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The Bibale Database at the IRHT: A Digital Tool for Researching Manuscript Provenance

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Abstract

The Institut de recherche et d'histoire des textes (IRHT) in Paris makes available a series of specialized electronic tools on medieval manuscripts, among which is Bibale, a database that aims to trace the provenance of medieval manuscripts and to reconstruct historic book collections from the medieval and early modern periods. This article explains the history, scope, and present state of this database and its links with several other tools, among which are the image repository Bibliothèque virtuelle des manuscrits médiévaux (BVMM) and the Biblissima project that is working on interoperability of a series of French digital humanities projects concerning manuscripts and early printed books.

Keywords

medieval manuscripts, provenance, digital humanities, Latin, French, Codicology, Heraldic arms, Library history, Interoperability, manuscript studies, databases, Bibale, Institut de recherche et d'histoire des textes (IRHT)

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The Bibale Database at the IRHT

A Digital Tool for Researching Manuscript Provenance

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THE PURPOSE OF THIS short article is to introduce the Bibale database and its context among the other digital tools developed by the Institut de recherche et d'histoire des textes (IRHT) in Paris. The IRHT is a French government institute, part of the Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS). The IRHT was founded in 1937 and specializes in the study of ancient and medieval texts and their transmission in manuscript form. Bibale (<http://bibale.irht.cnrs.fr>) is an IRHT electronic tool that makes available data on the transmission of medieval manuscripts through medieval and early modern collections. This French-language database, with introductory pages in English and French, has been available online and continuously updated since May 2014, but the beginning of its development goes back to 2005.

Although Bibale is an independent database, it is at the same time part of a network of other IRHT web tools and of “Biblissima,” an online observatory for medieval and Renaissance written cultural heritage, which will be discussed in more detail below. This article describes the state of Bibale and these tools in 2014–2015, though we anticipate new developments to the user interfaces and the implementation of new functionalities in 2016 and in the years thereafter.

The Section de codicologie, histoire des bibliothèques et d'héraldique

Since its birth in 1937, the IRHT has been involved in the study of medieval manuscripts. In 1943, the institute founded the Section de codicologie of the IRHT in order to trace the provenance of medieval manuscripts and to reconstruct historic book collections from the medieval and early modern periods. The goal of the Section de codicologie was to determine the actual conditions in which texts circulated in all levels of society. In 1994, it was merged with the Section d'héraldique, which had been independent until then. Since heraldry had always been studied at the IRHT as a means to understand and identify heraldic ownership marks in manuscripts, it seemed a natural choice to combine the two sections. As such, the current Section de codicologie, histoire des bibliothèques et d'héraldique collects documentation that assists users in identifying and interpreting patterns of transmission and use of manuscripts and the texts they contain, including collection inventories and ownership marks such as ex-libris, ex-dono, notes, bindings, heraldic arms, and other emblematic devices that can help determine the various stages of the life of a book.¹

The codicological section was the very first at the IRHT to develop an electronic database. ISBA (Inventaire des sources sur les bibliothèques anciennes) was created in the early 1970s to detail historic inventories and the owners of the described collections.² The database is no longer available, but the results were published in 1987 in a printed form as *Bibliothèques de manuscrits médiévaux en France*, a directory of almost two thousand sources concerning medieval book collections such as inventories, catalogs, and book lists.³

1 In addition to gathering this documentation, the section also carries out research on specific corpora, such as the projects on the fourteenth-century Avignon popes led by Jacques Monfrin, on the Abbey of Clairvaux led by André Vernet, on scholarly circles and mendicant orders led by Donatella Nebbiai, and on the research of the Maurists in the seventeenth century.

2 Monique Peyrafort, "2005, l'Odyssée de l'ISBA: Nouvelles orientations et perspectives," IRHT, 31 August 2015, updated 5 October 2015, <http://irht.hypotheses.org/138>.

3 Anne-Marie Genevois, Jean-François Genest, and Anne Chalandon, with the collaboration of Marie-José Beaud and Agnès Guillaumont, *Bibliothèques de manuscrits médiévaux en France: Relevé des inventaires du viii^e au xviii^e siècle* (Paris: CNRS, 1987).

