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A Proposal for a Cartesian Nomenclature

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I problemi di nomenclatura possono sembrare, anche in campo paleografico, problemi di parole, vuoti di sostanza e di contenuto concreti; ma spesso essi nascondono incomprensioni ed errori di valutazione e di prospettiva; sempre sono il sintomo di una imperfetta conoscenza della documentazione.

A. PETRUCCI, reviewing *ChLA*, in *Gnomon* 41 ('69) 771.

Tout cela est apparemment fort logique et j'ai la crainte de faire apparaître le Dr. L. comme un esprit systématique, appliquant à l'étude des mss. je ne sais quel *Discours de la Méthode*.

N. HUYGHEBAERT, reviewing Liefstinck, *Ter Duinen*, in *Scriptorium* 10 ('56) 135.

One of the most remarkable comments on Liefstinck's *Nomenclature*¹ of 1953 was Giorgio Cencetti's angry reproach that he 'did not take into account a principle which is now established incontrovertibly by recent studies, viz., that terminology and classification cannot be precise and arbitrary constructions, suggested by nothing but empirical observations, but must reflect real and historical articulations in the development of writing, to be established by a substantial study and not by the abstract combination of mere external data, taken arbitrarily as Cartesian co-ordinates of classificatory schemes which, like the legendary bed of Procrustes, can never adapt themselves to the concrete and rich polyphony of reality'.²

It is my conviction that there are two fundamental misconceptions in this comment. In the first place, Liefstinck's nomenclature *does* primarily 'reflect a real and historical articulation' etc. Secondly, a 'Cartesian' nomenclature is not as monstrous and unprofitable as Cencetti suggests. Exaggerating strongly, one might say: Cencetti thought Liefstinck's nomenclature too Cartesian and not historical enough, but with more reason one might think it too historical and not Cartesian enough. Or, in more sober terms: I wish to argue that there is room and use for a purely Cartesian conception of nomenclature beside the 'historical' conception.

As regards the historical validity of Liefstinck's system a few words must suffice here: it cannot be doubted by anyone acquainted with the Dutch material of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The *hybrida* (in 1953 still named *bastarda*) is a hard historical fact, at least in the Netherlands of the fifteenth century. Outside this area its existence as a separate historical entity is much less clear-cut; but after all the system arose from the study of Dutch manuscripts³ and was presented as an 'essai s'appliquant spécialement aux manuscrits originaux des Pays-Bas médiévaux'.⁴

But what are the Cartesian elements in this nomenclature? I am afraid that Cencetti's displeasure was caused mainly, if unjustly, by the rectangular diagram of *Nomenclature* p. 32,

¹ G. I. Liefstinck, 'Pour une nomenclature de l'écriture livresque de la période dite gothique', in *Nomenclature des écritures livresques du IXe au XVIIe siècle* (1954) 15-34.

² G. Cencetti, *Lineamenti di storia della scrittura latina* (1954), p. 479. His judgment in *Compendio di paleografia latina* [1966], p. 79, is much more equitable.

³ G. I. Liefstinck, *Codicum in finibus Belgarum (...) conscriptorum (...) pars I: codices 168-360 societatis c.n. Maatschappij der Nederlandsche Letterkunde* (= Bibliotheca Universitatis Leidensis, Codices manuscripti, V 1, 1948), pp. x-xiii.

⁴ *Nomenclature* p. 15. - Cf. now J. P. Gumbert, *Die Utrechter Kartäuser und ihre Bücher* (1974), p. 199-214.

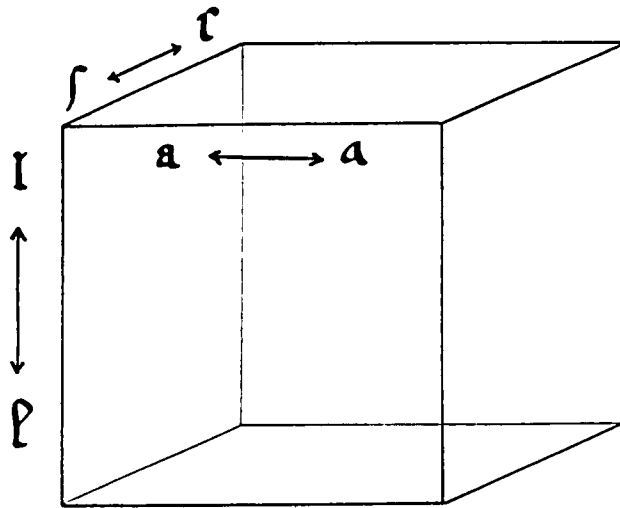


Fig. 1

where scripts are co-ordinated with periods and hierarchical levels; perhaps also by the neat assignation of the qualifications 'formata', 'textualis', 'currens' to each of the terms 'textualis', 'cursiva', 'hybrida'. But there is also the question of the criteria by which one can distinguish Liefertinck's categories; they are:

