

[This document contains the author's accepted manuscript. For the publisher's version, see the link in the header of this document.]

**Paper citation:**

Russell, Beth M. "Hidden Wisdom and Unseen Treasure: Revisiting Cataloging in Medieval Libraries." *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 26.3 (1998): 21-30.

**Keywords:**

**Abstract:**

Scholars working in the fields of medieval history and cultural history have recognized that understanding the cataloging and accessioning of books is central to understanding the transmission of ideas. This view should come as no surprise to catalogers themselves, who daily struggle with the problem of providing intellectual, and sometimes physical, access to texts and information. Unfortunately, general histories of libraries and even the library literature seem content to sketch out a chronological development of cataloging in line with the nineteenth and twentieth century view of library development, from a simple list to complex intellectual systems. In truth, however, those individuals responsible for cataloging books in medieval libraries faced many of the same challenges as catalogers today: how to organize information, how to serve local needs, and how to provide access to individual works within larger bibliographic formats. This article will summarize recent scholarship in the history of the book that relates to library cataloging, as well as providing parallels to the cooperative library environment of today.

**Text of paper:**

## **Hidden Wisdom and Unseen Treasure: Revisiting Cataloging in Medieval Libraries**

**Beth M. Russell**

Beth M. Russell, MA, MLIS, is Original Cataloging Librarian, Cushing Memorial Library, Texas A&M University.

Traditional library history has outlined library cataloging as a progression from crude inventories to subject cataloging, tracing its development as a predecessor of "library science" in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, a reexamination of medieval library cataloging in light of recent scholarship in the "history of the book" suggests that, lacking the standardization common in modern cataloging, medieval librarians were driven by utilitarian needs to develop cataloging practices that would work in their particular situations. No medieval treatise on cataloging exists today,<sup>2</sup> and it is rarely possible to determine individual responsibility for library catalogs, but within the extant documentation, individual thinkers often emerge as people solving interesting problems.<sup>3</sup> Anachronistic analyses of library catalogs overlook the fact that, in many ways, medieval librarians were not unlike modern catalogers, who base their decisions on national and international standards, but also must attempt to accommodate users of their own collections, especially as technological advances make such accommodation a reality.<sup>4</sup>

Library cataloging reveals how those entrusted with the care of books thought about the books and, just as interesting, how they thought about the knowledge contained in the books.<sup>5</sup> Other types of documentation can provide clues to the use and understanding of books, such as financial accounts, wills, and inscriptions in the books themselves, but they do not reveal the intellectual work of

description, classification, and organization. Modern authors often see the study of library catalogs as a source of literary and intellectual history,<sup>6</sup> and it seems clear that library catalogs serve first and foremost as a source of the history of the book itself.

Researching the history of cataloging of course requires researching library catalogs themselves. This is hampered by the fact that inventories and catalogs of libraries rarely appear in printed editions, and when they do appear, typesetting and print conventions mean valuable manuscript evidence is lost.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, much scholarship relies heavily on synthesis sources, survey articles, and a few individual examples of collections.<sup>8</sup> Faced with the lack of standard treatises, information can be gleaned from introductory material found in several library catalogs which suggests that individual compilers often felt compelled to explain their system to readers,<sup>9</sup> underlining the intellectual importance of cataloging as a means of access to texts.

A working definition of catalogs: "guides to the content and location of the books available for use,"<sup>10</sup> can serve as a basis for understanding these documents. Due to the absence of theoretical or practical works, individual compilers of catalogs apparently had to work out for themselves how to provide access to titles if they desired, roughly analogous to cataloging a small library without recourse to the *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules* or the Library of Congress files. Despite this disorganization, which seems daunting to modern catalogers, many comprehensive intellectual systems for organizing volumes do survive in medieval documents. In fact, since "cooperation" was virtually unknown in the insular monastic and cathedral libraries of the middle ages, standardization was less important and less desirable than in the our twentieth century environment.