Since then, the directory has been expanded to include about four thousand items that are gradually published in the form of short descriptions on the website www.libraria.fr as part of the BMF project (Bibliothèques médiévales de France) led by Monique Peyrafort.⁴

The Bibale project was initiated in 2005 by Anne-Marie Turcan-Verkerk and Monique Peyrafort. The first version, developed between 2008 and 2012, was implemented by the IRHT codicological section⁵ and the private firm *Infotique* (Michel Grech and Hervé Blaize). It was launched in November 2012, at which point data entry could begin.⁶ In May 2014 Bibale was made available to the public in a first preliminary form. An explanatory website was published in September 2014 with its English translation in October 2014: bibale.irht.cnrs.fr.

Since the public release of the first version, a second version, Bibale 2, has been under development in collaboration with Pierre Chambert-Protat (Labex Hastec-EPHE) and the Biblissima project.⁷ This version, which will be operational by the end of 2016, uses the same content but employs a new structure with enhanced ergonomics. The development of Bibale was part of the project *Biblifram* (1 January 2009–31 March 2013) and of the program of the *Equipex Biblissima* (1 October 2012–31 December 2019), both funded by the French government.⁸

4 For more information: Peyrafort, “2005, l’Odyssée de l’ISBA”; Monique Peyrafort and Anne-Marie Turcan-Verkerk, “Vers un corpus des inventaires médiévaux de bibliothèques françaises: Des débuts de la section de Codicologie au projet BMF, 60 ans de recherches,” IRHT, 24 September 2015, <http://irht.hypotheses.org/680>.

5 Anne-Marie Turcan-Verkerk, Monique Peyrafort, and Martin Morard, joined in 2010 by Hanno Wijsman.

6 The data entry is and was done by Hanno Wijsman (2012–), Elise Herbeaux (2012–2014), Bénédicte Giffard (2012–), Jérémy Delmulle (2013–2014), Laure Miolo (2014–2015), Emmanuelle Kuhry (2014–2015), Elodie Lévêque (2015–), and Laura Albiero (2015–).

7 Technical development: Mathew Charlton, Henri Seng, and Cyril Masset.

8 About *Biblifram*, see <http://www.libraria.fr/fr/biblifram/le-projet-biblifram>. For *Biblissima*, see <http://www.biblissima-condorcet.fr>.

Bibale (BIBliothèque médiévALE) and Its Contents

In both the current and forthcoming versions, Bibale is structured to describe seven main objects (see fig. 1):

- **Persons**, among which we distinguish:
 - *personnes physiques* (individuals)
 - *personnes morales* (institutions, like churches, abbeys, communities of friars, and university colleges).
- **Collections**, referring especially to libraries and private book collections as well as grouping types such as books written by someone, books consulted by someone, or books stolen by someone.
- **Books**, referring to the object a collection is composed of. The word currently used by Bibale is the French term *composant*, or “component” in English. Two kinds of components should be distinguished:
 - *composants conservés* (preserved components): these are existing manuscripts with a current shelfmark or at least a shelfmark or a sales catalog reference of the nineteenth, twentieth, or twenty-first century
 - *composants attestés* (recorded components): these are manuscripts mentioned in medieval or early modern sources, especially in inventories and other book lists.
- **Sources**, including inventories, ex-libris, colophons, heraldic arms, and other elements that tell us something about the existence of a manuscript in a collection or its passing through various collections.
- **Bindings** (*reliures*)
- **Texts**, within which Bibale distinguishes between:
 - *unités textuelles* (textual units), or specific form of texts as they appear in the manuscripts
 - *œuvres* (works), or the standardized versions of the texts as they have been defined in repertories and as they have been published in modern critical editions.

These seven main objects are linked to each other by **associations** that have properties themselves. An association is a link between one object and

