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Looking at the Changes of Writing Materials in Italian Medieval Records

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CULTURAL AND INSTITUTIONAL MEMORY AS (A) MEANS OF PROGRESS (VOL I)

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Marta Luigina Mangini

Looking at the Changes of Writing Materials in Italian Medieval Records¹

Abstract

Recently, the methodological approach that has developed regarding the double historicity of the texts, the duality - material and content - inside each of them, has allowed the overcoming of the opposition between “the pureté de l'idée et sa corruption par la matière” (Chartier).

To fully understand the meanings of texts, it is crucial to study their material aspects. The moment, the place, the writers, but also the purpose, the content, the authors and the recipients of a text profoundly affect the exterior forms of a record, starting from the choice of writing materials.

Just now, when the space of writings is becoming immaterial, it is important to consider the causes and consequences of past changes of writing surfaces and their impact on the most widespread and preserved materials. Analyzing these changes, studying their causes and effects, the quantitative and qualitative progresses of the different materials used, helps us understand memory and the present of our cultural heritage.

Keywords: Diplomacy, Palaeography, Codicology, Archivistics, Cultural heritage

- 1 I would like to start with a simple fact: a historian has to work with the documents that are available to him. But, he also has to ask how much of the former amount of documents is extant, how much has been lost meanwhile and to study the proportion of the tradition of the records. One possibility to analyze the quantity and the quality of the documentary heritage and, finally, to understand the cultural and institutional memory, is to look at the changes of writing materials.
- 2 Documents do not automatically become records. Writing may be done for ephemeral purposes, without any intention of keeping the documents permanently. Instead, a document can become a record when it registers something - for example an event, a rent, a sale, a marriage, a donation - because someone wanted that event to be registered and preserved for a long time.
- 3 Medieval writing materials themselves made the scribe conscious of time. Because he was presented with different writing surfaces as a medium, he made an initial choice between the ephemeral and the permanent.
- 4 The moment, the place, the writers, but also the purpose, the content, the authors and the recipients of a text profoundly affect the exterior forms of a record, starting from the choice of writing materials. Therefore, that very document also registers the intention of using specific writing materials to convey information and preserve important memories.
- 5 Recently, the disciplinary and methodological debate about the double historicity of texts, especially narrative texts, about the duality - of materials and contents - inside each of them, has

¹I would like to thank Vincenza Petrilli at the State Archive of Milan for the reading and the useful suggestions to this article.

reduced the gap between «la pureté de l'idée et sa corruption par la matière» [the purity of the idea and its corruption by the matter] (Chartier "Culture" 800).