The inventory catalog was the simplest type of catalog.<sup>11</sup> For many monasteries, inventories reveal that books were indeed seen within the context of the monastery's treasures.<sup>12</sup> While these often appear to be little more than collections of titles, they can reveal many important details about book use, especially when they were compiled over time. Inventories do not necessarily indicate a lack of sophistication on the part of the compiler, nor should they be seen as "proto-catalogs," awaiting later centuries to emerge in intellectual full form.<sup>13</sup> Instead, they should be seen as functional documents designed more to "keep track" of titles than a comprehensive system for organizing physical volumes and the texts within them. While some have credited the development from physical value to subject value of texts as the impetus for the change in cataloging from inventories to more complicated schemes,<sup>14</sup> other factors, such as growth of the collection, developments in intellectual theory, and institutional needs seem to have played just as much a role.

The most basic type of classification in medieval catalogs is the division in physical storage among books with different uses. For example, the fact that liturgical or other service books were stored near the chapel in medieval monasteries reveals a functional difference between books, and a realization of that difference on the part of those who cared for the books. This basic division encompasses the monastic or cathedral division of main collection and service books (sometimes including school books).<sup>15</sup> In some cases, such Durham Cathedral's second catalog of 1391-1395, the spendment, or chancery, where books were stored was divided by an iron grille. Books in the inner portion were restricted in use and numbered 87, while the outer portion contained 428 items and was accessible to any monk.<sup>16</sup> The monastic library of San Martino al Cimino also held books scattered throughout the premises, according to need.<sup>17</sup>

Later, university libraries also utilized physical subdivision as a basic form of classification. The Sorbonne's *magna libraria* and *libraria parva* were basic divisions, arising from the growth and diversification of the library's collections.<sup>18</sup> Statutes from the fourteenth century make it clear that the two collections were stored in different rooms, with different keys.<sup>19</sup> It can be argued that this division arose because older libraries were largely restricted to theological works, while the new universities stocked both secular and religious texts,<sup>20</sup> and had a responsibility to a larger and more diverse base of patrons.

Simple location descriptions could also be assigned to provide access to volumes. These could be as transparent as a chest-by-chest description of where to find a particular volume.<sup>21</sup> The chained volumes so familiar to medievalists were often not listed in early documents, probably because they did not need to be kept track of. However, later catalogs do include them, and while it is usually assumed this is to prevent theft,<sup>22</sup> it seems just as likely it is to ensure communal access, much like holding books on reserve at a central location.

Catalogers also used a variety of techniques to indicate specific locations. Here, the notion of shelf listing came into play. Often catalogers assigned letters of the alphabet to volumes,<sup>23</sup> or gave precise descriptions of the shelf on which volumes could be found. Interesting mnemonic schemes may also have been developed to aid retrieval. In addition to organization of titles, medieval catalogs provide a varying degree of physical description. Short description such as that of the Durham library catalog in the twelfth century is limited to the number of volumes, the size, and the completeness of the set.<sup>24</sup> Sometimes descriptive information seems frivolous, and is of frustratingly little use to modern historians. For example, the 1394 catalog of Trinity Hall, Cambridge, gives us details such as *magna et pulchra* ("big and pretty"), which probably would not help distinguish one volume from another.<sup>25</sup> In other cases, the detail suggests the care with which books were regarded, as is the case in fifteenth century Cistercian documents resulting from an ordinance of 1456, which describe books' material, binding, and general state.<sup>26</sup>

A later practice is the recording of the opening words of the first or a later leaf in the volume. Possible explanations range from preventing substitution of cheaper volumes for more expensive ones,<sup>27</sup> to distinguishing between copies of the same work.<sup>28</sup> While many very brief catalogs do not give this information, it seems that even medieval librarians, who were not dealing with the exact print duplicates created by mechanized printing, realized that it could be necessary to distinguish among copies of the same text, either for their own purposes or for users of the library.

