The Bibale Database: A digital tool for researching historic collections and manuscript provenance

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http://bibale.irht.cnrs.fr/

Bibale is a database for researching historic collections and medieval manuscript provenance. It makes available data on medieval and early modern collections and on the transmission of medieval manuscripts. The tool has been developed since 2005 at the *Institut de recherche et d'histoire des textes* (IRHT-CNRS) in Paris and is officially online in a first form since May 2014. It is a database in French, but since September 2014 the introductory pages are available in English as well.

Bibale is part of the network of web resources of the IRHT (http://www.irht.cnrs.fr/fr/ressources/les-ressources-electroniques) as well as of the larger French platform Biblissima (http://www.biblissima-condorcet.fr/) aiming an interoperability between web tools on medieval manuscripts and texts.

Bibale is structured to describe seven main objects:
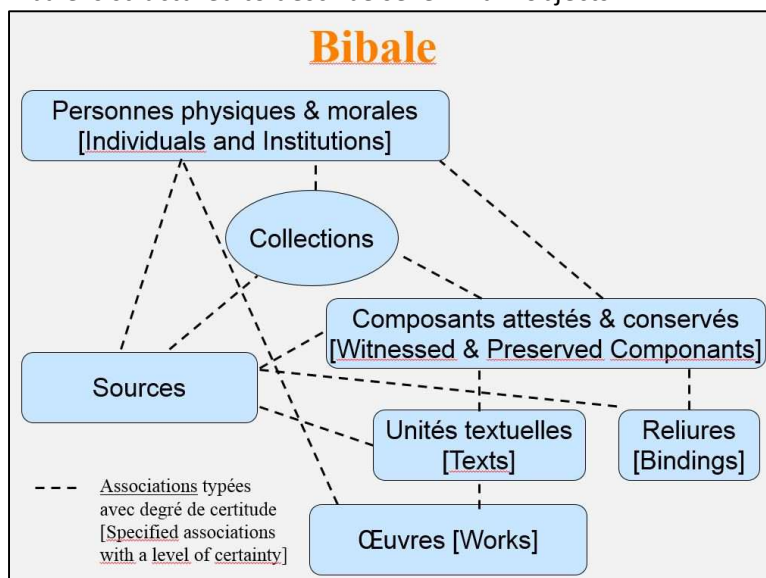
- **persons** ("personnes"):
  - "personnes physiques" (individuals) and
  - "personnes morales" (institutions, e.g. churches, abbeys, communities of friars, university colleges, etc.)

- "**collections**" (libraries, private book collections, but basically any possible grouping of objects: books written by someone, consulted by someone, stolen by someone, etc.)
- **books**; the word currently used in French is "composant" (component), i.e. the object a collection is composed of. Technically Bibale could describe all kinds of collections, but the database concentrates on medieval manuscripts. There are two kinds:
  - "composants conserves" (preserved componants), i.e. existing manuscripts with a current shelf mark or at least a shelf mark or a sales catalogue reference from the 19th-21st century
  - "composants attestés" (recorded componants), i.e. manuscripts mentioned in medieval or early modern sources, especially in inventories and other book lists
- **sources**: inventories, ex-libris, colophons, heraldic arms and other elements that tell us something about the passing of a manuscript in and through different collections
- **bindings** ("reliures")
- **texts**: ("unités textuelles"), i.e. the texts as they appear in the manuscripts
- **works** ("œuvres"), standardised versions of the texts as they have been defined in repertories and as they have been published in modern critical editions.

These seven main objects are linked between each other by **associations** that have properties themselves: for an association between a text and its author or between a manuscript and its owner, or its annotator (or its thief!), several things can be specified:

- a date
- a place
- a commentary
- a level of certainty (it can be defined as certain, doubtful or even rejected)

We have been entering data since two or three years already, but the amount of data is still limited.

