

# THE MAKING OF A CATALOGUE IN ANCIENT LIBRARIES

## THE LIBRARIAN'S TESTIMONIES

**Fernanda Campos**

*Integrated Researcher at CHAM – Center for Humanities, NOVA University, Faculty on Social Sciences and Humanities, Lisbon, Portugal and Invited Researcher at CEHR – Center for Studies on Religious History, Catholic University, Lisbon, Portugal*

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**ABSTRACT**

*Catalogues in libraries have been an indispensable tool for centuries. Before the 'invention' of the card catalogue, they consisted mostly in large in-folio manuscript books that presented the bibliographic references of the collection in alphabetical order. The catalogue had two major functions: firstly, to record the existing items and their location, which was essential for controlling the collection's integrity and access. Secondly, it was intended to help readers in their efforts to find what they were searching. The making of a catalogue in 18th and early 19th centuries represented a huge task, with many hours of drafting until arriving to the clean copy. As a result of a recent investigation on the organisation of ancient Portuguese religious libraries, I studied some of the still existing catalogues in order to make the inventory of the collections, trace the books through provenance marks (whenever possible) and settle reading patterns in those libraries. Perusing the catalogues was also a unique occasion to unveil cataloguing standards and rule interpretations usually explained by the librarian in a written caveat. In this contribution to Mirna Willer's homage – a dear friend and a remarkable fighter for better catalogues – I will fo-*

*cus on identifying some of the principles commonly used in bibliographic descriptions, and other more unusual and sophisticated, always giving the floor to the librarians' own testimonies, on their quest for the perfect catalogue, two hundred years ago.*

## Introduction

When I gladly accepted the honour of contributing to Mirna Willer's Festschrift I was not sure which topic to choose. My lifelong work with Mirna started with UNIMARC but it was also very common in our professional exchanges to discuss wider issues especially concerning bibliographic standards in general. After ending my term as Deputy Director at the National Library of Portugal, I decided to go back where I started, very briefly, as a young librarian: historic research on ancient books and from there to the foundations of library collections in Portugal.

It is a work in progress that has already provided the first book in which I focused especially on the organisation of ancient religious libraries both in the arrangement of collections and the display of bibliographic information in catalogues (Campos, 2015). I was amazed to discover some of our day-to-day rules and rule interpretation in 18th century and early 19th century catalogues. Furthermore, some of the librarians left us written testimonies either to explain how to use the catalogue or to justify their choices and decisions, in the making of what they wanted to be the ideal catalogue.

This is my choice for Mirna Willer's Festschrift in celebration of her continuous search for professional perfection and her great interest in the history of books and of cataloguing rules.

### Ancient religious libraries: a bird's eye view

Addressing this subject always reminds us of the Umberto Eco's book and the motion picture *The name of the rose*, and, in fact, the representation of the library and its *scriptorium* can be accepted as rather accurate in late medieval times and for large monastic institutions. In the depiction, we can see a very large and complex library and a distribution of books in the shelves obeying to a classification scheme. The catalogue in which the librarians recorded every book was, in such an environment, an essential part of the library acting as a pathfinder for the readers' orientation. During the period of manuscript books, the bibliographic description presented in catalogues or rather inventories, was usually very concise (Bell, 1999).

The printed book revolution forced the need for a more accurate description of the books which implied the development of classification schemes and cata-

loguing principles. In monasteries and convents, regardless of their religious order, librarians were chosen among scholars who besides Latin, had a good understanding of foreign languages and were closely connected with other librarians and scholars participating in a global cultural network that the religious orders environment quite easily provided. Not only did they travel much but also, they participated in numerous reunions or had routine correspondence in and out their own country thus being able to know what was currently being printed and hence proceed in order to update the libraries and increase the collections.

Of course, larger and more pre-eminent monasteries and convents had greater resources and therefore were able to update their collections. Large or small, in the countryside or in towns, the monastic libraries continued to be among the more important libraries and with an advantage regarding private libraries: they did not finish with the death of the proprietor; on the contrary, they built cumulative collections by purchasing, exchanging and attracting book donations. Many convents and monasteries even had their own printing office to ensure the production of books, many of which were written by their members.

The inventories and catalogues prepared over centuries reveal the development of cataloguing and classification 'standards' but, of course, they present differences not only in contents but also on the display of the bibliographic references. Either short-title descriptions or very detailed ones, the function of these catalogues was to help librarians run the library (it was impossible to know everything by heart...) and to provide the reader with a capable instrument where he/she could find the book or books he/she needed. They were usually arranged in alphabetical order of the surnames or names of authors which did not match the arrangement of the books in the shelves, that obeyed a classification scheme. The fact that it was a very morose task requiring many drafts, until a final clean copy was possible, made librarians choose to leave spaces between descriptions or at the bottom of each page not forgetting to include blank pages at the end of each letter, in order to add, at least for a certain period of time, the references of the incoming books. By doing this, they could keep a catalogue for some time.