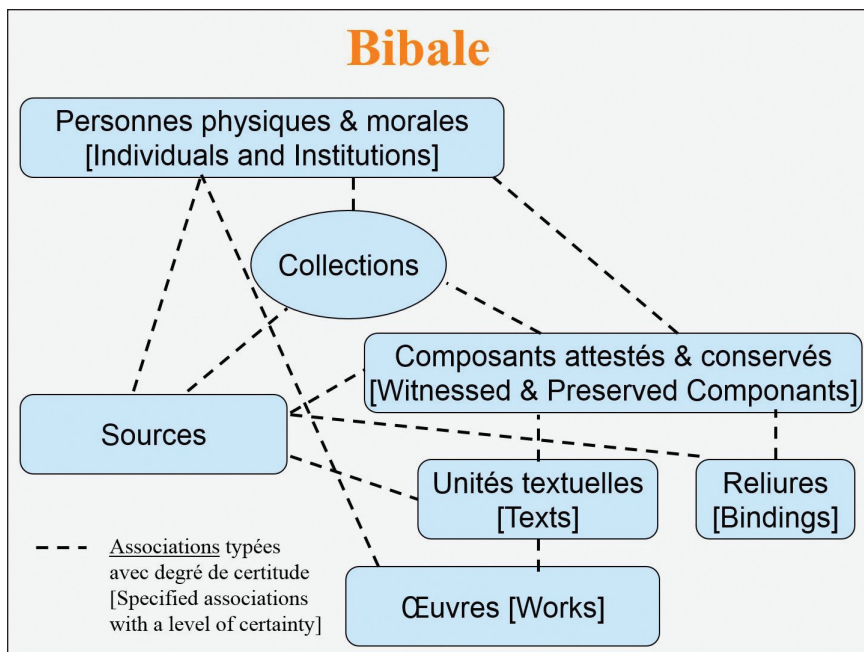


FIGURE 1. Structure of the current version of the Bibale database.

any other object in the database: it can be between a text and its author, between a manuscript and its owner, between a manuscript and its scribe or annotator, between a coat of arms and the person who bore it, or between two persons, two manuscripts, two texts, etc. For any of these associations several attributions can be specified:

- date
- place
- commentary
- level of certainty, meaning that the established link between two objects can be certain, doubtful, or even rejected

This last attribute is important since an association between a manuscript and an owner can be proposed by one scholar, but rejected subsequently by

others. With this attribution, we can capture the disagreement in the database. For example, a researcher would be able to see that though a manuscript was long thought to have been owned by Person X, it is now believed to belong to Person Y. In this case, neither proposed ownership disappears from the record of the manuscript's provenance and subsequent researchers will be alerted to the two possible owners.

Although data entry has occurred since November 2012, the amount of data is still limited. For the moment, a strong point is the heraldic data. From the 1940s to the 1980s, the IRHT built up a heraldic card index, first under Marguerite Pecqueur-Grat, and from 1975 onwards under H el ene Loyau. The 5,200 index cards are still available to scholars and students. At the IRHT it is commonly known as the "Fichier peint," or the "painted card index," because it is the only one of the numerous card indexes at the IRHT that has colored images. The cards were hand-painted by two collaborators, Madeleine Senez and Ren e Pr echac, who either copied from publications like collection catalogs and exhibition catalogs, or followed descriptions and sketches made by IRHT collaborators visiting libraries to study manuscripts.⁹

The original cards have been reproduced and added as images to the files of the sources. In our era of ubiquitous digital images, we might hesitate about the scientific value of publishing these hand-painted images in the database. Indeed, we can all agree that if a link to the digitization of a manuscript, or at least of the page with the arms, is available it should be added. Still, the mere fact that we can publish these thousands of images of heraldic arms without bothering about permissions from the various libraries (because these hand-made copies are ours) makes publishing them worthwhile. Moreover, these hand-made copies have themselves been made, used, and referred to for more than half a century.

The cards of the "Fichier peint" typically contain the name of a person, the description of his/her arms, a shelfmark, and a bibliographical reference or sometimes two (see fig. 2). Most of the data from the cards were transferred

9 They have signed their images M. S. and R. P. respectively.



FIGURE 2. An example of one of the 5,200 cards of the Heraldic Card Index at the IRHT: the card shows the arms of Charles d’Orléans-Angoulême and his wife Louise de Savoie.

into Bibale via a lengthy spreadsheet made by Elise Herbeaux.¹⁰ In this way, many **sources** have been created in Bibale (mostly coats of arms, but also some emblems and devices), and they were linked by **associations** to the corresponding persons (mainly individuals, some institutions) and manuscripts (**composants**).

