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**The Library of Sir Hans Sloane (1660-1753):  
creating a catalogue of a dispersed library**

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**Meeting:** 78. Library History SIG

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*WORLD LIBRARY AND INFORMATION CONGRESS: 75TH IFLA GENERAL CONFERENCE AND COUNCIL*  
23-27 August 2009, Milan, Italy

<http://www.ifla.org/annual-conference/ifla75/index.htm>

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**Abstract**

*Sir Hans Sloane was a physician, a scientist and a great collector. His collections catalysed the creation of, and formed the basis of, the British Museum, opened in 1759. The number of items estimated to be in his collections at his death in 1753 is over 117,000, of which the largest single category was books and manuscripts, said to number 50,000 volumes, of which approximately 45,000 were printed material.*

*When his books were moved from his home at the foundation of the Museum, they were not kept in the order that Sloane had used, but were re-arranged by subject. As a result the identity of the collection was very soon lost. Books were first rearranged, then interspersed with items from other sources, particularly the Old Royal Library, and with subsequent acquisitions. In addition, the British Museum held a number of sales of duplicate books between 1769 and 1832, at which many Sloane copies were disposed of.*

*As a consequence, although most of Sloane's books are still in the British Library, they are spread throughout the foundation collections. A large but unknown number were sold and many of these dispersed items can now be found in libraries throughout the world. The Sloane Printed Books project has created an online catalogue which will allow us to see Sloane's library as a whole for the first time in over 250 years. As well as bibliographical details, it records copy-specific information such as previous owners, the presence of manuscript notes, general condition, and significant bindings.*

*This paper will describe the way in which the catalogue has been compiled, and the process which is being followed for the identification of Sloane's books both in the British Library and in other libraries and collections. It will emphasise the physical fragility of provenance information and illustrate the*

*methods used to identify dispersed material. It will show the value of such a catalogue for intellectual, scientific and medical history, and for the history of libraries and information.*

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## **The Library of Sir Hans Sloane(1660-1753): creating a catalogue of a dispersed library.**

### *Introduction*

Sir Hans Sloane was a physician, a scientist and a great collector. At the time of his death, his collections included metals, minerals, crystals, flints and other stones, corals, vegetable specimens and dried plants, insects, shells, eggs, specimens of fish, birds, snakes, and humans, seals, pictures, coins and medals, mathematical instruments, and many more objects, including some 2000 'miscellaneous things not comprehended with the foregoing, both natural and artificial' (one wonders what they may have been ). But the single largest category was books. Together with books of prints and volumes of manuscripts, the total was estimated at 50,000, a clear illustration of the importance of the literature of science, both in itself as an integral part of a collection, and in support of a collection of objects.

This was a very large library for its time, certainly one of the largest in Britain, and possibly in Europe. In 1729, a French visitor described it as the most complete in Europe for medicine. Science and medicine were certainly the great strengths of his library, but Sloane collected very widely and has been described as omnivorous. As we recreate his library in a form which allows us to analyse its makeup, the nature of its content will become clearer, and I suspect it will show that 'omnivorous' is not quite the right term- wide-ranging, certainly, but with clear areas of interest and others of much lesser importance.

After Sloane's death, his collections went to form the nucleus of the British Museum. Objects and books were transported from his home in Chelsea to Montague House, the first home of the Museum. At first his library was kept together, in designated rooms, but even at this stage, it was no longer arranged as it had been. The Trustees of the Museum, feeling that the books were 'dispos'd in a very irregular manner, with little regard to the subjects or even the size of them' ordered that they should be re-arranged by subject; they should be 'placed on the shelves according to their respective faculties'. Subsequent rearrangements of the collections went further to disperse Sloane's library, interspersing his books with those from other collections and with later Museum acquisitions.