A final type of catalog is the union list, or combined catalog of several libraries' holdings. These are usually considered a modern invention, but an interesting medieval example, though incomplete, does exist. The *Registrum Librorum Angliae*, compiled between 1250 and 1296, was apparently designed for use by traveling Franciscans who would not have the resources of a stationary library like other orders. It lists holdings of one hundred eighty-three libraries in England, by title only, with no descriptive information given.<sup>29</sup> Clearly this list would be helpful only for locating a known item. A fragmentary remain of a thirteenth century Parisian union catalog follows the same principle.<sup>30</sup> It is often asserted that early subject or thematic cataloging consisted of attempts to fit books into the natural order, corresponding to the seven liberal arts or other accepted "medieval" schemes of knowledge,<sup>31</sup> based on the common medieval world view. Religious works, sometimes liturgical books, sometimes theological works, were listed first. In descending order, the Church Fathers, ancient pagan writers, and other works followed. While this hierarchical organization, which could be much more complex than one might think, may have worked from small religious collections, by the thirteenth century other models of catalogs were being developed to meet the needs of growing mixed collections, such as universities.<sup>32</sup>

Other types of organization were called for, and the acceptance of alphabetical order for subject access represents a major development in the medieval catalog,<sup>33</sup> one which renders it more familiar to modern librarians. Given the admittedly different nature of "subjects" as seen in early library catalogs, it seems clear that as early as the twelfth century subject cataloging was being used to distinguish categories of books, Christchurch, Canterbury's 1170 catalog and Durham Cathedral's 1162 catalog are organized primarily by subject, even when no headings for subject are given.<sup>34</sup> Seen in this light, the more "sophisticated" subject classification of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries may be a product of larger library collections, not a quantitative shift in the understanding of books. An interesting case of unique organization is that of the Glastonbury Abbey catalog of around 1247. Here, books that were primarily interesting because of their subject, or whose author was not

illustrious, are cataloged under subjects. Famous authors had books classed under their name, with no mention made of the subject.<sup>35</sup> This organization brings to mind modern problems of determining how users may want to look for material decades or even centuries later. "Cataloger judgement" clearly played a significant role.

Perhaps one of the most interesting problems in cataloging is distinguishing between the notions of item and work. For the medieval scholar today, the notion of a work is relatively straightforward. *Beowulf* is a work. A French romance may exist in several variations in several manuscripts, but it is relatively easy to determine whether they are the same "work." For librarians and library theorists, this notion is a bit more problematic, encompassing ideas such as chief responsibility for a work, extent of revision, and changes in format. Modern catalogers dealing with multiple texts in one volume, or other issues of confused format, can take heart in knowing that their medieval colleagues struggled with the same issues.

Composite volumes were such a problem because binding was an expensive part of the book production process. The surviving percentage of composite volumes is relatively small, but much of this can be attributed to the fact that nineteenth and twentieth century owners often had their volumes dis-bound. It seems likely that many volumes in any particular collection would be composites, chosen for binding based on rational characteristic such as sharing an author or general subject, or more idiosyncratic ones such as size or value.<sup>36</sup>

The catalog of the *parva libraria* of the Sorbonne, circa 1275, presents a taste of how frustrating the issue can be. Under several of the subdivisions are classed works labeled *mixtes*, suggesting a catchall for thematically organized works with no actual access to individual texts.<sup>37</sup> In addition, although the cataloger presents a title analysis of some volumes, such as Augustine's letters, the individual titles must be accessed through the volume in question.<sup>38</sup> This is a common problem with composite works, and persists in the modern cataloging practice of giving contents notes. Chapters that may contain different subject matter are listed individually under a common title, allowing readers to find sub-headings within a volume, but only if they know the title under which the volume is cataloged.<sup>39</sup>

It seems for the most part that early catalogs listed only the first work in composite volumes. Contents lists or other guides within the book functioned to give access to other texts.<sup>40</sup> This may have been sufficient due to the small size of the libraries in question. In other cases, phrases such as *cum multis aliis* ("with many others") were used to indicate other works.<sup>41</sup> In rare cases, each text within a volume was listed, such as the Lorsch catalog of the ninth century.<sup>42</sup> This is a strong argument against the claim that later catalogs were more sophisticated than earlier documents. The fourteenth century Christchurch, Canterbury cataloger came up with an unusual approach. Section marks were made for a composite volume, with the tag *In hoc volumine continentur* ("Contained in this volume") followed by other titles. This early attempt at providing contents notes suffered one major drawback, though. When the next item in the list is not a composite volume, and so has no section mark, titles run together, making it impossible to distinguish titles within a volume.<sup>43</sup>

Another interesting decision was made in the catalog of the library of the Augustinian Friars at York, compiled around 1372. Here, the cataloger assigned letters of the alphabet to each book in each subject class. Letters were repeated or combined with symbols when necessary. In this way, a book listed by its letter then its content clearly shows which titles are contained therein, avoiding the problem of titles running together.<sup>44</sup> While these organizational schemes may seem to modern librarians as "stoppag" measures which do not fully compensate for lack of access to each title and subject, they obviously served their purpose in the libraries they described.