textualis has developed Gothic *a* and *g* (*a* of the 'two-compartment'-type, etc.), *f* and *s* ending on the line with little 'feet', and no loops;

cursiva has, in total contrast, the simpler, reduced forms of *a* and *g*, *f* and *s* with tails, and loops;

hybrida is like *cursiva*, but it has – like *textualis* – no loops.

These criteria were not meant to give an exhaustive catalogue of the differences between the categories; they were merely selected, *a posteriori*,¹ as the most remarkable and the most useful in practical work. For my present purpose, however, I wish to isolate them from their historical context and use them as a starting-point for my own Cartesian suggestion.

I propose to take a three-dimensional orthogonal space (a cube, for reasons of convenience), to assign a graphical meaning to each of the three co-ordinates, and to plot in hands in this spatial diagram according to their graphical characteristics.

The horizontal axis shall represent the state of the letter *a*: the extreme left shall mean the *a*'s in which the 'head' of the Carolingian *a* is preserved or, in various ways, developed into an 'upper compartment'; the extreme right shall be for the 'reduced' *a*'s without heads; hands using an intermediate type, or using both types, shall be co-ordinated with points more to the left or to the right on this axis according to the relative frequency of these types, etc. In the same way the vertical axis shall represent the loops: loopless ascenders, in which the movement comes from the left, shall correspond to points at the top, looped ascenders to points at the bottom. The third axis shall be for the feet of *s* (and *f*): 'feet' at the back of the cube, 'tails' (or at least: forms which end with a leftward movement, not a rightward one) at the front (Fig. 1).

¹ The best proof of this, and at the same time of the historical validity of the system, is that one recognizes a Dutch *hybrida* at a glance, just as one does a *beneventana*

or a *bourguignonne*, without having to search for the criteria.

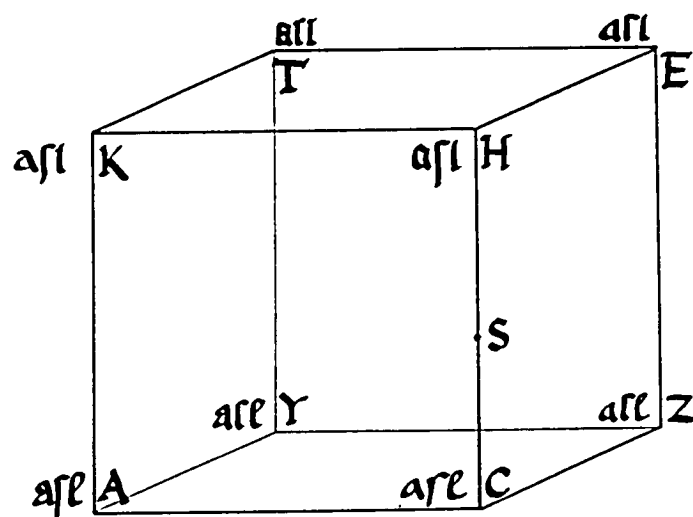


Fig. 2

It is evident that a hand which is 'pure' in respect to all three characteristics will be plotted in at one of the corners of the cube; if it is 'pure' in two respects, but mixed in the third, it will be represented by a point on one of the edges; if it is mixed in all three respects, it will be somewhere in the interior of the cube. A hand which, for instance, is 'pure' in having reduced *a*, tailed *s* and no loops will be plotted in at the point H in fig. 2, and can conveniently be named an H-hand. If this hand is inconsistent in its use of loops, it will find its place at S; etc. Lieftinck's *textualis*, *cursiva* and *hybrida* are T-, C-, and H-scripts respectively.¹ (I may remind the reader of the important distinction that Lieftinck's *textualis* is a historical category, whereas my *T-script* refers to a point in an abstract system of co-ordinates.)²

Now we can take some actual material, for instance Dutch manuscripts of the second half of the fifteenth century, and see what happens. In this case³ we get the following picture: heavy clusters at T and C, an even heavier one at H, a thin string of instances along the line C-H, and a mere sprinkling of isolated points in the whole rest of the diagram (Fig. 3b). This situation once more confirms Lieftinck's recognition of three separate categories, *textualis-cursiva-hybrida*, as an adequate analysis of the Dutch historical reality.