Between 1769 and 1832 shortage of space and the need for funds for new acquisitions led the Museum to hold a number of sales of duplicate books, which included a substantial number of books from Sloane's collections- possibly as many as 10000. As a result of the rearrangements, and sales of duplicates, Sloane's library can be considered as 'dispersed'. Even though the great majority of his books are in the British Library, they cannot be identified

or viewed as whole. For this reason his library has been described as 'one of the best documented of its period [but] one of the least studied'.

### *The Sloane Printed Books Catalogue*

Listing of Sloane's printed books began in the 1980s, at a period when a great deal of conservation and rebinding was being undertaken in the older parts of the BL. As they were rebound they were stamped with a distinguishing mark based on that used for Sloane volumes in the Department of Manuscripts. At first we used a simple word-processed file, then an Access2 database, downloading records from the electronic catalogue, and adding copy-specific data. Remarkably, the Access database remained in use for seventeen years.

In 2007, the listing took two significant steps forward. Firstly, the catalogue was remodelled, transferred to a relational database using Microsoft SQL Server and given public access on the BL website. Secondly, thanks to funding from the Wellcome Trust Research Resources in Medical History, two part-time research posts were funded to further populate the database. The Sloane Printed Books Project<sup>1</sup> started in 2008 and will run until 2010. Its aim is to add to the database as many as possible of Sloane's books, both those held by the BL, and those dispersed through the duplicate sales. British Museum 'duplicates' are held by many private and public collections throughout the world.

There are manuscript catalogues of Sloane's collections, including an eight-volume catalogue of his library. It might have seemed logical to use this catalogue to identify his books, but for a number of reasons this is not practicable. Most of the identification work has been done at the library shelf, searching for the distinguishing marks used by Sloane. Strangely, perhaps, the various marks which provide firm identification of Sloane's books were evidently not considered of great significance in the Museum, and there appears to have been no attempt to retain this evidence. It has simply survived. It was not until the mid-twentieth century that research on the identifying marks was published: firstly by an academic, Jeremiah Finch, in 1942<sup>2</sup> and subsequently by two members of library staff, Laurence Wood and Margaret Nickson .

### *Identifying Sloane's books*

Sloane was collecting over a period of over 70 years- the first dated acquisitions are from 1680, when he was 20 years old, and accessions to the library continued until his death. The marks which identify his books change over this period of time, a feature which can be useful for tracing dates of acquisition and pre- Sloane provenances.

The first is a simple date, associated with Sloane's signature, found so far on only two items, one a botanical work( Fig. 1), and the other a pharmacopoeia. Already, at the age of twenty, botany and medicine appear to be major interests.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/sloane>

<sup>2</sup> J. S. Finch, 'Sir Hans Sloane's Printed Books', *The Library*, 4th ser., 22 (1942), 67-72.



Fig. 1

In the early 1680s Sloane was recording the place, date and price of acquisition, as in the example below, a book purchased in London in 1686, at the price of one shilling and eight pence (Fig. 2). Added later is the alphanumeric identification which appears to function as both a shelf number and accession number. This volume is a collection of Paris medical dissertations dating from 1647 to 1666. This type of note was used to record books he bought while studying in France- thus we have books bought at Paris, Montpellier and Toulouse. Most are medical texts, as might be expected.

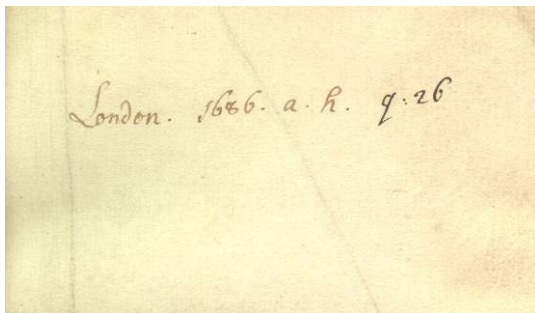


Fig.2

From 1686 to 1699 we see Sloane using a different way of recording the price and date of acquisition. The code seen below (Fig.3) is made up of symbols, and signifies the date, 1694, and price 2.0.0., i.e. £2. In this example we see, quite unusually, the code, signature and alphanumeric together. This is in a collection of astronomical and geographical observations made by the Academie des Sciences in Paris, 1693. The change of notation coincides with his first attempt to note acquisitions: a small notebook survives among the Sloane manuscripts which records the books in his library in 1684/5, and continues with acquisitions up to 1687. It is evident from the coded dates that Sloane bought a very large number of books in 1686, a great number of which were from the library of Joseph Fenton, a London surgeon who died in 1634. These were, naturally, retrospective acquisitions, and the practice of buying classic medical texts and older works remains a feature of the library.