The catalogue also reflected the importance of the library within the religious community and as a result, many of them are carefully written and even decorated. In fact, the library was a mirror of the convent's life and status, as well as the church itself. These were the only 'public' spaces available: the library, in many cases, was opened to readers coming from other institutions, civil or religious ones, also receiving individual scholars. Churches, of course, were opened to all

those who attended services.

All religious libraries during the Ancient Regime had regulations in which we can see how the access to the collections was implemented. Free or mediated access, depending on the rank and position of the reader and of the collections too, short and long-time loan with punishments for infringers... We could go on, but it gives us an insight in the common problems faced by librarians which are common even today. The catalogue in its various formats is always at the centre of the library and, for centuries it has been functioning as a surrogate to the collections. We have mentioned the librarian's profile and the easiness of acquiring the necessary skills to exercise their job. One of the most relevant ones was the permanent access to bibliographies and to booksellers, famous libraries or auctions catalogues. These enabled the librarian to know what was available for sale or what was being collected by reputed bibliophiles or institutions. The librarian of the monastery of the Holy Cross, in Coimbra, Friar Pedro da Encarnação, left a very humorous account about the necessary librarian's skills that we will translate:

[...] and on this occasion, I would like to warn the Prior and Council members that whenever appointing a new librarian the chosen one must be not only a bibliophile but also a good bibliographer. He must have a sound judgement and, so to say, he must also be cunning to recognize the constant mischiefs used by book merchants with whom it is necessary to deal. It is not enough that the librarian be a saint and doctor by the university if these other qualities are lacking (Carvalho, 1921, p. 29).

On the other hand, between religious houses there was also an important and regular activity of disposing duplicates either by selling or by exchanging them. There was also a sense of rivalry and newly appointed librarians usually wanted to promote themselves and the library they served. One of the chosen methods was the making of a new catalogue. Fortunately, some of those librarians left testimonies and caveats in the manuscript in order to explain the need for a new catalogue but mostly their decisions and rule interpretations in the arrangement of the bibliographic references, as well as some instructions on how to use the catalogue. I will present two case studies coming from different Portuguese religious houses.

## The *Index* of the Convent of Beato, in Lisbon (1763)

The convent of Beato was founded in 1456 in the outskirts of Lisbon and it became the head of the Portuguese Congregation of Saint John the Evangelist. Dedicated to theological studies and medical assistance, this order kept a discrete position over the centuries, but the convent of Beato was a large building and had a selected library, although not a very large one (Campos, 2017, p. 138).

In 1763, the librarian Friar Silveira prepared a new catalogue and decided to present it in a rather unique style (*Index*, 1763). As he mentions in his caveat, the library had a catalogue in place ‘excellently done both in content and appearance’. However, it was written in 1739 and it lacked proper updating. Furthermore, the librarian implies that the physical organization of the library was generally criticized because it had no specific order. That led quite easily to have, for example, two books with the same shelf-mark and to ignore how many books of a certain author existed at the library, which inevitably resulted in double acquisitions... The list of bad practices is quite detailed and for this newly appointed librarian it represented a unique occasion to put things right. So, instead of sorting a new catalogue, Friar Silveira decided to create an *Index* of all the books that existed in the library, dividing it in five parts. The first is an alphabetical index organized by names of authors. The second is for titles. The third is a combination of author and title. The fourth is again in alphabetical order of names of authors but disposed in topographic order. The fifth is a subject index. All of them contain the shelf-marks of the books so that the user, whatever the way he chose to approach the catalogue, would always know where the books were ranged.

It is ingenious and clearly anticipates the multiple indexes that existed in former card catalogues and are present in current databases. This ‘method’ as the librarian calls it, obliged him to repeat the same references but as he meant to present a multiple index and, as there was a catalogue at the library, those references only include the author’s name, or the title, or the combination of the two headings, along, as we said before, with the shelf-mark. There are a few ‘See’ and ‘See also’ references as well, especially in the first index. The entries order is not always very accurate, it is written in a hasty way, but the references have some space between them in order to allow updates, and at the end of each part there are blank pages. Still, in the last sentence of his caveat, the librarian confesses that the *Index* probably has many mistakes and the written apparatus looked very poor but for those who did not like it he gives two suggestions: first, to do a better one and secondly, use the old catalogue which was available at the library in the desk’s drawer.