The second source of data being transferred to Bibale is the IRHT provenance card index (“Fichier possesseurs”). This card index is infinitely more extensive: it contains an estimated 350,000 cards and will become the primary source of data for Bibale. The provenance card index was developed between 1942 and 2005 at the IRHT and continues to be available in hard-copy in our library to all scholars. The cards contain information particularly on owners (orange cards), manuscripts (yellow cards), bibliographical

10 The Italian arms deriving from one specific armorial have been omitted because they are not linked to any ownership marks. Entry of the category of cards with unidentified arms is still under way.

references (white cards), sources such as inventories or other book lists (also white cards), and scribes or places of copying (blue cards).¹¹

We have been entering data from these cards since 2012. Our method is to work according to our interest rather than a more systematic method such as by alphabetical order. We identify a group of cards, or “ensembles,” according to a particular interest, enter those cards, and move to another group. After data from a card has been entered, the cards are stamped with the word “Bibale” in red, and returned to the index to remain available in the library so that users can track progress.

Some examples of the ensembles now entered in Bibale are:

- Dominican libraries of southern France, especially the convent in Toulouse and of Avignon (entered by Bénédicte Giffard and based on the research of Martin Morard)
- the sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and eighteenth-century Bouhier bibliophile family from Burgundy (entered by Elise Herbeaux)
- the Abbey of Cluny (entered by Jérémy Delmulle)
- the Abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés in Paris (entered by Jérémy Delmulle)
- the sixteenth-century humanist Claude Dupuy (entered by Jérémy Delmulle)
- several fifteenth-century Burgundian and Southern Netherlandish noble families like Hornes, Bergen-Glymes, and Lannoy (entered by Hanno Wijsman)
- the French Rochechouart family (entered by Jérémy Delmulle)
- the fifteenth-century English Prince Humphrey of Gloucester (entered by Hanno Wijsman)
- Benedictine monasteries, especially those visited by the Maurists in the seventeenth century (entered by Bénédicte Giffard)

11 The IRHT provenance card index (“Fichier possesseurs”) is completed by the “Fichier Vernet,” present at the codicological section of the IRHT. We also hope to be able to add information from this source into Bibale in the future.

- Paris University colleges, like the Collège de Navarre, Collège d’Harcourt, and Collège du Trésorier (entered by Laure Miolo)
- Convent of the Grands-Augustins of Paris (entered by Laure Miolo)
- Many other smaller collections or single manuscripts from larger collections

It is not clear at this point to what extent we will be able to transfer all the data from the card index into the database. One of the challenges is of course that research goes on and information can and should be updated with new findings and references. The user must realize that if a person and the linked collection have been entered in Bibale, it does not necessarily mean that we have already entered all manuscripts known to have been owned by them.

At the time of writing (January 2016), we can note that Bibale offers descriptions on:

- 5,750 persons (individuals and institutions) with 1,375 collections
- 5,950 manuscripts (*composants*) with 250 bindings
- 7,800 sources (mainly heraldic arms, ex-libris, inventories)
- 1,150 texts linked to 250 works¹²

The total of 22,500 objects represented in this list is not a bad start. Our aim, however, is more ambitious since we have not established a final count: to describe all manuscripts, all collectors, all collections, and all contents. And while our current focus is on the persons, manuscripts, and sources, we have also started the process of linking to other projects that are more text based—including Jonas for French texts, Fama for Latin texts, Pinakes for Greek texts—to expand the scope and interoperability of Bibale.¹³

12 <http://bibale.irht.cnrs.fr/situation.html>.

13 <http://jonas.irht.cnrs.fr>; <http://fama.irht.cnrs.fr>; <http://pinakes.irht.cnrs.fr>.

The Network of Other IRHT Databases and Web Tools

As stated earlier, although Bibale operates independently, it is part of an ensemble of IRHT databases and other web tools that are intended to function in an interoperable environment. Figure 3 presents a schema outlining the relationships among the IRHT databases and related web tools.

In the center are the primary manuscripts database Medium and the image repository BVMM (*Bibliothèque virtuelle des manuscrits médiévaux*) of digitized manuscripts from French public collections. Medium¹⁴ is a primary manuscripts database, conceived in the first place to find entries for all manuscripts for which the IRHT has microfilms, photographs, or digital reproductions, but now offering more and more manuscript files linking through to other IRHT tools or to external websites. The BVMM¹⁵ is the virtual library of medieval manuscripts in French public collections. It contains reproductions of a large selection of medieval and early Renaissance manuscripts, some fully digitized, others offering reproductions of the decorated folios.