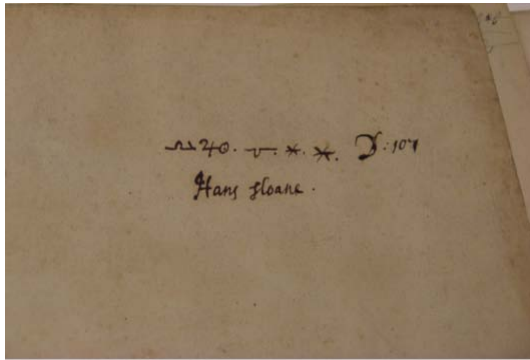


Fig. 3

Sloane's library had been growing steadily since 1680. By 1687 he had about 2700 books and manuscripts. The library had reached a size where some systematic arrangement was needed. Around 1693 he started to catalogue his collection. He was evidently an organised man, and managed his collection in a systematic way, paying considerable attention to the accurate description of his books and other items- there are similar catalogues for most of the other categories of object. The system he adopted for his books was an arrangement by size and type of book. Small books (octavo or smaller) were placed in a number of sequences prefixed by a lower case letter (Figs. 4-5). Quarto and folio volumes were in sequences preceded by an upper case letter. (Fig. 6)

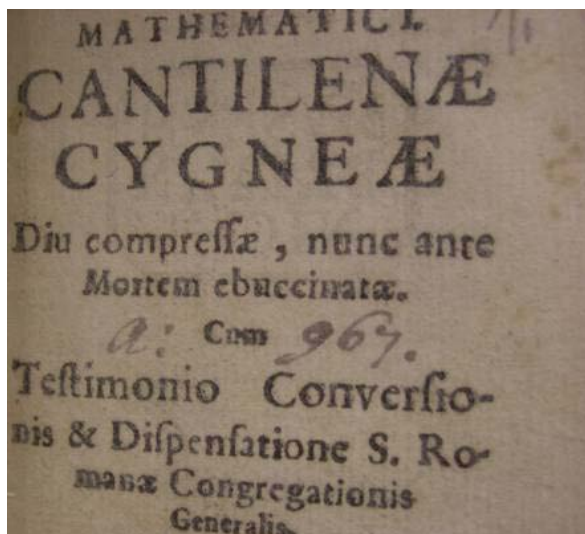


Fig.4

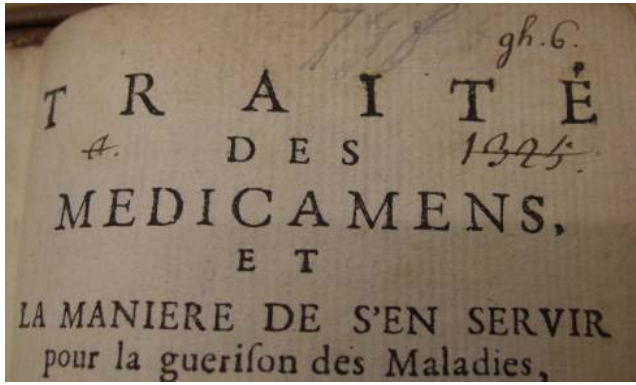


Fig. 5

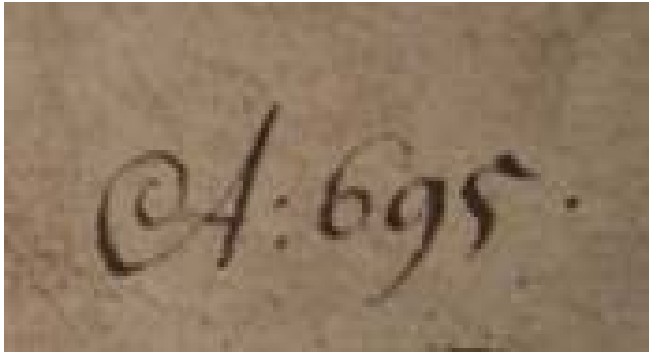


Fig.6

Special categories had special sequences- Pr for books with a large number of images or engravings, Min, used mostly for those with coloured illustrations(Fig.7) , Pr Or for oriental material, and a numerical sequence for periodicals.



Fig.7

Initially, almost all letters of the alphabet were used: for example, lower case sequences used at least 24 different letters. These may have represented subject categories, but there appears to be little distinction between the content in the different sequences. Possibly they may have represented



