

WHEN WAS I BORN? WHEN DID I DIE?

Cécile Martini – I am going to talk about library registers with particular reference to the École française in Rome. Now exactly what is a register? Technically, a register is something that records the chronological order of all the documents that come into the collections of a library, be it by purchase, gift or exchange. When we open an inventory we in reality tell a story, we tease out a thread, we go back in time. A library register can ultimately be compared to a civil registry because we can find enough information for a book: where was I born? When? With whom did I live? When did I die?

When was I born? The most basic item is the date when the book came into the library and that is what figures in the first column of the library register. Right away that lets us observe the passage of the years so we can tell how the library evolved. Years of plenty: many entries in the register, many purchases; meagre years: when the Franc fell in 1924, the École française didn't buy any works and then there are years of drought: years during wartime when the library was closed.

Who brought me into this world? The second column is that which tells the way a volume came into the library. Was it bought? Was it exchanged? Was it given to us, sometimes by our supervisory board? If that's the case then we have no choice, we have to accept the book. It gets recorded in the register, "gift from the ministry".

Who am I? The library register records the identity of a work. Author, title, which edition. To validate a work's identity, it gets a number in the inventory which is its unique identifier, something that lets it be traced throughout its life in our library.

Where did I live and with whom? That is a question that we end up asking about humans and that we can also ask about books. In all libraries, when a book comes into the collections, it gets assigned a code. But this code isn't something that is static because as time goes by with maintenance work in the library rooms, with the reorganisation of knowledge, even with mere changes in the coding system, well, codes change. As far as the École française in Rome is concerned, the old library register sometimes has as many as six codes and that is evidence of a library that is a living organism. Books move, they get displaced, they change neighbours and voila, we have a change in theme, we may pass from archaeology to ancient history and the book has moved on, it has new friends in the library.

So when did I die? That is indeed a fundamentally existential question and books do die. This information also appears in the library register and it's usually a consequence of weeding. That is to say that librarians have with good intent decided to extract a work from the collections because it no longer fits in with

the chosen themes, because it's in a bad state or perhaps because it would fit better in another library to whom it will have been given. So weeding denotes the death of the work in the collections and a note is made: 'weeded out' and that date, well there it is, that's the date of the death of a work. There are works that we cannot find and in that case there will be a search operation. When a book is missing its disappearance gets reported in the library register just as would happen for someone when they die, we write down 'missing' with the date and that's it, the life of the book stops right there.

In short, library registers are what records the life cycle of a book. They make possible a number of interlinked fields of research. We can study the readership, we can study policy with regard to documents, we can study budgets, we can also study maintenance work in a library: all this information ends up being accessible through a register! And then at least from my point of view, we consider that when there is an accident, it's better to save a library register even before saving books because the entire history of the library, it's living memory, go into these documents. Indeed a library is an organism that is very much alive! There have been cases at the École française where works have not disappeared but appeared! All on their own... When the library reopened at the end of the war in 1944, books were found that had appeared there and no one had any idea how they had got there, so we just adopted them! They were recorded in our library register with the note: 'found in the library', how marvellous!

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