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Thoughts on a Microfiche Roll Edition of The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci October 1983

A printed edition of a manuscript traditionally involves a) a facsimile of the original, b) a transcription and c) a translation. The limitation of such an edition is that the sequence of pages is fixed. An edition of a manuscript, (or rare book), or a microfiche roll, indexed by means of a small computer, permits multiple sequences.

This is particularly advantageous with an author such as Leonardo da Vinci. Individual printed editions of his manuscripts have divergent transcriptions, translations and frequently even different paginations. A microfiche roll edition, complemented by a home computer and multiple screens can display such variants simultaneously in the case of a single page and thus enable a precise comparison. In addition, different sequences of pages in various editions can be displayed.

New arrangements can also be introduced. Leonardo's notebooks frequently contain two to five themes on a single folio. If each folio of the manuscripts is identified with a series of catchwords (or searchwords) such as geography, geometry, mechanics or optics, a thematic presentation of the notes is possible. A reader will need merely to identify a) a searchword, say optics, and b) a particular manuscript, say Codex Atlanticus, and all folios pertaining to optics in this treatise can be displayed in sequence.

There is considerable debate concerning the dating of individual folios, particularly in the Codex Atlanticus and the Windsor Corpus. These variations, insofar as recorded in the secondary literature, can be fed into a computer. A reader can then request a display of different sequences of notes in a manuscript in accordance with alternative chronologies.

At present there is effectively no library, -- not even the Library of Congress, British Library, Bibliothèque Nationale or Göttingen --, which possesses all editions of Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks. Hence no scholar anywhere has ready access to every edition. This is a major factor why serious scholarship on Leonardo remains so rare.

A microfiche roll edition will make the complete works of Leonardo readily available for the first time in history, and thereby make feasible a hitherto unrealistic project: a critical new transcription and translation of the complete works first into English and then into other major languages. (To date there is no complete translation, not even in Italian or English).

Once a microfiche roll copy has been made an editor can prepare a search programme, including preliminary catchwords for each folio. A team of c. 30 scholars can be found. Each scholar will receive a personal copy of the microfiche roll of the complete works. In return these scholars will commit themselves to editing and translating all writings devoted to a specific theme in which they are expert.

Dr. Kenneth Keele, in his exemplary edition of *The Corpus of Anatomical Studies in the Collection of Her Majesty the queen at Windsor Castle* has introduced a new standard for future editions. On every folio he has numbered each figure in Arabic numerals and each text in Roman numerals (fig. 1). That which he has done for two hundred folios (400 pages), a future team of thirty scholars will do for the remaining c. 6,100 pages. Their transcriptions and translations will then be checked by a small committee and coordinated by a general editor.

A systematic edition and translation will prepare the way for detailed studies of individual themes analogous to those of the present author concerning perspective and optics. As a result general searchwords such as optics can be further subdivided into specialized themes: eye and vision, and in turn parts of the eye: cornea, pupil, retina. This detailed classification can then be applied to individual pages and combined with variant datings. Hence a future reader will be able to go to a home computer, begin with a term, optics, find the subheading, pupil (of the eye), and request a display of all notes pertaining to pupils in the existing manuscripts. The reader will, moreover, have the privilege of choosing whether he wants this display a) in the page sequence that they appear in a said manuscript or b) in alternative chronological sequences (e.g. Calvi, Brizio, Pedretti).

The great advantage of such a microfiche roll edition on display screens is that it provides a systematic method for surveying material on a given topic and tracking down specific texts and diagrams. As such it complements and need not replace existing printed modes of study.

Printed studies by scholars traditionally contain many pages of footnotes referring to the sources cited. The sources in question are usually cited in very abbreviated form such that a critical reader needs to return to the actual source if a reference is to be checked. In future this dimension of footnotes will be obsolete. All references to Leonardo's work in a scholarly need merely be fed into a programme for a home computer. This programme will then search through the complete works and present either all references in sequence or a single reference on its own. As such the new edition can potentially serve as a type of primary concordance for subsequent secondary literature.

Machines for reading microfiche rolls, can readily be linked with a readerprinter. Hence when a scholar decides to study a given folio in detail, the equivalent of a photocopy can be supplied in less than a minute.