shelves or blocks of shelves. Whatever the original intention, the multiplicity of letter sequences eventually reduced. The majority of these sequences of octavo and smaller books reached only a few hundred items. Only a, c, g, l, and R reached into the thousands, with 'a' reaching over 6000. There is no extant shelf-list for Sloane's library which might help us to understand how the library was arranged, but it is difficult to conclude other than that the books were arranged on the shelves in running order within each letter category. The numbering of books was quite often changed from one alphanumeric to another(Fig.8), suggesting a physical move.

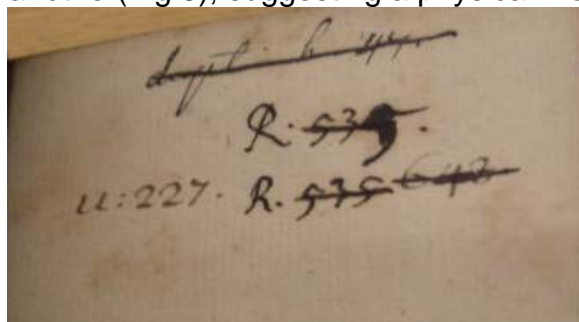


Fig.8

Once the books in his collection in 1693 had been catalogued, subsequent accessions were entered into the folio volumes in order of accession, with an index by author. This catalogue continued in use until 1753. It is now in the BL Department of Manuscripts. However, Latin medical books were entered separately in an interleaved copy of GA Merckelin, *Lindenius renovatus*, 1686, a medical bibliography, in author order. This separation is one reason why it is difficult to identify books from Sloane's catalogues. It may have been systematic and organised at the time, but the dual cataloguing system, combined with changes of number, means that it is now very difficult to view Sloane's library as a whole.

The alphanumeric marking (Sloane number) is the principal means of identifying Sloane's books, but there are others, such as manuscript notes and dedications(Fig. 9), and small paper labels on the cover, spine or titlepage(Fig.10). These labels would have allowed the user to find books by number, yet they do not seem to have been used for all books in the library, even though many must have become detached over the years: many contemporary bindings show no evidence of them at all.

