

The First Steps in Creating Cultural Heritage Digital Resources in Bulgaria

Milena P. Dobрева

Institute of Mathematics and Informatics, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

bl. 8, Acad. G. Bonchev St.

1113 Sofia, Bulgaria

e-mail: dobрева@math.acad.bg

fax: 00359-2-9713649

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents the current state of the creation of digitised collections of cultural heritage resources in Bulgaria. Two aspects of this process are discussed in detail:

1. the policy of establishing the first projects in the field,
2. the unsolved problems which require a quick solution.

The experience presented in this paper is characteristic for countries in transition and will be of interest for colleagues, launching projects in the field of digitising cultural heritage collections in similar cultural and/or economic environment.

1. Background

Bulgaria has a rich cultural heritage represented by monuments both of local and European importance. The main collections of the cultural heritage belong to the state and their maintenance is totally dependent on the state budget. Collections differ in their nature like everywhere in the world - they are buildings, frescoes, icons, paintings, manuscripts, instruments, vessels, coins, etc. In this paper we will concentrate above all on written monuments, such as epigraphic inscriptions and palaeographic materials (medieval and more recent manuscripts), for example, the Latin and Greek epigraphic inscriptions from Late Antiquity period, kept in Bulgarian repositories which form the third largest national collection in Europe after the collections in Italy and Greece. The repositories of Bulgarian libraries and museums house over 8,500 manuscripts, which are a major historical source casting light on Medieval South-East European literature and history.

One would expect that the development of a national policy for digitisation would be an easy task when most collections of the cultural heritage are state-owned. Unfortunately, there is no national strategy for digitisation of national cultural heritage collections, although there are specialists in Bulgaria who already have valuable experience in this field.

The difficult situation in the country is one of the reasons for the absence of a national strategy in the field of digitisation of the cultural heritage. During the current transition period the issues of preservation of cultural heritage collections have been neglected as the main concern of the state is an economic stabilisation. Since libraries and the museums, the

largest repositories of cultural heritage resources, are almost totally dependent on insufficient Government funding, difficult choices on allocation of resources for support of the current collections and traditional preservation have to be taken. The applications of new information technologies which would contribute to the preservation and study of the collections is considered luxury the budget cannot afford.

2. Bulgarian Pilot Projects

2.1. Participating organisations

Five types of organisations are potentially interested in digitisation of cultural heritage: government bodies, repositories, research and/or educational institutions, companies and foundations. These organisations with a different profile have significantly different approaches in the field of digitisation of cultural heritage due to their different aims and needs.

2.1.1. *Government bodies* (the Ministry of culture) are entrusted with the supervision of such activities. A project on networking of the museums is currently underway, however it does not contain any official statement or plan for digitisation of cultural heritage collections in the wide sense.

2.1.2. *Repositories* (libraries and museums), which seem the most natural initiators of digitisation projects because of the close relationship between digitisation and preservation, are currently in the position of observers due to lack of funding on the one hand, and copyright issues for digital collections, on the other hand. The Union of Librarians and Information Services Officers produced in 1997 a National Program for the preservation of Library Collections, which was adopted by the Library Council at the Ministry of Culture. Unfortunately, this interesting program is adopted only formally, without any real work on its implementation into the practice.

2.1.3. *Research and/or educational institutions* are the most active initiators of digitisation projects in Bulgaria as centres of study of the cultural heritage and the impact which digitisation could have on:

- routine work
- potential for large-scale comparative studies
- application of new research methods.

2.1.4. *Companies* are interested in presenting sections of cultural heritage to the world which they believe will be easily realised on the market. Today it is rather difficult to establish customer interest. The Bulgarian market of such products is unsatisfactory. This is why their main market is abroad.

2.1.5. *Funding bodies* (foundations) supported practically all projects undertaken in the field of digitisation. However, the scale of their support cannot meet the real costs of serious digitisation projects.

2.2. *Current work in the field*

The first initiatives in this field were launched by research institutions and companies under the conditions of an absence of a national strategy and funding for digitisation programmes. Libraries and museums basically provided access to their collections instead of launching their own programmes.

