

# Parchment and paper in digital University Libraries – new contexts for manuscript and archival collections

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## Introduction

The advent of digital editing and publishing does not mean the end has come for the Gutenberg era. Most of what we read, we still read in print, even if we locate it and select it on the computer screen. The proportion of digital library services compared with traditional book and journal ones is obviously growing at a high rate. Digital information is a rich and wonderful source, with no physical limits to it, for those who are online. For many, the internet is already the first place to turn when searching for information. In the case of scientific journals, it seems that the electronic medium is already coming close to replacing the printed one. While the situation is not the same as far as books are concerned, one could probably say that in theory at least, the electronic medium can completely replace the modern printed book – or more precisely: Technology enables books to exist primarily in digital form as structured electronic texts, which then can be formatted and printed on demand.

The impact of the digital age is not of the same type or at the same scale when we turn to manuscript and archival materials. The drive towards digitisation is naturally much stronger in the case of structured, synthesised textual information like books and journals. Those texts are ready for reading. In manuscript collections, there is typically, apart from the highlights we all want to see, large amounts of materials that contain raw, unprocessed textual information. This is not synthesised information, it is rather textual data for research and investigation. This kind of materials moves much more slowly into the digital age. The sheer size of it makes it safe to say that our paper and parchment collections are going to have to stay with us, in their original physical form, for as far into the future as we can see.

The great and potentially very rewarding challenge is to integrate manuscript and archival collections in the modern concept of a university library. In my article, I will give some principal reflections on this challenge. After saying something about the type of materials itself and its relevance, I will discuss the difference between “provenance” archives and “collections”, which I think is an

important difference to bear in mind, especially for university libraries. Then, I will move onto the role of university libraries and our physical and digital archives. Finally I point at the promising possibilities in the new educational context of university libraries involving learning centres and teaching.

My general perspective is that of a special collection department in the library of a medium size, nearly 200 years old European academic institution.

### **The relevance of unique or rare materials**

Unique materials like handwritten documents, or very rare materials like books from the earlier years of the printing age, are sometimes aesthetically beautiful objects which possess a certain aura of age and authenticity that enthrall us when we look at them. This effect is commonly experienced among the public, whenever old and rare written or printed materials are exhibited. One important duty for us as keepers of old and rare materials is of course to give the public the opportunity to see and experience old books and manuscripts. Many archives and libraries hold materials that give great opportunities for people to see the longer lines of history stretching backwards from their own spot in time and space, like the history of their country, region or city, or the history of their family, whose ancestors may be mentioned in the archives. This is an important aspect where the public justly expects our institutions to provide both access to information and context for understanding. With the electronic age, where we can scan images, digitise text and produce web publications, we have of course much better possibilities to meet this expectation. There is today an emerging wealth of high quality digital manuscript and old book publications on the internet. The possibilities to locate and access reproductions of historical materials have improved considerably over the only 10-15 years since the internet became a reality. One might wonder, in passing, what the impact of the digital world on the inherent power of the real, physical objects will be. Digital copies of manuscripts can be more colourful, larger, clearer than the original. Will the paper objects in the future become more or less powerful in their authenticity?

The relevance of the unique materials lies of course first and foremost in its provision of textual information that is nowhere else to be gained. Moreover, the function of unique textual materials as documentation of historical events and processes is of primary importance. The documentation aspect is in the archival world rightly seen as being of relevance to questions even of human rights and democracy. The documentation aspect is a major one whenever history is investigated and written, because the unique, actual and authentic materials with its information are there to demand our historical description and explanation. This goes for the history of society in general, and also, of course, for the history

and development of the academic world, where university libraries have a particular responsibility and role to play.

### **University libraries in the archival world**

As keepers of unique and rare materials, university libraries are part of a larger landscape of archival institutions. In the field of old and rare materials there is an overlap between university libraries, state and national archives, county archives, municipal or city archives and libraries, not to forget the museum sector. From the point of view of society in general, it is of little importance whether this or that material is deposited in a university library or in the state archives. The overall important points are safe preservation of materials and physical and digital, and intellectual, access for the public.<sup>1</sup> Archival institutions and libraries share to a great extent the view that the main objectives on behalf of our public audience are more important than the actual location of materials, even if each institution naturally feels privileged to have the collection that it has, no matter if the collection is large or small in numbers.