Arrangements could be made to prevent whole sequences of folios being made without permission. Individuals could indicate their interest in a specific sequence and the price level they are prepared to pay. This information which amounts to a pre-publication subscription for a book can then be collected by a publishing firm. When demand for a given sequence is sufficient a printed edition can be produced. In the long run microfiche editions might even stimulate book production. In any event they would open many new horizons for scholars in particular and the public at large.

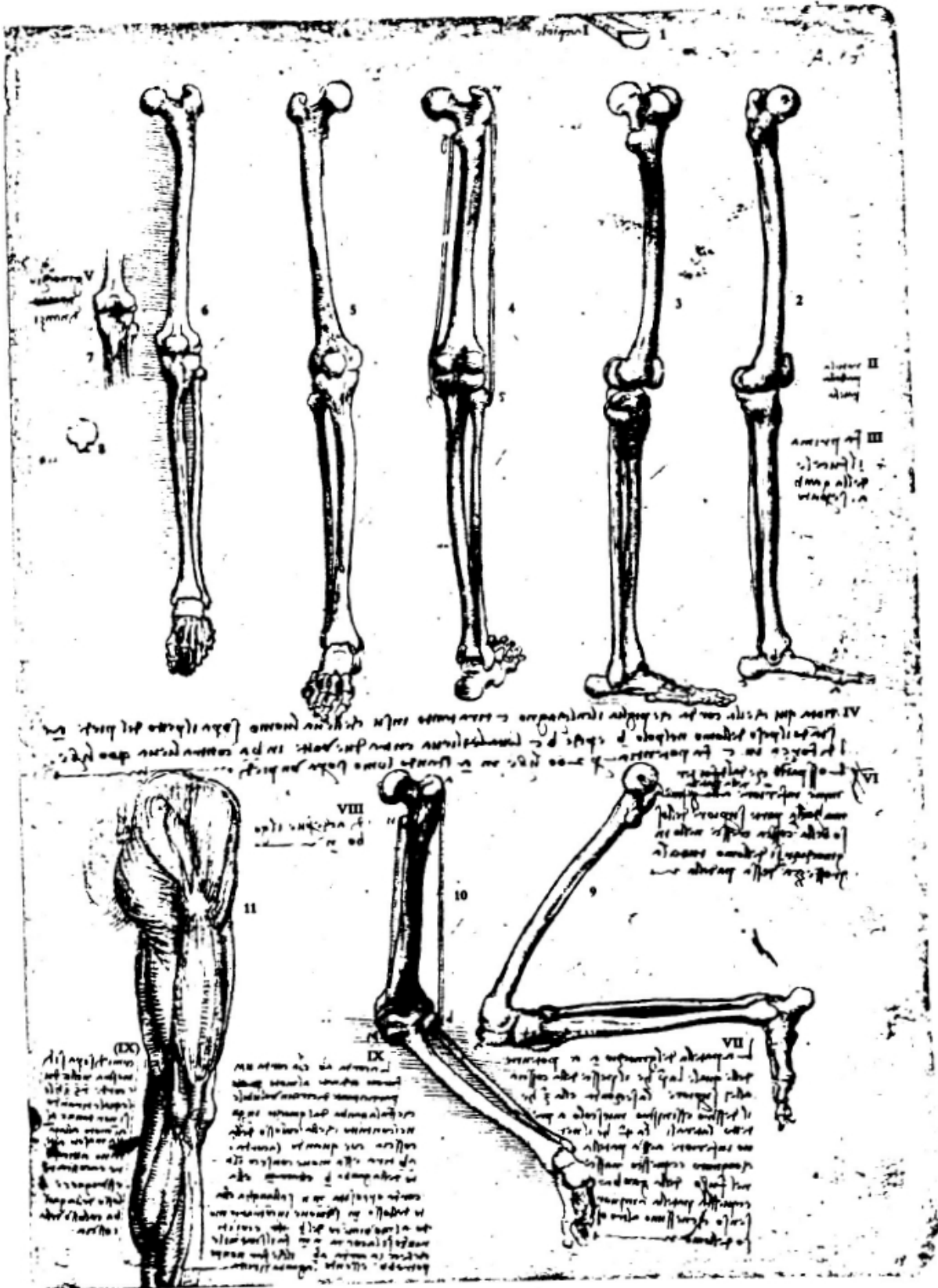


Fig. 1 Sample page from Dr. K. D. Keele's new edition of the Windsor Corpus.