For the moment one of the strong points is heraldry:
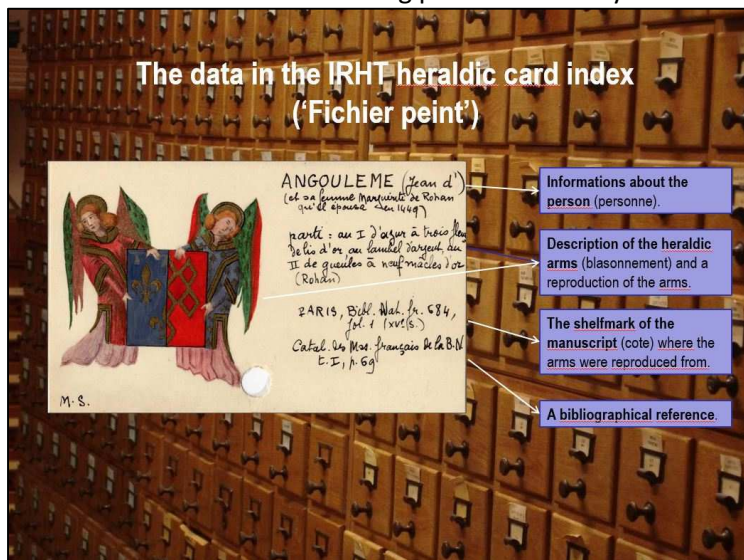
From the 1940s to the 1970s, the IRHT has built up a heraldic card index ("Fichier peint") of about 5200 cards about coats of arms. The images have been painted by hand. These cards typically contain information about a person, a description of the arms, a shelfmark and a bibliographical reference (see image). Most of the data from these 5200 cards have been transferred into Bibale. Thus especially many "Sources" have been created (arms, but also some emblems and devices), and they were linked to the corresponding "Persons" (mainly individuals) and manuscripts ("Composants"). As I said, the original cards have been reproduced and added as images to the files of the sources.

The other source that is – and especially will become – the main one, is the IRHT provenance card index ("Fichier possesseurs").
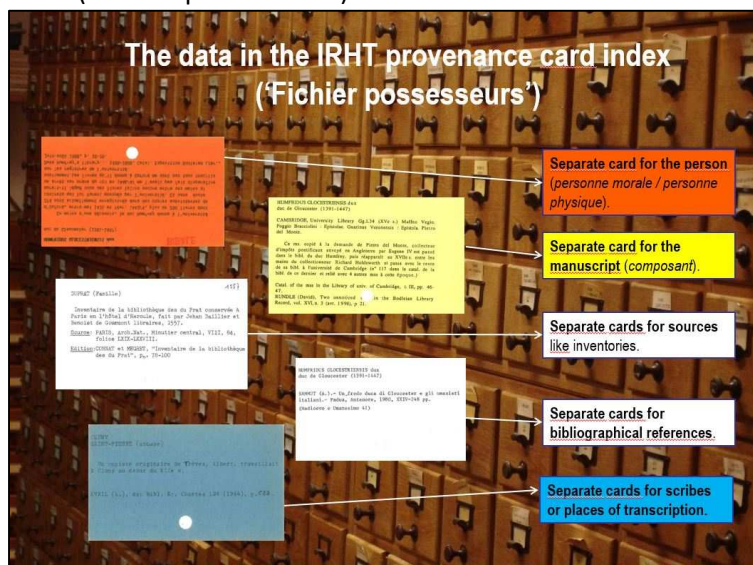
This card index has been built up between 1942 and 2005 at the IRHT and is available in our library to all scholars visiting this library. It consists of some 350.000 coloured cards, containing information on owners, manuscripts, bibliographical references, sources (like inventories or other book lists) and scribes.

From these cards we have been entering information into the database, not starting from A onwards, but focussing on specific ensembles. For the moment Bibale contains for example many Dominican libraries of Southern-France (especially Toulouse and Avignon), the bibliophile Bouhier family (from 16th-18th century Burgundy), the Abbey of Cluny, the Abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés in Paris, Claude Dupuy (a 16th-century humanist), Philippe de Horn (a 15th-century Brabant nobleman), the Rochechouart family, the Bergues-Glymes Family, Humphrey of Gloucester, several medieval Paris university colleges, and Benedictine abbeys where the Maurists were active in the 17th and 18th centuries.

