

Parsifal: an innovative and powerful bibliographic research tool

Mauro Guerrini

Some recollections of the history of URBE

«I believe that the experience of URBE [Unione Romana Biblioteche Ecclesiastiche: Roman Union of Ecclesiastical Libraries] marks a very important moment in the history of cooperation between universities and libraries, but its approach to librarianship should be specified: namely, its aim to really arrive at a single catalogue, an integrated catalogue, drawn up in the same way, in compliance with international standards» (Guerrini 2004, 28). This was the aspiration formulated in 2004 on the occasion of the ten years of activity of the Network of Roman pontifical libraries. On 11 May 2023, the ambitious goal was achieved with the inauguration of *Parsifal*, the innovative and powerful bibliographic research tool of the libraries of Roman universities and pontifical institutions that collaborate through the URBE Network. In 2023 they are as follows: the Pontifical Gregorian University, the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas – Angelicum, the Pontifical Urban University, the Pontifical Lateran University, the Pontifical University Antonianum, the Salesian Pontifical University, the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, the Pontifical Athenaeum of Sant’Anselmo, the Pontifical Teresianum Theological Faculty (catalogue not yet in *Parsifal*), the Pontifical Theological Faculty “Marianum”, the Pontifical Faculty of Educational Sciences Auxilium, the Pontifical Biblical Institute, the Pontifical Oriental Institute, the Pontifical Institute of Christian Archaeology (catalogue not yet in

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Parsifal), the Pontifical Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies (PISAI) (catalogue not yet in Parsifal), the Pontifical Alfonsianum Institute of Moral Theology, the Patristic Institute Augustinianum, the John Paul II Pontifical Theological Institute, and the Centro Pro Unione.

The collaboration between pontifical university libraries, an important factor, has been consolidated over time, culminating, in 1991, with the approval of the Statute, a text that urges institutions to engage in dialogue and define bibliographic service projects for the benefit of their users: professors and students, i.e.: «to support the teaching and research carried out in our universities/faculties». These aims were pursued with the establishment of extensive and updated collections of bibliographic resources in theological and related disciplines, with works published in numerous languages, to meet the needs of students from a vast, international area of origin.

Parsifal is the fruit of a long collaborative journey that began with the first meeting of the librarians of the pontifical universities held at the Gregorian university on 28 February 1973, in which the librarians of the Gregorian, the Biblical, the Oriental, the Lateran University, the Augustinianum, Propaganda Fide (later renamed Urbaniana), the Angelicum, the Sant'Anselmo, the Antonianum, the Salesianum, the Seraphicum, the Teresianum, the Marianum, the Institute of Arab Studies and Regina Mundi participated. On 13 May 1991, the URBE Association's founding document was signed, while the Network was officially inaugurated on 12 May 1994. The history of the Network is characterised by numerous attempts to search for a common cataloguing language through training courses, reflections, and exchange.

Having reached the milestone of Parsifal does honour to those in charge of URBE – first and foremost, the rectors of the pontifical institutions – for having believed in the proposal for bibliographic cooperation and, therefore, for having invested human and financial resources in its implementation. The path has not always been linear (as is the case with large projects), and it has constantly tried to take into account the distinctive characteristics of the institutions involved, which were similar and at the same time different in nature and size, in the awareness that each co-operating institution wished to preserve and exalt its historical and functional individuality, but also in the knowledge that one library alone, however large and self-sufficient, could not achieve the same goals.

The first steps for participatory cataloguing were accompanied in the early nineties of the last century by Ivan Rebernik, librarian of the Vatican Apostolic Library, who coordinated the work of a commission that combined the adoption of ISBD for the cataloguing description with the characteristics of the Aleph 300 software. The pontifical libraries, which followed the norms of the Vatican, moved on to the adoption of an international standard, shared by bibliographic agencies and libraries from all over the world. In 2001, URBE began working with the computer company Teknesis (later @Cult) and chose the Amicus software, a second decisive step in its history, but more complex than the previous one due to the problems posed by MARC 21. Indeed, the migration from Aleph to Amicus required a cautious two-year journey, from 2002 to 2004, to make all

the libraries operational. In 2006, a first significant training course was organised, dedicated to the updates of ISBD and MARC 21: it consisted of 96 hours of training over three months. It was the basis and premise for some decisive steps: the adoption of AACR2 from 2009 and of RDA from 2017, and the inauguration of Parsifal in 2023. Thirty years exactly: 1993-2023. From the paper sheet to Aleph 300 to Amicus with MARC 21; from the Vatican regulations to ISBD to AACR2 to RDA; from the initial 14 print catalogues to the current online ones.