With contemporary German hands the result is different: instead of two all but isolated clusters at C and H, we find one undivided cluster along the whole line C-H (Fig. 3c). Apparently the dichotomy *cursiva-hybrida* is not an adequate description of the German reality. Thus our diagram, while supporting German palaeographers in their slightly sceptical attitude towards the *Nomenclature*, reveals at the same time an interesting difference between Dutch and German scripts – a difference which the use of the single term 'bastarda' for the German script brings out much less clearly.

When we return to Dutch practice but consider the fourteenth century we find yet another picture. Now the cluster at T is markedly thicker; there is a second cluster at C, with an extension towards A (which is also covered by Lieftinck's term *cursiva*); but H is totally empty (Fig. 3a). Here a historical development is reflected: our picture is the graphical representation of Lieftinck's discovery that there is no *hybrida* before c. 1425; but it also calls our attention to the fact that *cursiva* is not an unchanging phenomenon either.

¹ For the distinction between 'hand' and 'script', see M. B. Parkes, *English Cursive Book Hands* (1969), p. xxvi.

² The choice of the letter T for this point is – like that of

CHAK – purely mnemotechnical.

³ The reader is asked to take this on credit; I intend to give more data elsewhere.

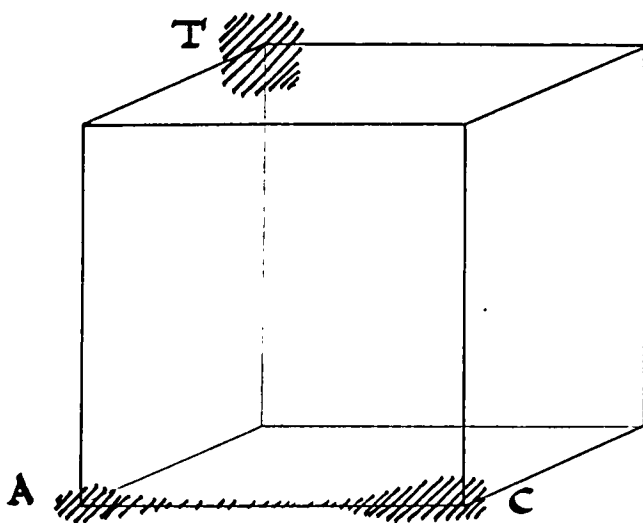


Fig. 3a

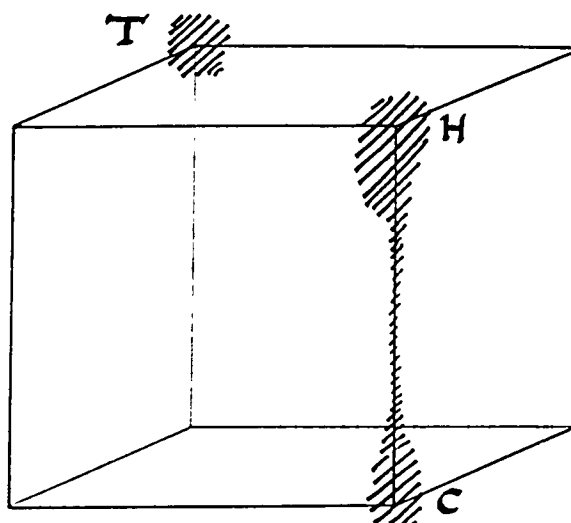


Fig. 3b

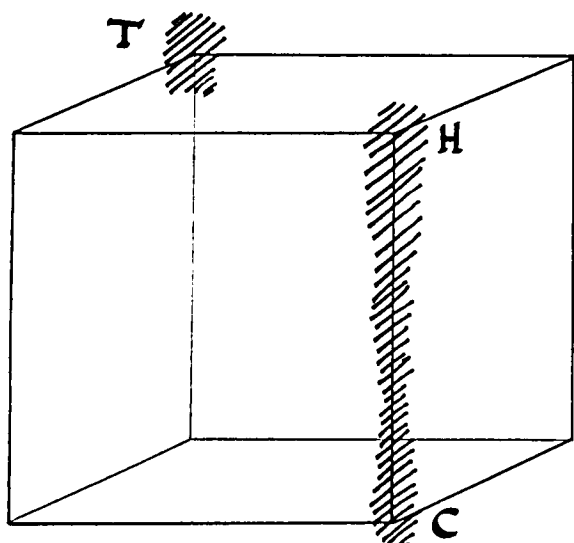


Fig. 3c

Fig. 3a - Netherlands, 14th c.