Even if archival institutions inside and outside the academic world share the main objectives and intentions regarding our duties and activities, there are also noteworthy differences in archival traditions. The processing of handwritten materials in university libraries throughout time tends to reflect a more academic perspective than is sometimes the case in the tradition of the non university archives, like state and national archives. University archives have had, in many cases at least, better time and opportunity to catalogue unique materials in detail. As far as Norway is concerned, we could say that the university catalogue tradition is more of a philological kind, sometimes richer in context and detail and more individually adapted to each archival object, than the catalogue tradition of national and state archives. If this is so, it is no wonder. It is not possible for the large receiving institutions to catalogue in deep and broad detail each document, or each series of documents, because the amounts of archival materials that each year are deposited is very large. This has been the situation for many archival institutions for a long time.

Part of the answer to this challenge is to stick strictly to the so called *principle of provenance*. This means in as much as possible to keep archival items together, complete and in the order they had when created. The fundamental value ascribed to the creator and the creation process becomes evident when one reads how the International Council on Archives (ICA) defines the concept of an archival *fonds*, which is

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<sup>1</sup> Buckland 1991, see Skagen and Torras, this volume.

[the] whole of the records, regardless of form or medium, organically created and/or accumulated and used by a particular person, family, or corporate body in the course of that creator's activities and functions.<sup>2</sup>

One could say that the principle of provenance, when observed, keeps the materials as authentic as possible. Further, this principle preserves the order and system of the archival materials as an additional source of information about its creation. The principle of provenance is a sensible way to guard the future information value of archival materials, and it is a cornerstone of archival methodology.

One could argue, however, that the provenance principle is indispensable only when detailed, philological cataloguing is not an alternative. In principle, a detailed description of creation, acquisition, and later custodial history of the materials could preserve the same information as is taken care of by keeping the materials in the original order.

An example of a collection built around a part of an archive is the Bergen University Library MS 2053, letters to *and from* poet Olav H. Hauge. After poet Olav H. Hauge, born 1908, died in 1994, his letters were processed in the following way. All letters of strictly private character were sifted out and remained in the possession of the family. All letters concerning his activity as a poet were registered and taken over by The University of Bergen. Then, a university professor contacted the persons that had written letters *to* Olav H. Hauge, and asked them to provide the University with the letters they had received *from* the poet. A good deal of new material was provided by the recipients. Most scholars would agree that the scientific value of the collection was raised by the addition of letters *from* Hauge. From a strict provenance point of view, however, the materials have been interfered with, it *is not* the archive of the original creator anymore.

The provenance question seems to be a point where cataloguing traditions in academic institutions differ from the traditions of other important archival institutions. We do not focus on provenance in the same way as state or national archives. Some tension sometimes follows from this fact, like in Norway, where the national archives might think that university libraries are not handling archival materials correctly. Some would argue that if the principle of provenance is not strictly adhered to, we are not speaking of *archives* proper, but of *collections*. Collections, then, are implied to be of lesser archival value. The ICA defines a collection as

an artificial assemblage of documents accumulated on the basis of some common characteristic without regard to the provenance of those documents  
Not to be confused with an archival fonds.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> ISAD(G), p. 10. See also Lange et al., p. 135 ff.

<sup>3</sup> ISAD(G), p. 10.

The question of archives as opposed to collections in my view represent a basic methodological point where university libraries have a different archival tradition. We should develop and strengthen our own tradition into the age of the digital library. I think we have to do so very consciously, since our institutions are after all comparatively small in the archival world.

It would be to oversimplify to state that philological cataloguing requires much more time and effort per shelf meter of catalogued materials, although in one sense this is true. The determining factor as to where to spend the cataloguing resources is the scholarly interest. We ask what can be scientifically gained by describing the particular archival object in detail. When scientists predict there is something substantial to gain, then there is reason for more detailed description. This we might call the *criterion of scientific interest*. The same criterion applies to the choice of materials for digitisation. Obvious as this may seem, the criterion is necessary for university libraries to make explicit to explain their aim and their job, because in it lies the cornerstone of *our* archival tradition. Universities are not here simply to collect information. Facilitating the creation of new knowledge is the ultimate goal of our libraries, with all their branches. Following this objective, university library special collections have acquired and established archival objects that are not of the “pure” provenance kind, but of the collection kind. We have good and legitimate reasons for doing so, on the basis of scientific interest.

### **The present and future role of University Libraries**

As mentioned above, the actual physical location of an archival object is of little matter to the public or even to scientists, when the object is digitally available. From the point of view of an institution, we need to ask ourselves what the collection profile should be for our physical collections as well as for our electronic ones. The profile of the physical collection is formed to a large extent by the history of our institutions. Some subjects, some periods, some types of materials will be better represented in our collections than others. Certain scientists or certain departments or projects may have produced archival materials of particular interest, archival materials that maybe today are part of the special collections.