These two central tools are linked to other IRHT databases (on the left in fig. 3) and to other web tools (on the right in fig. 3). The other IRHT tools include Jonas, Initiale, Pinakes, and FAMA. Jonas¹⁶ is a catalog of medieval manuscripts worldwide containing texts in medieval French (*langue d'oc* and *langue d'oïl*). Initiale¹⁷ offers art-historical analyses of the decoration of illuminated manuscripts (and incunables) kept in French public collections outside the BNF. Pinakes¹⁸ is a database assembling information about medieval manuscripts, texts, and text traditions in Greek. The youngest of the IRHT databases, Fama,¹⁹ is about the most successful Medieval Latin texts (in terms of the numbers of surviving manuscripts).

14 Medium: <http://medium.irht.cnrs.fr>; Advanced Medium: <http://medium-avance.irht.cnrs.fr>.

15 BVMM: <http://bvmm.irht.cnrs.fr>.

16 Jonas: <http://jonas.irht.cnrs.fr>.

17 Initiale: <http://initiale.irht.cnrs.fr>.

18 Pinakes: <http://pinakes.irht.cnrs.fr>.

19 FAMA: <http://fama.irht.cnrs.fr>.

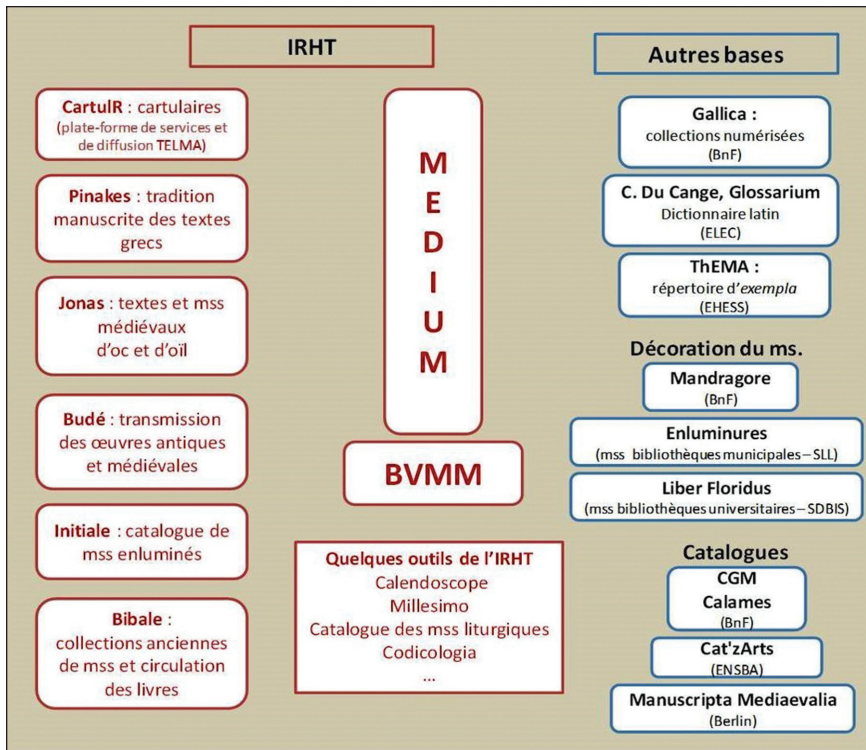


FIGURE 3. Schematic overview of the principal IRHT databases and other webtools and linked databases.

The Biblissima Project

Especially notable for its connections with external (French or international) projects is the Biblissima project. Biblissima (*Bibliotheca bibliothecarum novissima*) defines itself as an “observatory for the written cultural heritage of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.”²⁰ This eight-year and 7.1 million-Euro project was developed through the French government program *Équipements*

20 <http://www.biblissima-condorcet.fr>.

d'excellence, part of the *Investissements d'avenir*, as a project to develop tools in the field of digital humanities (rather than as a research project).