The protagonists of this story have been the cataloguers, whose competence has grown collectively from year to year, despite differences from library to library. The work of the Governing Council has been equally important and valuable, with Silvano Danieli as its tireless and determined director, who always tried to proceed in harmony and listen to the needs of each participant. Everyone played their part, and together contributed to the growth of URBE. The investment in professional training aimed at directors and librarians played a decisive role, with particular attention paid to cataloguers. The 2018 Plenary Assembly recalls this commitment: «One of the most valuable services that URBE intends to offer our institutions is that of promoting the professionalism, first and foremost, of the librarian, and consequently also of all other aspects related to the profession. The responsibility and commitment that is asked of each of us librarians is to reaffirm that the collaboration and cooperation that we carry out in the association serves to enhance our mission and support us in sharing service projects that one library alone would find it more difficult to achieve».

The international dimension of Parsifal

Parsifal is an initiative conceived with the library expertise and IT assistance of @Cult and Casalini Libri and is linked to Italian and international bodies in which the two companies, world leaders in their field, participate as protagonists; among these, the *Share-VDE* experience, an acronym for Share Virtual Discovery Environment, part of the broader *Share Family* initiative, which involves over thirty of the largest US and Northern European libraries. Its purposes are twofold: a) to define a new bibliographic model at the conceptual level and a new way of describing resources and publishing their metadata as linked open data; b) to facilitate the transition of libraries from the traditional bibliographic context to the new environment proposed by the *Semantic Web* and linked data. Linked data, as we know, is a Semantic Web technology, a model for structuring and representing data in a way that can be used *semantically*, or understandably, by machines.

BIBFRAME is a bibliographic structure model developed by the Library of Congress since the early 2000s, with the participation of numerous libraries, mainly in the United States, which incorporates the ongoing evolutions on the new methods of sharing data and digital resources between cultural areas that use different rules and standards; it promotes the transition from the MARC format to linked open data. The BIBFRAME model is based on the entity-relationship concept of FRBR, IFLA LRM and RDA, and creates bibliographic structures in linked open data, thus bringing catalogue data into the Semantic Web.

Share Family has as its prototype *SHARE Catalogue*, a cooperation and service sharing project between the libraries of universities in Campania, Basilicata and Salento¹. More precisely, it is a platform for browsing the catalogues of the participating libraries, organised according to the BIBFRAME data model, an acronym for the Bibliographic Framework Initiative. Among the numerous services, the portal provides integrated access to bibliographic, analogue and digital resources (including those accessible online on the websites of the suppliers) of the participating libraries, with users being directed to the *full text* of the essays and monographs, in compliance with the authorisations and licences for use issued by the rights holders. *SHARE Catalogue* is the collective catalogue (catalogue is now a term far from its etymology) in *Linked Open Data* and *SHARE Discovery* is the *information discovery* system, a search engine that creates an index by drawing on online catalogues and databases: it allows for users to be offered a unique access tool to the various OPACs of libraries. The integration of the different catalogues and authority data and their positioning on the web enables the enrichment of «new and evolving knowledge» generated by the web itself: a further qualitative leap forward for the *SHARE* project.

Since 2023, Share Family counts *LILLITH* and *Parsifal* among its initiatives, two projects that are therefore part of an innovative and prestigious international project.

*LILLIT, Libri illustrati italiani*², is a research project of Sapienza University of Rome, with the collaboration of the ICCU and the Central Institute for Graphics, whose objective is to carry out a recognition of the Italian printed editions of the 16th–18th centuries that contain illustrations or engravings, both as an accompaniment and explanation of the texts, and as an ornament to the paratextual pages, front pages and frontispieces.