Fig. 3b - Netherlands, 15th c.

Fig. 3c - Germany, 15th c.

These three experiments, and their differences, show the essential character of the 'Cartesian' conception that is here proposed. Cencetti thought that Lieftinck's categories were arbitrary boxes to squeeze facts into. This is not true: they are really carefully designed to fit the (Dutch) facts. In the Cartesian conception, however, there are no categories at all; it is not a presentation of facts, but an instrument for looking at facts; or, in a geographical simile: it is not a map, but a grid, an aid to map-makers (T no more pretends to be a *textualis* than a meridian pretends to be a river or a frontier). I feel that, for large parts of Gothic palaeography, the need for map-making is still great,¹ and that a number of experiments like the ones suggested above, differentiated as to time, place, etc. and arranged into series, may contribute much to our knowledge of the essential features of the landscape we want to study.

¹ '(...) nous avons à peine abordé (...) les relevés sur le terrain (...); il faut nous laisser le temps de le faire, (...) alors nous pourrions édifier des systèmes et tenter

d'expliquer le paysage.' R. Marichal, 'L'écriture latine', in *L'écriture et la psychologie des peuples* (1963), p. 247.

Some other features of our grid emerge when we study the occupation of one point in various times and places. Point A for instance is, in the fourteenth century, occupied by a few Dutch specimens;¹ but there are large numbers of contemporary German and Austrian A-hands,² and, of course, the whole of the *littera anglicana*. (When we pass into the fifteenth century, the Dutch and German A-hands disappear; the *anglicana* remains.) This underlines once more that our grid does not automatically produce historical facts. Nobody would suggest that the English A-script *anglicana* and the Austrian A-hands are 'the same script' (*g* and *r* alone are sufficient to disprove this); they merely come at the same place in the grid we chose (one might call them 'isotopes'). Still, their juxtaposition is, perhaps, rather unexpected. At the least, the pattern is suggestive: it deserves thought and, if possible, explanation.

Other interesting cases of 'isotopy' occur at point H. The Italian hand of *Nomenclature* fig. 34 (Italy 1472) for instance, though an H-hand, does not easily fit into the historical concept of the *hybrida* of the Low Countries. The same is the case with Kirchner³ 53 (Murcia 1425), or Foerster⁴ 44 (Constance 1415), or Kirchner 34a (Tuscany 1408), or Thomson⁵ 121 (Avignon 1328!), to mention only a few of the H-hands which are earlier than the approximate date of origin of the *hybrida*. The recognition and study of these H-hands may eventually help to make an explanation of their 'isotope' *hybrida* more correct, if less simple.⁶

The plates accompanying this article illustrate some of the varieties of 'isotopes' occurring at the cardinal points. Two of these are virtually empty. For the various intermediate points on the edges of our cube only a few instances are given. Points neither at the corners nor on the edges are occupied relatively seldom; and especially the interior of the cube is generally all but empty. This, too, is a feature deserving investigation. My impression is that hands outside the cardinal points, i.e. – per definition – hands with fluctuations in their characteristics, are more frequent in the lower levels of the hierarchical scale, in periods of desintegration or in those of development (which is probably the most interesting case). Conversely, an isolated cluster at one of the cardinal points is likely to correspond to a highly formalised script which has lost contact with living development (such as the *textualis* of the fifteenth century: its isolation is reflected in the general agreement about this one term of Lieftinck's, as opposed to the other two!).