- 6 The new approaches adopted by analytical bibliography - let's think about Donald McKenzie, Michael Clanchy and Armando Petrucci's studies on the graphic culture - have shown that to fully understand a text, it is necessary to analyze not only its content, but also its material aspects.
- 7 As Christopher Tilley argued, the study of material culture "centres on the idea of materiality as an integral dimension of culture, and indeed there are dimensions of social existence that cannot be fully understood without it" (1). Historiography is thus leaving the ideal perspective, derived from Platonic philosophy, which considers documents as entities not related to the physical context that made and preserved them. Material aspects are going to be considered as a key factor to be examined in order to define and understand texts as *res in forma* and finally appraise them and plan the best policies for their conservation.
- 8 The writing surfaces of which records have been made and the methods used to transform words into symbols appropriate to those materials, have varied considerably. Considering such aspects is crucial. Over the past two decades, as noted by Paola Carucci and Luciana Duranti's studies, the advent of digital media has dramatically changed the very idea of writing instruments, from material to immaterial ones. The widespread diffusion of digital memories and tools necessitates a study of the phenomenon and its difficulties. The conservation of the new documentary forms is a very complex function. Its main difficulty concerns the tools and types of material to be preserved, because they are objects constantly changing with regard to physical aspects, display mode, conservation and consultation. As in the past, the technology environment today has significant impact on the processes of formation and management of contemporary memory. Therefore, it is important to consider the causes and consequences of past changes of writing surfaces and their impact on the most widespread and preserved materials.
- 9 Assessing the impact of the relationship between intrinsic and extrinsic elements of documents represents the aim of this quick and inevitably limited examination of the different writing materials. To do this, my primary focus will be the materials used in Italy during the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Era to write down records²: papyrus, parchment and paper (for a general introduction see Giry 1972, Bresslau 1998, Agati 2003). In the end, we should be able to understand the factors that led to the transition from one writing material to another, and whether and how the choices were determined by the need to protect the memory of the documentary heritage. At the same time, my intent is to study how such choices affected the preservation of documents and, ultimately, if they still affect the survival of our documentary heritage.
- 10 Although the length of this article requires a very precise geographical scope for such survey, this is not limiting in itself. Considering the few European medieval documents kept for the period prior to the 10th century, the amount of Italian documentation is an exception: we are talking about great numbers of originals and copies (265 records) and of the oldest original record belonging to Pisa, from the year 720 (Schiapparelli 1929-33, Ghignoli 2006 and Ghignoli 2009). In the Western French area, the oldest original is 619-620, but documents are much more sparse, less numerous and for the most part in the form of copy: only 25 original records up to the 9th century (De Bouard 1948; for the edition of the documents Atsma et al. 1981-87). In the Eastern French area, except for the important but isolated corpus of documents of the St. Gall's Abbey - 133 original records from the 8th to the 9th centuries (Erhart & Kleindienst 2004; for the edition of the documents Bruckner & Marichal 1954; and Bruckner & Marichal 1956) - the documentary

² By documents, I mean records of legal facts written down in accordance with intrinsic and extrinsic forms to confer them probative value (Paoli and Bascapé).

heritage is equally sparse and in the form of copy: in fact the records, all dated from the 8th century onwards, are copied in the *libri traditionum* of Passau (Heuwieser), Mondsee (Verwaltungs-ausschuss des Museums Francisco-Carolinum zu Linz), Ratisbona (Widemann), Frisinga (Bitterauf).

- 11 Analyzing the Italian documentary heritage, we see that the topic is broad and complex, showing a large variety and quantity of archaeological sources prior to the documentary ones (Ornato et al. 2001). Also, it has been studied by many scholars and historians, though they have so far focused almost exclusively on manuscript books, containing novels, hymns or poetry, both western and eastern.
- 12 The writing materials of these manuscripts have been studied mainly with regard to technical aspects, such as the different animal skins (Di Majo et al. 1985, Di Majo et al. 1988, Rück 1988, Rück 1991, Ansalone et.al. 1993), format (Gumbert 1993), manufacturing (Chahine 2001), including the places where they were made and sold (Cavaciocchi 1992) and, finally, their use (Bischoff 1993). Recently, due to new technologies and scientific knowledge, analysis on the qualitative aspects of writing materials has been undertaken, as well as studies on the techniques of restoration and conservation and survey instruments and digital reproduction have been made (Ornato et al. 2001). Illustrative examples are *Wasserzeichen des Mittelalters* through which it is possible to access Piccard-Online, Briquet-Online and *The Bernstein Project* that merges the results of several repertoires of watermarks and allows cartographic and statistics visualizations.
- 13 In Italy, the most ancient and widespread writing material is papyrus. In order to study where and how it was used, we can refer to a few works: the *Chartae Latinae Antiquiores*, the lists edited by Jan Olof Tjäder and more or less recent thematic catalogues (Dorandi 1996). The results obtained from examining these works led to two basic conclusions: in Italy, papyrus was used for writing records for a long time, from the 5th to the 10th centuries, but its spread throughout the peninsula seems limited to Ravenna, capital of the Exarchate, and Rome, at the papal chancery (Bresslau 1093-1105). While in other areas such as Piedmont, Lombardy and Tuscany parchment seems to have replaced papyrus already in the 8th century. In fact, the oldest records date back to the second decade of the 8th century and are all already written in parchment: Pisa, January, 29, 720 (Tjäder *Chartae XXVI*, 799); Milano, June, 6, 725 (Marichal *Chartae*, 845); Novara, 729 (Tjäder *Chartae XXVII*, 838).
- 14 Recent studies have demonstrated that these conclusions must be partially revised. In fact, to consider only the resources that have survived, means to exclude from the survey those areas with few resources and also those areas with less ancient records.
- 15 Our considerations about the times and places which saw the use of papyrus in Italy change considerably if we accompany the study of the originals, such as the records from Ravenna and those created by the papal chancery, with the information contained in latest records, such as those from Naples (Martin 183-189), Rome (Carbonetti 33-48), Venice (Pozza 801-848), Milan (Marini 54) and Siena (Brühl 52). In these cities, according to numerous indirect sources, writing records on papyrus went on well beyond the 7th and even the 8th centuries. This prevalence of the use of papyrus was caused by a strong attachment to tradition or, in other words, by the reluctance to change the extrinsic elements of the documents. The actual transition from papyrus to parchment was due to the awareness of the little resistance papyrus offered, plus the increasing difficulties of its supply (Carbonetti 33-48).
- 16 However, this was a very slow transition. Moreover, it was the protracted use of such a fragile writing material as papyrus, which in all likelihood caused the loss of most of the records and a transmission of the documentary memory characterized by extreme disproportion between the number of documents originally written on papyrus and their effective conservation over time (Carbonetti 33-48). If papyrus fragility and the consequent losses of records have long caused the