When planning the future of our manuscript and archival collections, it will be helpful to differentiate between types of unique materials. The traditional manuscript collection typically comprises a heterogeneous materials. Written items seen as culturally, historically or otherwise valuable have been collected and catalogued here. Some items are single pages or fragments, there are single volumes of handwritten books, like diaries. There are large or small letter collections. We might also find in the manuscript collection large series of account books

or protocols from trade companies or other private organisations, maybe the voluminous private correspondence of a famous professor, along with documents created by an important research project. This approach to manuscript and archival collection, if it is the only one we take, is probably too undifferentiated and not very well suited for the future.

I will now try to outline a proactive archival collecting policy for a university library in very general terms. In the general archival collection picture, we must include both paper and parchment archives, as well as the electronic ones. There is an important link between the two types, in that the latter is often created from the former. Digitisation of physical archives is an important challenge for research institutions. Again, the theoretical scientific point of view is crucial. Paper collections of scientific value stimulate digitisation, which then adds to the potential for knowledge creation in the scientific community.

My first point is that we should keep and continue the traditional manuscript collection for one category of items. The manuscript collection is suitable for heterogeneous, often relatively small, items. The Hauge collection mentioned above, is such an item. It is not very large (about 10 folders), it is limited in scope, and it is collected and kept by the university because of the high literary and biographical research value of its contents. The manuscript collection is the right place for items like these.

When it comes to larger archives, more diverse in content and complex in internal structure, there are reasons to handle some of them differently. It is in the case of such archives that university libraries really have to take into account the larger landscape of the archival world and reflect on our place in it. Private archives (“private” as opposed to produced by a state or government public agency) are collected in all larger archival institutions, certainly also in the state and national institutions. Examples of this category are archives of corporations, firms, organisations and individuals, or research projects. When such an archive broadly documents the activity of its creator, it ought to be handled by standard archival rules and kept and treated according to the provenance principle. Now my point is that university libraries should aim at collecting this kind of materials also. The research value might not be so concentrated in larger private archives. Neither will those archives always promise a direct scientific gain. Nevertheless, *the history of our institutions* is to some extent documented by private archives created by persons, organisations, projects and activities related to our universities. The difference, generally speaking, from the typical manuscript collection item, is that private archives throw light on processes in a broader sense, while the manuscript collection item often represents a concentrated research resource. A proactive attitude towards our institutional history would be to keep and catalogue private archives at the university. The most important objective is to

preserve the archives, of course, and state or national archives would gladly do that for us. But in order to strengthen our institutional historical identity we should collect and keep important materials at our universities, for example in university libraries. Our catalogue data on private archives should then be exported into larger catalogues maintained on national level.

### **Electronic archives: Static and dynamic**

I will now complete this picture by saying something about electronic archives. Here too it is necessary to speak of different categories. One main type of electronic archival resource for universities today is the open access publication archive.<sup>4</sup> Such electronic archives offer permanent, open storage and access for digitised materials. They will become important windows into the profile, history and activities of our institutions. Such archives will accumulate a great wealth of textual information and images. Any static materials that are digitised in a publishable form could find its place in an electronic institutional repository.

When I use the word static, I imply that there exists another main category of electronic archives. What I have in mind is digital text archives that are not frozen, but have some degree of dynamics to them. This dynamics might be in terms of added textual markup to XML texts, on the fly textual transformations in order to view different aspects of the encoded text, or some other kind of continuing alteration or shifting display of the texts, or continuing input to them or rewriting of them resulting from research activities.

An example of a dynamic text and image resource is the Bergen University Library Medieval Fragment Collection (screenshot below). This web resource makes available several types of data in an integrated manner. First, there is the electronic catalogue text. The catalogue text is XML encoded, and a display of it is generated by the web server every time an enduser requests the specific catalogue entry. The text of the catalogue data is in principle a changing one. The special collections department will update the catalogue text when new information is at hand. This web resource also comprises full text transcriptions. Not even transcriptions are static texts when old manuscript materials is concerned. In the case of texts in Old Norse language, philological editing today moves in the direction of including both facsimile transcriptions and diplomatic ones in the same single electronic text file. Then the user can choose alternative views. XML encoding of additional textual phenomena may be added. Such electronic transcriptions therefore have a growing and changing character, and should be kept “alive” at least for as long as there is work going on on them.