Biblissima unites nine partners:

1. Bibliothèque nationale de France, département des Manuscrits (BNF, Paris)
2. Campus Condorcet (Aubervilliers)
3. Centre d'études supérieures de la Renaissance (CESR, Tours)
4. Histoire, archéologie, littératures des mondes chrétiens et musulmans médiévaux (CIHAM, Lyon)
5. Centre Jean-Mabillon-École nationale des Chartes (CJM, Paris)
6. Centre de recherches archéologiques et historiques anciennes et médiévales-Centre Michel de Boüard (CRAHAM, Caen)
7. Institut de recherche et d'histoire des textes-centre national de la recherche scientifique (IRHT-CNRS, Paris-Orléans)
8. Maison de la recherche en sciences humaines de Caen, Pôle du document numérique (Caen)
9. Savoirs et pratiques du Moyen-Âge au XIX^e siècle-École pratique de hautes études (EPHE, Paris)

These institutions were already developing web tools independently from the Biblissima project, but the new project gives them an extra boost and coordinates the interoperability between the tools more precisely.

The observatory focuses on documents written in the main languages of culture in medieval and Renaissance Europe and the Mediterranean (Arabic, French, Greek, Hebrew, and Latin) and contributes to a better understanding of the circulation of texts, the evolution of libraries, and the transmission of knowledge in Europe from the eighth to eighteenth centuries. The purpose of Biblissima is to create a kind of meta-library with the primary aim of boosting work on the digitization of manuscripts, digital editions of historical texts, and metadata (databases, manuscript descriptions, etc.).

The second aim of Biblissima is the interoperability of data and images. The idea is to develop ways to combine previously available data and images

that are now scattered all over the internet and therefore difficult to use. It is not the only project with this aim, but in France this is the biggest project in this particular field. *Biblissima* is, for example, participating in the IIF project (International Image Interoperability Framework) of Stanford University that is developing a format to enable any scholar to bring together in one virtual space various digital images from manuscripts housed in various distinct libraries. A demo is already available on the *Biblissima* website.

There are many existing databases on the history of texts or manuscripts; the aim of the *Biblissima* cluster is to draw them together and link the data they contain. About forty-five databases hosted and developed by the participating institutions form the basis for the development of this virtual cluster of databases describing and analyzing the transmission of books, texts, and images. These databases will be linked to the digital image repositories and the digital edition platform.

Biblissima partners will be able to submit their data to those databases that are best suited to their objectives and field of study while also having access to enriched content from other linked databases. A federated search engine will make it possible to search all the data in the cluster, while each database maintains its individual structure. Therefore the use of authority files must be generalized, and within *Biblissima*, an all-encompassing ontology is being created for all forty-five participating databases.

Bibale

The federated *Biblissima* search engine is still in development and so is the new, enhanced version of *Bibale*. In the current version of the *Bibale* database, however, a limited number of searches can already be carried out, giving easy access to the available files (fig. 4).

One can currently do queries for persons (by name), manuscripts (by shelfmark), and sources (by type; for example, heraldic sources). These entries give access to the 22,500 files present (as of January 2016), whereupon you can click from one file to the other using the hyperlinked associa-

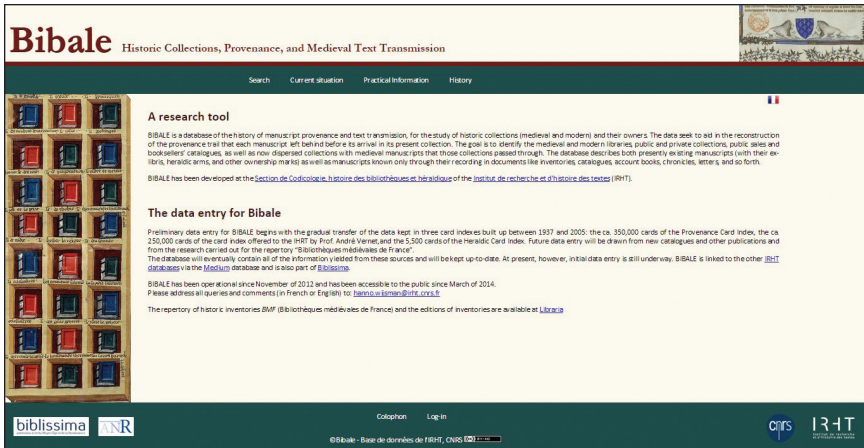


FIGURE 4. Bibale Database homepage.

tions between the various files. In the course of 2016, Bibale will be replaced by a new version. The URL will remain the same, but the searching functionalities will be much better. With this update, Bibale will become ever more integrated with the other resources that compose the Biblissima constellation of databases, and in turn, mutually enhance the research capabilities of the whole system.