risk of an underestimation of the use of vegetal writing surface in the Middle Ages, on the contrary, the durability of parchment has allowed a better long term preservation of documents written on animal skins, perhaps apparently lengthening the period of its actual impact over the other writing materials, i.e. papyrus first and paper later. Also, in this case it is not easy to closely follow the transition between parchment and paper. On the one hand, the loss of paper records dating back to the 11th and 12th centuries meant the need to postpone the introduction and the widespread use of the new material; on the other hand, administrative and indirect sources urge us to reconsider the real incidence of paper in the daily practice of writing.

- 17 In Italy, the introduction of paper began around the mid-12th century. The oldest Italian paper documents are almost coeval with the oldest reports of paper-making processing in the peninsula. During the 12th century, Catania and Palermo were the first paper manufacturing centers in Italy using the Arabic technique; while the first isolated pieces of information about paper produced according to the Western technique are dated to the following century, around the regions of Liguria and Tuscany. In a deed drawn up in Genoa, June 24, 1235, two owners of paper mills, one of which was from Lucca, employed a papermaker for their factories (Briquet *Briquet's Opuscula* 181, Pirani 19-46). But even before this date, we know of sales of reams of paper whose production is attributable to mills operating in the area of Colle Val d' Elsa (Agati 45-120).
- 18 The introduction of paper soon caused problems in drawing up, use, storage and long term conservation of documents. In 1145, in Sicily, King Roger ordered some documents written by his predecessors to be rewritten «de carta cuttanea in pergamenum» [to be rewritten on parchment]. The same happened in 1222, when Frederick II ordered some paper records of his predecessor William II to be transcribed on parchment «quoniam incipiebant vetustate consumi» [since the writing surface begins to get old from consumption] (Bresslau 1110). Even though these examples attest to the awareness of the fragility of paper, the oldest paper records written by a royal chancery and still preserved as originals date back to the period of Frederick II's reign (1228 and 1230) (Bresslau 1111).
- 19 This is not a contradiction: rather, considering the different purposes of the documents written on parchment from the ones written on paper, it is clear that the choice of the material requested a preliminary assessment of the type of legal transaction. In fact, in 1231, Frederick II stated that mandates and scriptures not intended for long term conservation could be recorded on paper, cheaper but also more perishable, and prescribed the use of parchment for solemn diplomas and, in general, for documents proving perpetual or long-term rights «instrumenta publica et aliae similes cautiones» [public and notarial records] (Bresslau 1111).
- 20 During the 13th century, we find similar restrictive measures marked by the preliminary assessment of the intended use, even in the common law of some Italian centers, like Padova (“Instrumentum factum in carta banbacina non valeat nec fides adhibeatur eidem” [Only the record written on paper is valid]) (Gloria 66), Como (Ceruti 59), Bergamo (“in libris vel quaternis offittii pecudinis vel membranensis nec papiri” [It is permitted to write books only on parchment, not on paper] Storti & Storchi 185) and Bologna (“in bonis cartis ... et non in garbittis” [Documents must not be written on poor quality paper, but on good quality paper] Frati 147). At the same time, even praxis reflects what is prescribed by the regulations. For example, if we analyze the oldest paper records in Lombardy, dating back to the mid-13th century, and almost coeval with the oldest records of such material in the area, we see that the earliest documents were letters, interim writings useful for the performance of legal proceedings, inventories of goods and rents necessary for the current, ordinary, administrative and financial activities of those institutions that drew them up (Mangini “Impiego”, 17 & Mangini “Il cambiamento”, 5-8). And the same happens in France, where until the end of the 13th century the use of paper is limited to «l'écrit d'administration et de gestion: correspondances et actes tels que les quittances et mandements