The Cartesian grid, as it is here proposed, was designed for the study of Gothic scripts.⁷ But it can be used for other scripts as well – in fact, for all scripts since the re-introduction of the uncial *a* into Caroline minuscule. And it is not without interest to note how the Humanistic scripts continue the tradition of T- and (C)-H-scripts. Even more promising is the pre-Gothic period. Normal Caroline script is a K-script. One of the essential factors in the development of the Caroline book-hand towards *gothique primitive* is the extension of the use of 'feet' from minims to *f* *s*; correspondingly, this development is reflected by a movement from K towards T (and, eventually, towards E). On the other hand the lower levels of Caroline (e.g. the 'Glossenschrift' of Bischoff, *Nomenclature* p. 8) and documentary hands often tend to 'reduce' *a* and – somewhat later – to introduce loops; these changes correspond to various developments on the plane KACH. Thus scripts 'draw away' from K in two directions, leaving K itself nearly empty. Here again I feel that the 'Cartesian cube' provides a rather graphic illustration of what might be called the 'Gothic divergence'.

¹ E.g. *Nomenclature* fig. 20.

² See for instance F. Unterkircher, *Die datierten Handschriften der österreichischen Nationalbibliothek bis zum Jahre 1400* (1969).

³ J. Kirchner, *Scriptura gothica libraria* (1966).

⁴ H. Foerster, *Mittelalterliche Buch- und Urkundenschriften* (1946).

⁵ S. H. Thomson, *Latin Bookhands of the Later Middle Ages* (1969).

⁶ It is not wholly accidental that all the examples quoted here are from Southern Europe.

⁷ For a first elaboration and application of the grid, see J. P. Gumbert, 'Iets over laatmiddeleeuwse schrifttypen (...)' in *Archief- en Bibliotheekwezen in België* 46 (1975) 273–282.

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A/C (aalf) N. Neth. XIV²

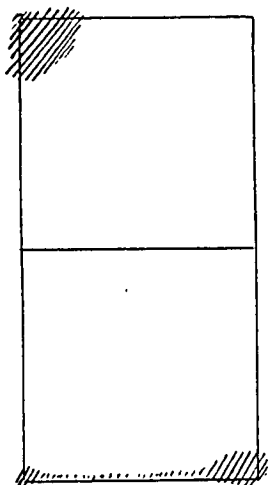


Fig. 4a – Netherlands, 14th c.

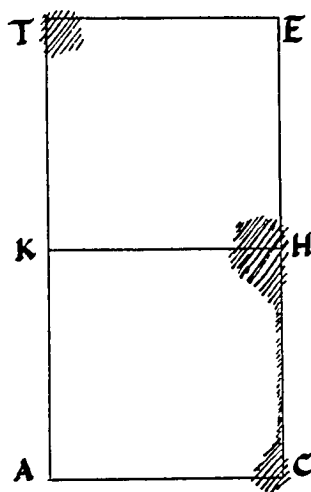


Fig. 4b – Netherlands, 15th c.

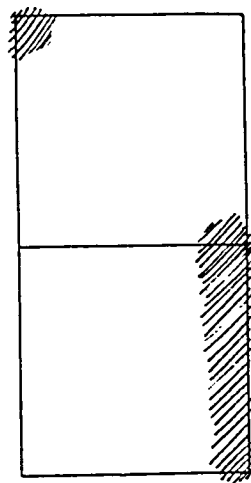


Fig. 4c – Germany, 15th c.

The cube, whose co-ordinates represent certain features of *a*, *l* and *s*, is not the only possible application of the Cartesian conception to palaeography. Four- or more-dimensional grids would often be welcome, but are hardly realizable. But there is a variety of two-dimensional possibilities; one – a sort of ‘unfolded’ excerpt from the cube – is illustrated in fig. 4.

A more essential possibility of variation lies in the meaning of the co-ordinates. Other graphical characteristics can be chosen – arbitrarily – and the whole material plotted in again in the new grid. It will then fall into new patterns, as intricate as the ones we found by means of the original cube. If the choice of co-ordinates was wise, the result is likely to be rewarding; and anyway palaeography can only gain if the material is mapped from as many points of view as possible. (I myself should think that *g*, *r* and the treatment of the minims would be useful as co-ordinates. The choice of yet other features could make the grid suitable for Roman scripts.)

By doing exactly what Cencetti forbade, we have, I hope, designed a useful palaeographical technique. For I need not underline again that the Cartesian conception here proposed is a technique, not a statement of fact. It can be an aid in mapping the palaeographical situation at various times and places, a pointer to unexpected similarities and divergences, a tool for asking questions, an instrument for illustrating developments. As such, it may contribute towards attaining the real end of palaeography: to understand the ‘concreta, ricca, multicolorde e multitonale realtà’, and to express this understanding in an adequate ‘historical’ nomenclature.