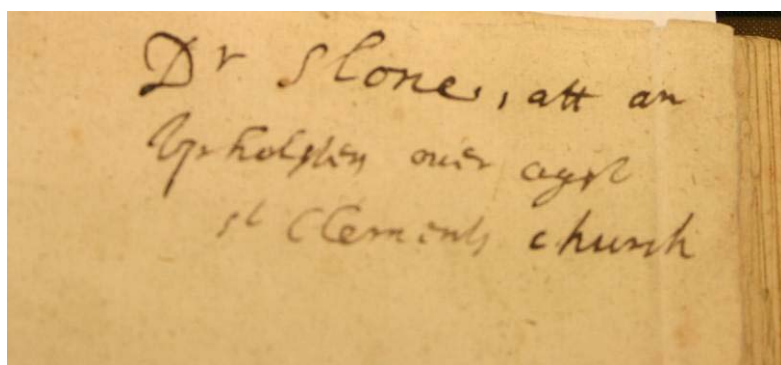


Fig.9



Fig.10

Sloane's numbers are written in several different places- on the titlepage, at top, bottom or middle, on the flyleaf, or on the pastedown. They are vulnerable to incidental damage and loss. Early binding practices at the British Museum led to the loss of information on preliminary leaves; thus many books which are almost certainly from Sloane's library cannot be conclusively identified. However, the British Museum ownership mark (Fig.11) can be helpful. This stamp was intended to be used, in black, on all Sloane's books. Unfortunately for our investigations, it continued in use on later accessions to the Museum, and its presence on a pre-1752 imprint can therefore only indicate a strong probability that the item came from Sloane's collection.



Fig.11

The Sloane Printed Books Catalogue records the Sloane number or other form of identification and other copy-specific information such as the presence of manuscript notes, binding types, and pre-Sloane provenance. The example in the screenshot below (Fig.12) shows the previous owner, and the coded date of acquisition.





Fig. 12

Books with the characteristic black BM stamp are entered as 'probably' from Sloane's library, as in the following screenshot. (Fig.13)

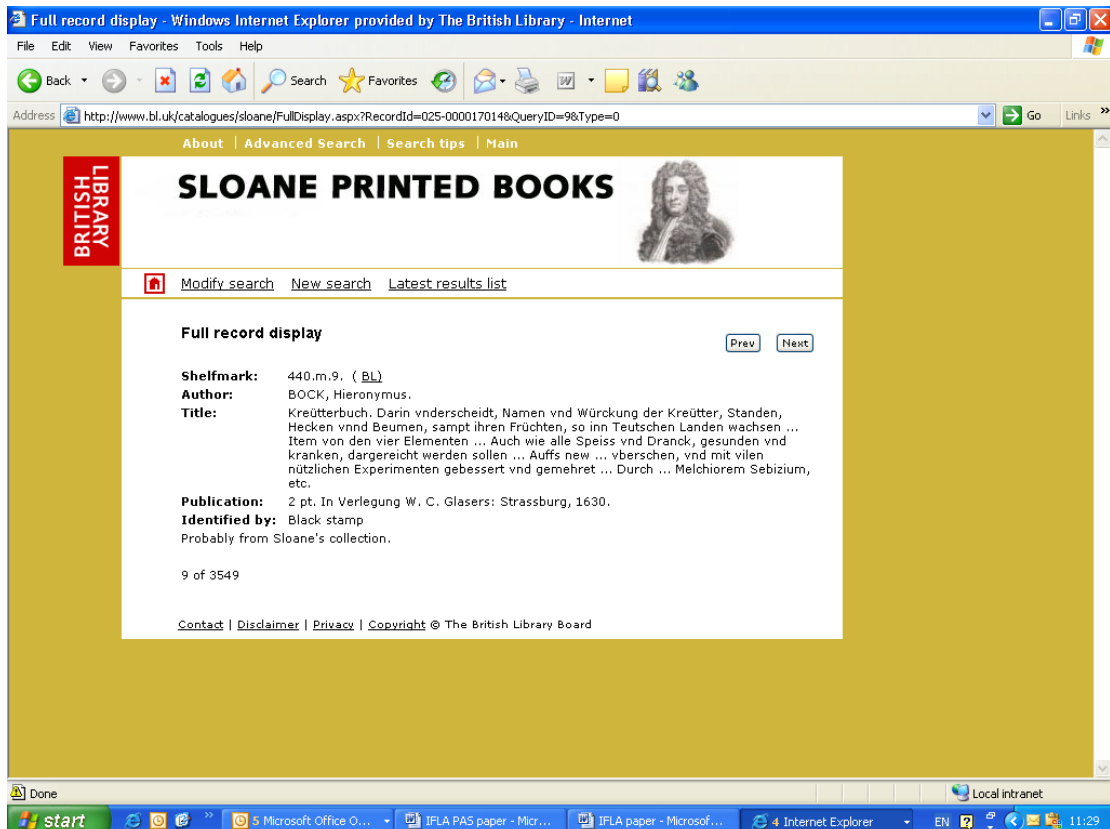


Fig.13

Further enhancement of entries will be possible in due course, by the addition of subjects and genres. The genre function has been used so far for oriental material, maps and atlases and Slavonic-language books.