### ***The Índice Alfabético e Universal da Livraria do Mosteiro D'alcobaça (1801)***

The second case I would like to present is a catalogue of the library of Saint Mary's monastery in Alcobaça, 100 km north of Lisbon. It was the head of the Cistercian Order in Portugal, founded in 1153 by the first Portuguese king Afonso I. This rich monastery helped in the settlement of population, provided shelter in case of danger, organized a school and acted as a religious authority in the newly found country (Campos, 2017, p. 71). Since its beginning, the monastery had a library and a *scriptorium* where the monks copied, illuminated and produced many books (Nascimento, 1992). It was one of the largest religious libraries for centuries and, although it was pillaged in the 19th century, its collections, now at the National Library of Portugal in its great majority, still represent an impressive testimony of written culture.

The library occupied different places within the monastery through its long life, and the lack of space was always the main reason for such changes. Having a large collection, which was continuously increased by new titles, also determined the existence of several catalogues some of which still exist today. We will have a look at the one prepared in 1801 when a new librarian by the name of José Caldeira was appointed (Índice, 1801). Instead of writing a sort of introduction to the catalogue, as we saw in the previous example, he picked up an existing catalogue, introduced a large number of corrections and amendments, and at the end included a very thorough set of notices where he explains his ideas about what the perfect catalogue should look like, the rules and rule interpretations that he followed and also a number of recommendations to the copyist that would write the definitive catalogue. His starting point was, like in the previous example, the lack of a good and updated catalogue although many others before him had worked hard to produce it. Though the general attitude of the new librarian displays the idea that everything was in a poor condition and that his intervention would provide a much better research tool at the library, the fact is that he did not achieve it and only left us with a draft, the one that was supposed to be copied with great perfection. Perusing his views on the ideal catalogue, the librarian left many notes explaining how to do the copy but mostly indicating the rules he had followed, the particularities of his rule interpretation and his views on the role of a catalogue in a library. We will present the most relevant ones.

The catalogue was meant to be organized alphabetically by the author's name

(or title in case of anonymous books), while the bibliographic description was to be composed by title, edition number, place of publication, name of publisher and date of publication, format, number of volumes or pages and shelf number. Caldeira explains his decision not to make a subject catalogue because it was a very difficult task and it would take a long time. Furthermore, not all subjects were immediately identified by the users without raising reasonable doubts and an accurate classification was not a one man-task because he would lack the appropriate skills. The fact that a lot of blank pages should be reserved was also an unpleasant decision, he states. But, of course, he acknowledges that choosing an alphabetical order by names of authors also implied the use of blank spaces between references, and/or at the bottom of each page and certainly many blank pages at the end of each letter so as to later fill them with updates.

The catalogue should include *See* and *See also* references, the language should respect the original publication, what he calls 'a polyglottal cataloguing'. Even the *See* references should obey this principle and we find in the catalogue the word 'Veja' which means 'See' in Portuguese but 'Voire' which is the French word whenever the entry concerned a French book. He does not accept that titles even in strange languages and non-roman scripts could be translated because that would mislead the readers. However, he exceptionally compromises by indicating that, after a translated title into Latin or Portuguese, a note should be made to clarify the original language of the book. José Caldeira also admits the use of genre titles in the author catalogue, for example, in the case of dictionaries, encyclopaedias, memories, biographies, because these 'combinations' as he calls them, are the names most usually searched by readers, and include, in some cases, many editions with different titles not immediately perceived. Of course, in the catalogue those references had to be comprehensively displayed and an entry under the name of the author should also be in place even as a *See* reference. He is not alone in these practices and I have found very rich and elaborated genre entries in other catalogues.

The choice of the author's name and the arrangement of authors with many works are also among the issues addressed by the librarian. In the first case he advocates the form of name that usually identifies the author (and *See* references for other forms). That, however, does not always become evidence especially because names might have different forms according with the publication language. It was a very common practice to translate names, mostly personal names, and there was of course the Latin name of many authors. José Caldeira was aware of these difficulties and persists in the name's fidelity to the language of the book, which means



of course that the same author is represented in different forms. He allows some exceptions for the classical authors and others that are so famous 'that everyone recognizes them and does not confuse them with other authors.' When compared to catalogues from other religious libraries we can state that in various librarians' notes there is a recognition of the need to choose one 'authorized' form which is the name by which the author is usually known and 'See' and 'See also' references for other forms.

As to the title, José Caldeira determines that it should be transcribed in the original language, as we mentioned before, and in its complete form so as not to mistake with others and to provide immediate information to the users about the contents of the book. Ultimately, the names of translators, editors, commentators and other contributors should be included in the transcription and ideally have a 'See' or 'See also' reference especially if they were considered as important contributors to the work's content. The librarian recognizes that these were very morose practices but very accurate whenever one aimed to build a perfect catalogue. He also includes a consideration about different authors with the same name and homonymous titles (e.g. Complete Works, *Opera Varia*, etc). In the first case he advises to include a brief note about the author, for example, nationality, function, religious order or other distinctive and appropriate information. In the second case, whenever there are various such titles for the same author, the bibliographic description should include, for example, information about the compiler or editor of the work because the reader might prefer one edition to the other, if he finds that particular orientation.