An example of another type of document designed to give access to texts and the information within is an analytic catalog, probably compiled after 1321, of the Sorbonne's *magna libraria*. The individual compiler of this catalog faced a problem common to all catalogers: how to let users of the

library know what was in the books. He anguished over the "hidden wisdom and unseen treasure" of the library, and attempted to do something about it.<sup>45</sup> He constructed a table to the contents of all the bound volumes in the chained library, and allowed use by titles or *incipits* (opening lines) to locate individual texts. While it is tempting to see it as a "distant ancestor of the modern author and subject catalog,"<sup>46</sup> it seems to have more in common with the indexes and tables compiled in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in its approach to the texts.

These indexes, concordances, and other research tools seemed to have been compiled in reaction to the new scholarship of the thirteenth century, which required easy access to basic texts, rather than to the *florilegium*, or compilations, that were popular earlier.<sup>47</sup> Early examples function solely for a single copy of a manuscript, relying on symbols in the margin or other notations, while later scholars devised more sophisticated methods of indexing, useful for standard works such as the Bible.

In modern library practice, indexing is a separate branch from cataloging, concerned with providing access to terms or subjects within a text rather than to volumes within a library. While it seems as if these distinctions were less clear in medieval library practice, and indeed works such as the analytical catalog of the Sorbonne blur the distinction, indexing while fascinating as a development of how people used texts, presents entirely different problems.

In sum, it is clear that individuals faced with the problems of describing and pointing the way to volumes and texts in medieval libraries faced a number of challenges, based on the structure of books, the way they had been traditionally used, and the needs of the institution. Medieval librarians devised ingenious and often unique ways to solve the problems in their own libraries. As the use of books changed and their numbers increased, so did the way in which catalogs were compiled, and there are outstanding examples both of negligence and of thoroughness from all periods.

Nonetheless, to claim that library cataloging became increasingly more sophisticated as it approached the ideal of the modern author/title/subject catalog is to overlook a wealth of evidence in the documents of medieval libraries.

Modern catalogers struggling to meet local needs in a cooperative electronic environment can look for inspiration, and for examples of ingenuity and invention, to our early colleagues in centuries past, who dealt with similar problems in organizing the knowledge in their care.

## NOTES

1. Lawrence S. Guthrie, "An Overview of Medieval Library Cataloging," *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly*, v. 15, no. 3, (1992): 93-100. "One can easily recognize the progress in modern cataloging from its medieval roots. No longer is cataloging solely an inventory list, but also a subject index guide for the patron." 99-100.

2. Guthrie makes much of this fact, stating that the armarius in charge of medieval libraries and scriptoria "followed procedures based primarily on traditions." Guthrie: 95. Several authors did tackle the problem of how to organize their own libraries, most notably Richard of Fournival in his *Biblionomia*. For a discussion of his treatise, see Donatella Nebbiai-Dalla Guarda, "Classification et Classements" in *Histoire des bibliothèques françaises*, 1 (Paris: Promodis-Éditions du Cercle du librairie, 1988), 386-389.

3. Donatella Nebbiai-Dalla Guarda, "Les inventaires des bibliothèques médiévales," in *Le Livre au Moyen Âge* (Paris: Presses du CNRS, c1988), 89. She asserts "Based on a descriptive approach, the composition [of medieval library catalogs] underwent modifications and evolutions, according to the circumstances and the time period." (Author's translation.)

4. Guthrie, summarizing earlier sources, highlights the failure of some catalogs to "indicate any system at all," 96. His statement that "the medieval library catalog primarily served the librarian to guard against property loss, to audit the collection and to transfer the care of books to a successor. The user of the library rarely used the catalog but rather consulted the armarius," 97-98, pre-supposes modern system of patron-originated searches, which would have been illogical in small libraries with a limited number of users.