### Previous owners

Sloane's library includes single items, large parts, or possibly even the entirety, from other libraries. He purchased extensively at the auctions of important libraries. At present, the catalogue records over 500 previous owners of books in his collection. This represents already a valuable resource for the study of the transmission of knowledge and the interaction between collectors. Two of the most numerous previous owners are illustrated (Fig.14): Joseph Fenton, an otherwise little-recorded London surgeon, c. 1565- 1634 (275 books), and Jean-Baptiste Colbert, 1619-83, Louis XIV's minister of finance, whose library was sold in 1728 (107 books).

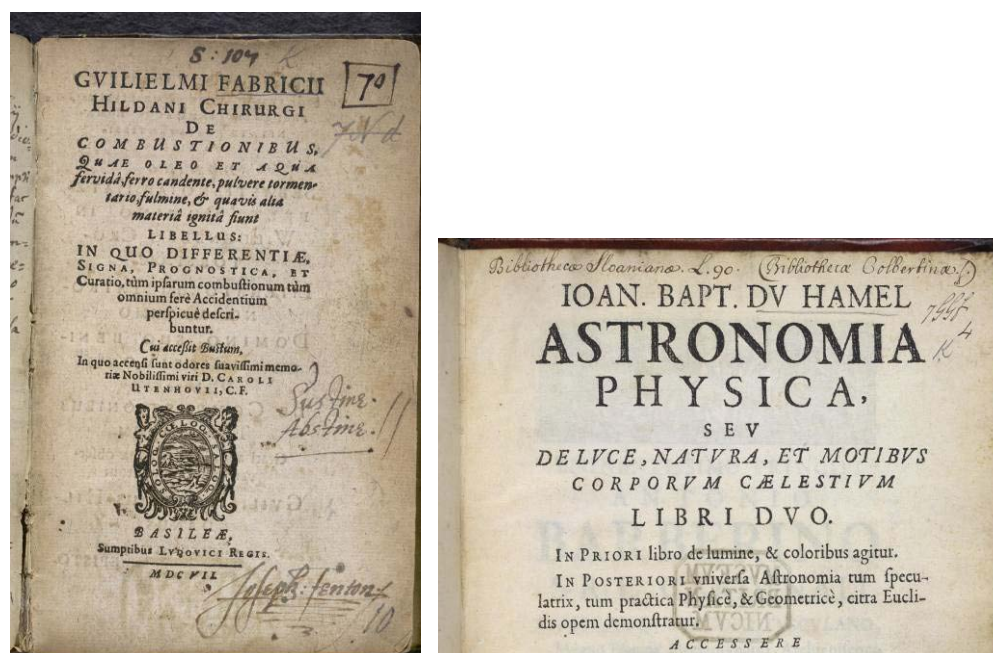


Fig.14

Many previous owners were medical practitioners: to mention only a few names as examples, Walter Charleton, physician 1619-1707; Charles Bernard, 1650-1711, surgeon to Queen Anne; Francis Bernard, 1627-1698, physician to Charles II, whose library was sold by auction in 1698; Henry Stanley, Fellow of the College of Physicians, d. 1671, who often notes the price and place of his purchases. A number of French physicians were previous owners, among them Jacques Poirier de la Ramée, born at Amboise, qualified at Montpellier 1679 or 1680, practised at Tours and became court physician to Louis XV, died at Paris in 1718; and Rene Moreau, 1587-1656, specialist in hygiene and dietetics. Others were scientists: Sloane had books of John Doody, father of Samuel Doody, botanist and intimate of Ray, Petiver and Sloane; Robert Boyle, physicist and chemist, 1627-1691; of James Petiver, (1663-1718) London apothecary, and Fellow of the Royal

Society, famous for his study of botany and entomology; and of Robert Hooke, 1635-1703, scientist and initiator of microscopy. From William Godolphin, ambassador to Spain, who died in 1696, Sloane acquired many Spanish books; and many astronomical works from Edward Sherburne, poet and classicist, 1618-1702.