In using Bibale, please note:
- Few search possibilities are now available, but that will change in the future. In 2016 a new version of Bibale will replace the present one.
- If a person has been entered in Bibale with his collection, this does not necessarily mean that we have entered all manuscripts known to have been owned by them.
- We try to update the information of the card indexes with new findings and references, but cannot pretend to be comprehensive in any way.

At the moment (February 2015) Bibale describes:
- Over 5000 persons with about 1000 collections
- Over 5000 manuscripts with 150 bindings
- Over 7000 sources
- 600 texts linked to 250 works

This total of about 20.000 objects is not bad for a start. But our aim is ambitious: the corpus has not been defined, so we theoretically want to describe all manuscripts, all collectors, all collections, all contents… It is a long term project. We are for the moment focussing on persons, manuscripts and sources (leaving the texts and bindings aside), but specific projects on these are being planned.

The challenge of the digital description of coats of arms

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In the field of heraldry, people have dreamt since a long time of a system, an ultimate database, in which one can put and find thousands of coats of arms. Heraldry is a field in which a historical, more or less fixed way exists to describe in words what is visual. This specific feature could make heraldry into the perfect case study for the challenge of making visual resources digitally searchable.

In the Bibale database, we have done our own, modest attempt to design a simple way to encode and coats or arms. We created several non-exhaustive lists of descriptors. They are available online:

- http://bibale.irht.cnrs.fr/php/bibale.php?PLACE=SEARCH1&SPLACE=SEARCH1&SESSIONID=
- Click on the tab "Sources"
- In the field "Type" choose "Héraldique / armoiries"
- In the field "Descripteurs" you see the various categories; when you choose one you see the list of possibilities we entered.

However, these detailed fields of heraldic descriptors in Bibale have not been used when we entered the data. In the end it simply was too much work for the few hands we had. Moreover, the system of description is too basic to describe all arms in a satisfactory way.
Currently, in Bibale only the "blasonnement" (blazon) field is useful. Here you can find about 4000 arms by their heraldic descriptions in French. The autocomplete function is very helpful for this.

In the past, many projects have been thought of to create a codified way to blazon arms.

Blasonnement classique:
Ecartelé : aux 1 et 4, d'argent à la croix ancrée de sable ; aux 2 et 3, de gueules à trois aiglettes d'or

Blasonnement codifié:
Ecartelé 1/4 une croix ancrée Sa/A ; 2/3 trois aiglettes O/G

Blasonnement Steen Clemmensen:
croix ancré; 3 aigles; {AS, GO}

The edition of the armorial of the "Cour amoureuse de Charles VI" by Carla Bozzolo and Hélène Loyau has led to one attempt. IT developers of the LAMOP (http://lamop.univ-paris1.fr/) then identified two main problems: the exact place of the "meubles" (heraldic devices that are not ordinaries) and the "meubles" which are (partly) covered by others.

Steen Clemmensen, a Danish heraldist, built up a huge database assembling data from 117 armorials and 320 other manuscripts: about 85.000 described coats of arms (all of them in English, most of them in French). See: http://www.armorial.dk/ and http://heraldica.hypotheses.org/673. These data are already available on his website, but in a way that is not so easy to use and understand.

A German project on digital opening-up and analysis of medieval heraldic sources is still in the course of being built up but hopes to (1) develop a standardisation for the encoding of coats of arms and (2) build an online digital tool based on Steen Clemmensen's database. The project is led by Torsten Hiltmann (professor of medieval history at the University of Münster) in collaboration with Sebastian Hellmann (Agile Knowledge Engineering and Semantic Web (AKSW), Universität Leipzig). It is to be hoped for that it will get funding.