, digitisation

Team 5 will deal with manuscript preservation. Exchange and research will concentrate on the following factors: the physical state of manuscripts in different cultural regions and in libraries; the conditions of storage; the steps to be taken towards the preservation of unique cultural heritage; educational programmes for librarians; cooperation with international cultural organisations (supra-regional research centres, UNESCO, etc.) and running projects

(Saint Catherine's Library Conservation Project, etc.). Starting from the codicological base provided by team 1 and the theory of manuscript preparation, possibilities for region-specific manuscript restoration will be explored. In close cooperation with team 3, criteria for digitisation – i.e. digital preservation – of manuscripts will be established. The work will also move towards establishing which small forgotten European manuscript collections might need adequate attention and/or restoration. Of foremost importance will be coordination, mainly with respect to the exchange of information and experience regarding activities in the field.

Team leader: Stéphane Ipert, Centre de Conservation du Livre, Arles, France. Email: s.ipert@gmail.com

Activities

Workshops and conferences

The COMSt activities will cover a period of five years and involve a series of meetings, workshops and conferences at different levels.

Each year, a cross-team meeting is planned. The first, 'Current issues of Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies', will take place in Hamburg from 1 to 3 December 2009. It will provide an opportunity to identify specific topics for the teams to focus their work in the coming years.

During the period of COMSt activity, each team will meet at least once a year for a workshop. The specific workshop topics will be identified in the course of the programme.

At the end of the fifth year, a closing conference will mark the completion of the programme, summarising the results and providing impetus for further work.

The COMSt programme will also enable participants to visit each others' facilities on a short-term basis for lecturing and research, also with the aim of gaining a better understanding of possible infrastructures and procedures. Specialists from outside the programme may also be invited by the programme participants if external expertise is needed.

Publications

A key objective is the publication of a comprehensive textbook for Oriental Manuscript Studies which will reflect on the state of research and stipulate the standards elaborated by the RNP to be followed by all researchers working in the field. The textbook will be available both in print and in electronic form to enhance access and visibility.

In addition, a yearly Newsletter will be published to disseminate interim research results; a database for methods and techniques of manuscript studies will be designed; and the programme website will provide updated information about the progress of COMSt as well as about ongoing research in all fields involved.

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For the latest information on this Research Networking Programme consult the COMSt website:
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