ou les copies d'actes authentiques, registres de notaires ou de justice, comptes, registres domaniaux, fonciers» [Administration and management records : letters and acts such as receipts, orders, certified copies, records of notaries, judges, lords and officials], while parchment is intended for the «actes authentiques scellés et de tous les documents à valeur perpétuelle» [The authentic sealed records and documents with perpetual validity] (Bourlet, Bretthauer & Zerdoun Bat-Yehouda 166). They show their content and value even in the choice of extrinsic aspects: first of all the use of the paper surface, preferred because it was less expensive than parchment (Ganda 145), even if it was insecure in terms of duration and quality of preservation.

- 21 Therefore, practical needs favored the choice of inexpensive even if temporary writing supports, for current and internal use. They were records without *publica fides* and deliberately different, for extrinsic and intrinsic aspects, from documents written down by notaries on parchment to confirm rights of possession and perpetual enjoyment of *res*. No wonder then, that in the context of the scriptures with *publica fides*, while still in the 15th-16th centuries, parchment was destined to write the originals issued to eligible parties. While already from the middle of the 12th century, anywhere between Italy (Rovere 304) and France (Capodano 205-218), paper was intended for notarial registers, as in the cases of Genoa and Savona. In fact, the long term preservation of these registers was ensured by notaries, required by the articles of their association to ensure memory of rights contained in the registers and even interested in their economic exploitation.
- 22 So most of the reservations about the use of paper were related to its duration and perishability, which appeared inadequate to the legal and permanent validity of the decisions and transactions which were to be recorded. This was also the reason for the extensive and prolonged use of parchment, which was even reused for bookbinding. Just over the last years there has been an increasing interest in the study, restoration and cataloguing of fragments from bindings made with parchment sheets of dismembered manuscripts (Merlani 20-23; Scianna 33-40). Major studies, the results of specific scientific projects, have been made in the field of Jewish (Perani 127-143), liturgical-musical (Baroffio 133-140) and notarial fragments (Mangini “Nuovi itinerari”, 549-563).
- 23 However, we should not underestimate other factors of equal importance in influencing the choices of different writing surfaces. For example, in some areas of the Alps, the larger availability of parchment coming from local farms, and conversely, the distance from paper manufacturing centers have remarkably slowed the transition from parchment to paper (Mangini “Impiego”, 21).
- 24 At the end of the 13th century and the beginning of the 14th, the many different watermarks of the Italian paper documents implicitly show the proliferation of manufacturing centers. In fact, in this period, the increase of paper manufacturing facilities – around Fabriano in Marche (Castagnari 1990; 1993), near Naples, Salerno and Amalfi in Campania (Amatruda 2013), in Tuscany especially at Colle Val d' Elsa (*Carta e cartiere a Colle*), in Liguria between Voltri and Acquasanta (Briquet “Le papiers”, 29-31; Calegari 1986), and in the North-East of Italy around Lake Garda, Padua and Treviso (Mattozzi 23-65; Simoni 1995) - increased their offer, causing a lowering of the costs of production (Irigoin 62-66; Hills 73-98; Castagnari & Calegari 1990).
- 25 These factors, plus the decisive improvement of the technical qualities of the product, concurred to reduce, until almost erase, the cautious hesitation of the 13th century towards paper, whether to entrust it with official or solemn acts, legal instrumenta and literary, historical, philosophical monumenta. So, the use of paper became widespread, beyond the practice of writing down records, also to manuscripts (Montecchi 125, Ganda 146). One of the oldest paper codices written in Northern Italy, perhaps in Liguria, was made just in this period (Ferrari XVI): Manuscript 35, preserved in Fondo Galletti of State Archive of Milan, contains «Disputatio facta inter Cotardum mercatorem lanuensem et quosdam sapientes iudeos et doctores in synagogis