#### *Sloane books outside the British Library*

Since 2008 we have started to add to the catalogue Sloane books found in other libraries. Many of these are 'British Museum duplicates', sold by the Museum between 1769 and 1832. Typically, they bear the black British Museum stamp, with an additional stamp marked British Museum duplicate and the date of the disposal. Many library catalogues indicate the British Museum provenance, and we have followed up by inspecting the books for Sloane marks and other annotations. To date we have mainly concentrated on UK university libraries. Glasgow University Library, for example, has 7 Sloane books, most from the collection of William Hunter; Durham University Library has 16. The Royal Society in London has 55, most bought at the duplicate sale of 1830. Many other libraries do not include this information in the catalogue record, or may be unaware of the significance of the marks. Meetings such as this provide an opportunity to encourage colleagues to recognise Sloane provenance, and to notify the project. European and North American libraries do have many dispersed items from Sloane's collection and we would welcome information about them.

The single largest collection of Sloane books outside the British Library, estimated at over 1000 volumes, is at the Bodleian Library, Oxford. Uniquely, the great majority of these were donated by Sloane, as duplicates, during his lifetime. We have begun to list books at the Bodleian, firstly by using a transcript of the Bodleian Benefactors' Register kindly provided by Dr Will Poole, of New College, and secondly by scanning the shelves in areas containing a strong concentration of medical material. One of the most interesting features of this collection is that most are in contemporary bindings, whereas the majority of the British Library's Sloane material has been rebound at least once. Much remains to be done to assess the significance of these binding types, but we may soon have a much better picture of the contemporary appearance of Sloane's library. On the evidence at present, he did not commission expensive or uniform bindings, being content to retain simple calf, sheep or limp vellum structures. Any grand bindings in his collections were not commissioned by him but for previous owners: Colbert's books, for example, are found in red morocco, vellum or painted vellum.

Examination of Sloane's lifetime disposal of duplicates throws some light on the way he managed his large collection. He certainly had multiple copies of many items, some of which may have been acquired through the purchase of whole libraries, or mixed auction lots. He is said to have kept duplicate copies in his attic, and to have given duplicates to friends. But he also appears to have undertaken some large-scale clearance or rationalisation, either to reorganise the collection or to clear space for new material. Here too, further

work and comparison of Bodleian and British Library copies promises useful illumination of the management of his library.

### *Conclusion*

A study of this kind relies heavily on the survival of fragile physical evidence. Already much has been lost or damaged through natural degradation, environmental damage, poor handling and storage, poor recognition of the significance of manuscript marks, and possibly well-intended but ultimately destructive historic binding practices. It relies not only on the recognition of the significance of owners' marks but also the sharing of this information. Happily there is an increasing number of resources for provenance study which can help with this, and one of the aims of the Sloane Printed Books Project is to provide and make public images and background relating to pre-Sloane provenances.

The project to recreate Sloane's dispersed library, in common with many historical studies of libraries, has at its core a list of books. But it is a list which can be searched, manipulated and interrogated, and which is enhanced with information on acquisition, provenance, binding and condition which can be used to analyse how the library was built up and managed. The list of books is only the starting point for analysis, interpretation, comparison and interdisciplinary study.

At the present moment we are still working on the process of recreation. For the future historian there will be a rich resource to be mined for the intellectual and scientific history of the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, to be exploited by the historian of the transfer of knowledge, and to be tapped by the historian of individual owners and collectors whose libraries are represented within Sloane's collection. We must also link analysis of the library to the collecting and management of Sloane's object collections- much remains to be done here. The sheer size and scale of Sloane's collection is one reason why he has been little studied – but we have made a start.