5. Guarda asserts that medieval catalogs are a tool privileged for historical research, since they show us how books were used and interpreted. "Inventaires," 91.

6. Mary and Richard Rouse, "Early Library of the Sorbonne" in *Authentic Witnesses: Approaches to Medieval Texts and Manuscripts*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, c1991), 342.

7. Of the few photographic reproductions I found, none are catalogs mentioned in this article. In fact, the most interesting examples of medieval library catalogs seem to be available only in transcriptions.

8. The sources most used by Guthrie fall into this category: James Westfall Thompson, *The Medieval Library* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939); Dorothy May Norris, *A History of Cataloguing Methods 1100-1850: With an Introductory Survey of Ancient Times*, (London: Grafton & Co., 1939) and Karl Christ, *Handbook of Medieval Library History* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1984), which still does not address much of the scholarship in the "history of the book" that has appeared since the 1980s.

9. For example, St. Martin's Priory in Dover has a catalog compiled in 1389 divided into three parts according to who was to use it. Each part was preceded by an explanation. Norris, 52-54.

10. Thompson, 613.

11. Karl Christ distinguishes the inventory list from accession lists or lists of books copied by a particular scribe, suggesting that these latter types of documents do not really count as catalogs at all. Christ, 36.

12. Thompson, 611, cites the need to inventory treasures as the reason book inventories were compiled.

13. Interestingly, medieval scholars in recent years have worked to counteract the long held belief that the Middle Ages represented a long dark period of cultural and intellectual stagnation before the Renaissance. A parallel can be drawn to the modern understanding of library organization, which suggests libraries only burst into full form in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

14. This is one of Guthrie's main contentions, 93, 99-100.

15. Thompson, 615.

16. Norris, 58.

17. Guarda, "Inventaires," 90.

18. Guarda, "Classifications," 378. The *libraria magna* ("great library") contained the chained volumes available to all, while the *libraria parva* ("small library") was the limited circulating collection. This division arose after the collection was divided in 1289. Christ, 242. Therefore, the terms could also refer to the "old" and "young" libraries.

19. Rouse and Rouse, 363.

20. Guarda, "Classifications," 379; Rouse and Rouse.

21. Norris posits the "*distinctiones*" category in the fourteenth century catalogue of Christchurch, Canterbury as corresponding to book presses, with further subdivisions corresponding to shelves, 38-40.

22. Thompson, 625.

23. Such is the case with the Augustinian Friars of York's catalog of 1372. See Norris, 47-52.

24. Norris, 23.

25. Norris, 68.

26. Guarda, "Inventaires," 90.

27. Christ, 37.

28. Norris, 24.

29. Norris, 30-33.

30. Guarda, "Inventaires," 91.

31. Guarda, "Classifications," 373-374; Thompson, 616. Examples of variations abound, and this scheme is the barest sketch of the natural order organization which manifested itself in numerous ways.

32. Guarda, "Inventaires," 90.

33. Mary and Richard Rouse, *Authentic Witnesses: Approaches to Medieval Texts and Manuscripts*, (Notre Dame : University of Notre Dame Press, c1991), 5.

34. Thompson, 14-23.

35. Norris, 29.

36. Regarding the Christchurch Canterbury catalog, Norris writes: "[T]he cataloguer seems to have been up against an insuperable difficulty with regard to the very ordinary practice of binding several items up into one volume," 41.

37. Guarda, "Classifications," 385.

38. Rouse and Rouse, "Early Library," 355.

39. Fortunately, the increasing availability of searching all fields in a computer catalog, and developments such as the enhanced contents notes in the OCLC format, make this less of a problem today.

40. Christ, 37

41. Norris, 19.

42. Christ, 37.

43. Norris, 41.

44. Norris, 51.

45. Rouse and Rouse, "Early Library," 381-386.

46. Rouse and Rouse, "Early Library," 385.

47. For a discussion of this phenomenon, see Richard Rouse and Mary Rouse, "Concordances et index," in *Mise en page et mise en texte du livre manuscrit*, eds. Henri-Jean Martin and Jean Vezin, (Paris : Editions du Cercle de la librairie-Promo-dis, c1990), 219-228.