Parsifal is a technological platform designed in compliance with the BIBFRAME bibliographic model, extended to ensure compatibility with the IFLA LRM model, an integral part of the RDA guidelines. Its primary objective is to help users find, identify, select, obtain and navigate metadata about works, their creators (narrators, poets, illustrators, entities, etc.) and the relationships between them. The platform allows all users, internal and external to URBE, to ascertain the availability of a specific bibliographic resource among the collections of the participating libraries and to refine searches, obtaining results enhanced by sources from the individual catalogues: in December 2023 the database contains 2.8 million catalogue records, with weekly updates.

The new tool is a historic turning point, marking a substantial leap for librarians. Indeed, *Parsifal* applies both a conceptual vision and an avant-garde descrip-

¹ University of Naples Federico II, University of Naples L'Orientale, University of Naples Parthenope, University of Salerno, University of Sannio, University of Basilicata, University of Salento, later joined by the Universities of Suor Orsola Benincasa and Cassino.

² *LILLIT, Libri illustrati italiani* was directed by prof. Maria Teresa Biagetti.

tive practice that requires – and perhaps even imposes – an elevated collaboration between librarians. It places the pontifical libraries at the qualitative level of many European and American public and private sister libraries.

The novelty of Parsifal

The political novelty of Parsifal consists mainly in the continuity, in the loyalty to a programme, to a project that began in 1994, in the ability to welcome the cataloguing evolution in an international environment, and above all in the awareness that each goal can only be a new starting point.

The collaboration between the libraries that contribute to implementing Parsifal involves a staff of about 60 cataloguers who work on current data – for example, on the reuse of authority records – and collaborate on pre-existing data – correcting incorrect data, arranging clusters.

RDA is the cornerstone of the entire process: over the years, librarians have grown in their understanding of the concepts of entities and access points as they are present in the guidelines. Above all, they participate directly or indirectly in international projects, such as BIBFRAME and SHARE Family.

Now a new path is beginning for the libraries participating in Parsifal: a greater and conscious collaboration that takes the form of following all determined and precise regulatory codes to prevent Parsifal from becoming a repository of unmanageable data that would compromise the efforts and purposes for which it was designed and created.

Prospects

This volume testifies to the path taken by the librarians of the pontifical universities of Rome and illustrates the particularities of the shared platform Parsifal, whose features, referred to in conclusion, are as follows:

- showing the items held on the URBE Network;
- adopting RDA to describe and discover resources in the Semantic Web, especially to organise a large amount of metadata;
- contributing to linked data with names of authors and works of Christian classicism; facilitating the integration of metadata with VIAF;
- highlighting in the authority record authors that are only known within a limited area, and perhaps for this reason are absent from VIAF;
- allowing the reuse of network metadata as a way of spreading the culture that characterises the URBE institutions (with the coining of new subjects that could one day enter the *Nuovo soggettario*);
- allowing navigation to the corresponding entities present in other databases to increase the knowledge of an author and his/her works: encyclopaedia entries, biographies, etc.

The attention paid to the Wiki world is also important, with the construction of links with Wikidata.

SHARE Catalogue and Parsifal represent two such attractive experiments that we hope they will serve as pioneers for a new Italian bibliographic ecosystem. SBN [‘Servizio bibliotecario nazionale’], the Italian National Library Service, needs to be reconfigured after its innovative and extraordinary conception in the 1980s. For too long, in fact, it has been in need of a profound evolution in line with bibliographic transformations and new international library architectures. This evolution represents, first of all, a change of perspective and can only be faced with an approach that is the result of the work of an international community: it imposes a change of vision towards the management of resources that no local and self-referential community can face and achieve. The challenges, the questions, and the problems to be solved to ensure a dialogue that transcends national, linguistic, cultural and domain boundaries are often too complex to be addressed and solved alone. Being on the web, dialoguing with the languages that the web prefers for many of the communities capable of producing metadata, is no longer a questionable option for libraries and for registered cultural institutes: it is a moral obligation, which faces and overcomes the problem of the marginalisation of a very rich information heritage, which is the result of centuries of analysis and application. Changing vision does not mean denying one’s past and traditions, but rather finding a new theoretical and technological paradigm to defend and amplify tradition. Reuse, which is one of the founding concepts of the web and which is expressed in different ways (such as open science, open data, and interoperability) involves our library communities completely; not understanding its value means not taking the opportunity to optimise processes by sharing efforts: only a competent, broad, cohesive and diverse community can face these burdens and hope to reach the goal of a new dimension of library cooperation in the digital age.

Bibliographic reference

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