iudeorum» (ff. 1r-26r), «Requisitiones et argumenta facta per magistrum Samuelem israelitam oriundum de felicitate regis Machochitam ad rabbi Isach magistrum sinagoge», better known as *Epistula rabbi Samuelis* (ff. 31r-47v), and a fragment of «Concordia Novi ac Veteris Testamenti» by Gioachino da Fiore (ff. 48r-50v) (Danelli 24-28).

- 26 The introduction and then the wide use of paper involved significant changes not only in the practices developed to write down records, but also in those to preserve documentary materials. Between the end of the 13th century and the beginning of the next, the constant increase in the thickness of paper documents created serious logistical problems. At this time, in fact, there were no appraisal processes or planned selections of records which were judged having permanent value (Casanova 339-340). Nevertheless, it was clear that the massive use of paper had inevitably caused a significant increase in the archival complexity. In fact, several institutions began to adopt policies of decentralization of archival sources, creating separate storage locations, depending on the different frequency of consultation of the documents for the daily management of administrative practices. From the second half of the 13th century on, the archive management was a cause for concern in many municipalities. In Bologna, for example, it was already necessary, in 1254, to purchase bags *pro reponendis scripturis*. The budget for a new cupboard was then approved and finally, in 1289, it was necessary to carry less consulted documents to the palace of Biava (Romiti XVII-XXI). Similar situations and solutions occurred, for example, at Siena (Archivio di Stato di Siena), Parma (Torelli 282) and Chiavenna (Mangini “Impiego”, 19-21).
- 27 At the beginning of the 15th century, the relationship between the two writing surfaces is almost completely reversed, both in book production and in notarial records and documents of the chanceries. The demand and the supply of parchment and paper turned upside down: now parchment was a surrogate for paper, and paper became the prevalent writing material, also intended for official or solemn records, legal instrumenta and literary or scientific manuscripts.
- 28 Eventually, the quality and the quantity of the survival of the medieval Italian documentary heritage was largely determined by the close and mutual relationship between text and writing materials, in which the text could not exist without the writing materials, but at the same time those materials were determined by the type of the text.
- 29 Then, at a time when our documentary heritage is becoming immaterial, at a time when technology provides new and ever more powerful digital tools for writing, reading, storing and managing documents, it is crucial to study documents from the past, even in their material aspects, in their being *res in forma*. In fact, “only by preserving the understanding of our culture of the codex may we wholeheartedly realize the ‘extravagant happiness’ promised by the screen” (Chartier *Forms and Meanings*, 25).
- 30 From these perspectives, the writing materials of the medieval Italian records should be considered as a comprehensive source of historical information, not only for Palaeography, Diplomacy and Codicology, but also for a large range of academic disciplines related to any cultural research that still considers memory as a special and challenging object of study.

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