The work of specialists from research institutions is basically directed towards entering data on available resources. Actual work on digitisation has not yet been done on large-scale basis, because of the high costs of such projects. Amongst the projects describing available resources we could mention:

- The Repertorium of Old Bulgarian Literature (co-ordinated by the Institute of literature at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences);
- The Corpus of Epigraphic Inscriptions in Greek and Latin (co-ordinated by the Institute of Mathematics and Informatics of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences),
- The 'St Cyril and Methodius: Byzantium and Slavs in the 9th century AD' project (co-ordinated by the American University in Blagoevgrad) [Dobрева, Ivanov 98].

The basic work done by companies is oriented towards creating CD-ROMs (four CD-ROMs already exist, two of manuscripts from the National Library 'St. Cyril and Methodius', one of Macedonian coins and one of Bulgarian Iconography).

A most important problem in the field of digitisation is connected with the copyright on materials for digitisation.

Copyright issues in such a complex field have to be clearly defined for 2 different situations: a. when primarily sources are being digitised, and b. when publications of research of different specialists are being incorporated into the final product. The second case is very important and even more complicated than the first one, because scholarly annotations and commentaries are important components of any digitised collections. Since this work is done in teams, the contribution of each member of the team has to be clearly defined and protected.

3. **Unresolved Problems**

This situation has led to several important issues:

- The absence of a national strategy has resulted in the lack of co-ordination between separate local initiatives which usually do not contribute to each other.
- The work of separate teams in the same field has led to the application of many different *ad hoc* solutions, instead of a search for a general *ad modum* strategy.
- There is a clear need for international co-operation in the fields of Slavic and Balkan Studies, because of the wide spread of primarily sources throughout the whole of Europe. The lack of a national strategy does not support such co-operation in spite of its importance for real large-scale comparative studies.

- Ambiguity of legal copyright issues has led to serious problems in persuading researchers to share their knowledge in digitisation projects affecting the level of presentation of materials, and restricting depth of presentation.
- In order not only to present materials, but to support research work in the field of Ancient and Medieval Studies, all data should be properly organised and processed. It is not sufficient to have collections of digital images, or text corpora. The application of information technologies in the Humanities is complicated by the specificity of the models in the subject domain. If we consider the example of Medieval Slavic studies, a commonly accepted model of which elements should be included in a formal model of the subject domain of knowledge can not be decided. For this reason, the creation of a generally accepted model is more a wish than a reality even after having the experience of several projects and organising a wide scientific discussion [Birnbaum et al. 95]. The creation of a specialised workbench for Slavic Medieval studies which will be sufficiently flexible to support those views and materials, which serve the needs of the concrete specialist is one of the possible solutions for this problem. I would like to stress that existing workbenches for the study for example of Latin manuscripts [Calabretto, Rumpler 98], will not match the needs of specialists in Slavic studies because of the impressive variety in Medieval Slavic texts for which computer presentation is still a subject of wide discussion (see the papers presented at the International workshop on Text Variety modelling [Dobrevva 98]).

4. Conclusions

The paper deals with the initial Bulgarian experience in the field of developing electronic resources in the presentation of cultural heritage. The first projects in the field fall into two categories: research and commercial.

Bulgarian specialists encountered problems related to:

- The lack of a national strategy and co-ordination amongst institutions in the field of digitisation;
- Copyright issues (both for primary sources and results of their scientific examination);
- Difficulties with the setting up of adequate workbenches for specific research tasks like Medieval Slavic manuscript studies.

The solution of those problems will contribute significantly to the development of real digital resources in the field of cultural heritage which, its turn, will contribute to the processes of European integration. Probably the basic problem for countries in transition is whether they will be able to set-up their own programs and start work on them meeting the quality criteria of the European Union.

There are two strategies which can be followed under these conditions:

1. Waiting for better economic conditions and for guidance of more experienced countries in the field of cultural heritage digitisation. The dangers in this approach come from the poor conditions for the preservation of our cultural heritage.
2. Searching for *ad hoc* solutions, which will not lead to qualitative preservation of the whole cultural heritage, but at least will partially preserve it. The danger in this approach comes from the serious differences in the quality standards in the field of digitisation. Is it worth spending money on digitisation projects with insufficient budgets?

These decisions are very difficult. But they should be taken, and sooner the better.

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