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<sup>4</sup> See Jones, this volume.

## The Botolph Breviary fragments

Parchment, four fragments: a: ca 17x18 cm, b: ca 25x14 cm, c and d: ca 12x3 cm, (original size: ca 25x18 cm), England, late 13th century.

**Manuscript Identification**

**Repository:** Bergen University Library  
**Signature:** MS 1549, 1, a-d  
**Alternative name (old signature):** MS 410, 1  
**Alternative name:** Br 4 (Gjerløw)


**Introduction**

The so-called Botolph Breviary fragments is a group of four fragments from the same Breviary, written in England in the late thirteenth century. One of the fragments contains the readings six to nine for the Matins of St Botolph's day (17 June, in Scotland 25 June). Nine readings constitute the highest degree of a saint's feast. St Botolph was a popular saint in Eastern England and Scotland, and the Botolph breviary was therefore perhaps written in Eastern England. The lessons six to nine, more or less extant in our fragment a, describe Botolph's discovery of Ikanho (possibly the present Iken in Suffolk, east of Ipswich), the exorcism of the area's demons, the building of the monastery (in 654), and, finally, to the great lament of his fellow brothers, Botolph's death (in 680). Apart from the readings of St Botolph's day, the fragments contain parts of the liturgy of the feast days of the Annunciation (25 March) and of the Saints Philip and Jacob (1 May).


**Manuscript Content**

a: St Botolph's day, 17 June: The fragment contains parts of paragraphs five to nine of the nocturnal readings of Matins

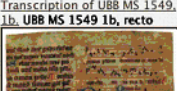
Transcription of UBB MS 1549, 1a, UBB MS 1549 1a, recto



UBB MS 1549 1a, verso.



Transcription of UBB MS 1549, 1b, UBB MS 1549 1b, recto



*Bergen University Library Medieval Fragment Collection: An electronic manuscript collection (<http://gandalf.aksis.uib.no/mpfl>).*

One characteristic of dynamic text archives like the one mentioned here, is that they require long term back up from researchers or experts in for example humanities text encoding, in addition to the service of librarians and of the central computing units at the institutions. I think that archives of this type should become a shared responsibility between faculty, library and computer department. The faculty could contribute with a long term research resource allocated to running and developing text archives. The library would be well suited to be the owner, because of its long term perspective and responsibility for all kinds of materials.

### **University libraries as a new context for archives: Learning centres and focus on information literacy**

Providing information guidance has always been an important task for special collection librarians and for archivists in other institutions alike. Knowledge about the context for the creation of manuscripts and other archival materials, and knowledge about the later history of the materials, is also something archivists have provided both researchers and the general public with. Historical and philological knowledge, information guidance and knowledge of sources, has been, and is, a strength of manuscript departments in university libraries.



Today, however, university libraries are moving on to more explicit methods and more systematic, scaled up user education. Also, cooperation between faculty and library in this respect is increasing.<sup>5</sup> Aims in university library strategies today are to establish well functioning learning centres, and to increase the information literacy of students and staff.

Special collections materials like manuscripts is not what students need to access early in their studies. At postgraduate level, however, there might be need for manuscript materials for students also. An obvious candidate field for setting up systematic teaching activity on manuscript materials is history. A university library with a collection of old documents could cooperate with the department on offering courses in reading, classifying and describing old documents. The digital era enhances our possibilities here. To study manuscripts on computer screen is often better in fact than having the real thing on your desk. Important gains for the library in connection with such activities could be improved catalogue data and the addition of electronic transcriptions of documents to our collections. This would be facilitated by dynamic electronic archives like the fragment web site presented above.

The growing teaching activity at university libraries is a fortunate circumstance for our manuscript and archival collections that allows us even more efficiently to make the most of the research and educational value of our materials. There is no doubt in my mind that university libraries are going to lead in this future development. This is a new context that strengthens the need to integrate our archival traditions with the new digital educational realities.

## **Summary**

There are certain general advantages and possibilities for university libraries with archival materials entering the age of digital media. As before, our institutions will both serve and benefit from our faculties, institutes and individual researchers and students. Being situated in the midst of knowledge creation and educational activities is a most fortunate context, both practically and strategically, when it comes to archival materials and manuscript collections. The digital aspect of libraries means there is a new common ground, or common space, for special collections and ordinary collections to enter. There we should build on and strengthen university library archival and manuscript tradition.

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<sup>5</sup> See Vedvik Tønning, this volume.

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