One of the problems that librarians encountered was the arrangement of multiple works and/or editions of a single author. José Caldeira proposes to use the alphabetical order but recognizes that a more elaborated method might be better although certainly very difficult to implement. Indeed, we found some cases in other catalogues where an anticipation of FRBR's logical scheme seems to have been implemented. For example, the Bible is quite commonly organized according to its different language expressions and within each, by its various existing manifestations.

Last but not least he mentions that even a short description of the contents of each book would be ideal because the users of the catalogue could immediately understand if the book in question was the one they were looking for, but he discards the practice as an impossible task in a library with a large collection. Still his intention was to try, at least the method with works whose titles were very vague or leaflets, like sermons, that were usually bound together to form a

volume with a very vague identification title in the book spine. In this last case, he proposes to catalogue one by one and to create a manuscript index for the contents of each miscellaneous book.

Although José Caldeira left only a draft which, with so many corrections, is quite impossible to read and interpret, still in his notes he summarizes and explains his decisions and rule interpretations. He looks proud enough to state that his work would ‘finally enable librarians to rule the library’ and users ‘to find easily what they were looking for.’ Normally we would expect a clean copy to be prepared but that was not the case. The draft shows late additions, but another catalogue was prepared in 1819 by a different librarian (they only served during a short period of time) in alphabetical order of author’s names and incorporating some of the ideas of the former librarian.

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The destiny of these libraries, books and catalogues ended in 1834 with the extinction of religious orders in Portugal. Though it was not a revolutionary event, like in France in 1789, still it determined the confiscation of all assets. Books were concentrated in a deposit to be distributed later by existing and newly created libraries, but they lost their provenance bond (Barata, 2003). Even today we can only grasp these collections through the provenance marks in the books which also help us in identifying specific readers and aspects related to the circulation and reception of the books (Pearson, 1998). Of course, the main source consists in those catalogues that survived and provide the researchers of the History of the Book with the necessary contents to identify literary, scientific and, in the case of religious libraries, also theological readings. For those who care for the History of Libraries, those catalogues are unique tools where we can uncover and discover the roots of our current knowledge and standards in librarianship.

## SOURCE MATERIALS

Biblioteca Nacional de Portugal

*Índice alfabético e universal da livraria do Real Mosteiro d'Alcobaça...* 1801. BNP. COD. 6483-6484.

*Index librorum qui in Bibliotheca Canoniorum Secularium Domus S. Joannis Evangelistae de Xabregas asservantur juxta Nomina, ac Cognomina Auctorum... digestus. Anno Domini 1763.* BNP. COD. 7437, <http://purl.pt/27248> (27-02-2019).

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# IZRADA KATALOGA U STARIM KNJIŽNICAMA SVJEDOČENJA KNJIŽNIČARA

## KLJUČNE RIJEČI:

stare knjižnice, Portugal, katalozi, kataložni opisi, knjižničari

## SAŽETAK

Katalozi su u knjižnicama stoljećima bili neophodan alat. Prije „izuma“ kataloga na listićima, oni su se uglavnom sastojali od velikih rukom pisanih knjiga folio formata koje su abecednim redom sadržavale kataložne opise građe. Katalog je imao dvije glavne funkcije: prvo, bilježenje postojećih jedinica građe i njihova smještaja, što je bilo bitno za nadzor cjelovitosti i pristupa zbirci. Drugo, namjena im je bila pomoći čitateljima da pronađu ono što traže. Izrada kataloga u 18. i početkom 19. stoljeća bio je golem i dugotrajan zadatak. U nedavnom istraživanju organizacije starih portugalskih vjerskih knjižnica, proučila sam neke od sačuvanih kataloga kako bih sastavila popis zbirki, pratila knjige pomoću oznaka provenijencije (kad god je to bilo moguće) i odredila obrasce čitanja u tim knjižnicama. Pregledavanje kataloga bilo je i jedinstvena prilika za otkrivanje kataložnih standarda i tumačenja pravila koja je knjižničar obično objašnjavao u pisanoj napomeni. Odajući ovim prilogom počast Mirni Willer, dragoj prijateljici i izvanrednom borcu za bolje kataloge, usredotočit ću se na prepoznavanje uobičajenih, ali i neobičnijih i sofisticiranih načela koja se primjenjuju u kataložnim opisima, uvijek navodeći svjedočenja knjižničara otprije dvije stotine godina o njihovoj potrazi za savršenim katalogom.