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1. Why is the St. Catherine's monastery a special case?

The case of the St. Catherine's Monastery (picture 1) is a special one:

Important objects - the monastery's library holds a large, unique and diverse collection of about 3300 manuscripts (including the largest collection of Byzantine bindings to have survived),

Remote location - it is located in the desert of Sinai, Egypt and moving equipment (or people) to the monastery is both expensive and time consuming,

Lack of publications - there is very little published information about the monastery's library and almost none regarding the condition of the manuscripts.

Religious life - the monastery is one of the main centres of Orthodox Christianity and it is very active in terms of monastic life.



Picture 1: The monastery of St. Catherine.

2. Problems of managing the conservation project at the monastery

Condition survey:

the size of the collection demanded a condition survey (picture 2) to provide and analyse data for conservation management,

the data recorded during the condition survey (which is still in progress) changes and often becomes more detailed, because it was impossible to start with a precise design for the survey as so little was known about the collection,

the project is managed remotely (from London), hence the data recorded should be centrally stored and should be remotely accessible.

Practical problem:

the books are normally surveyed only once since access time to the library is limited, therefore all possible data needs to be recorded during the first recording (even data whose value may not become clear until the survey is completed).



Picture 2: Conservators surveying manuscripts at the library.

3. How research helps to solve management problems

The St. Catherine's research project at Camberwell College of Arts expands in two fields as explained next.

Byzantine/Greek book-binding:

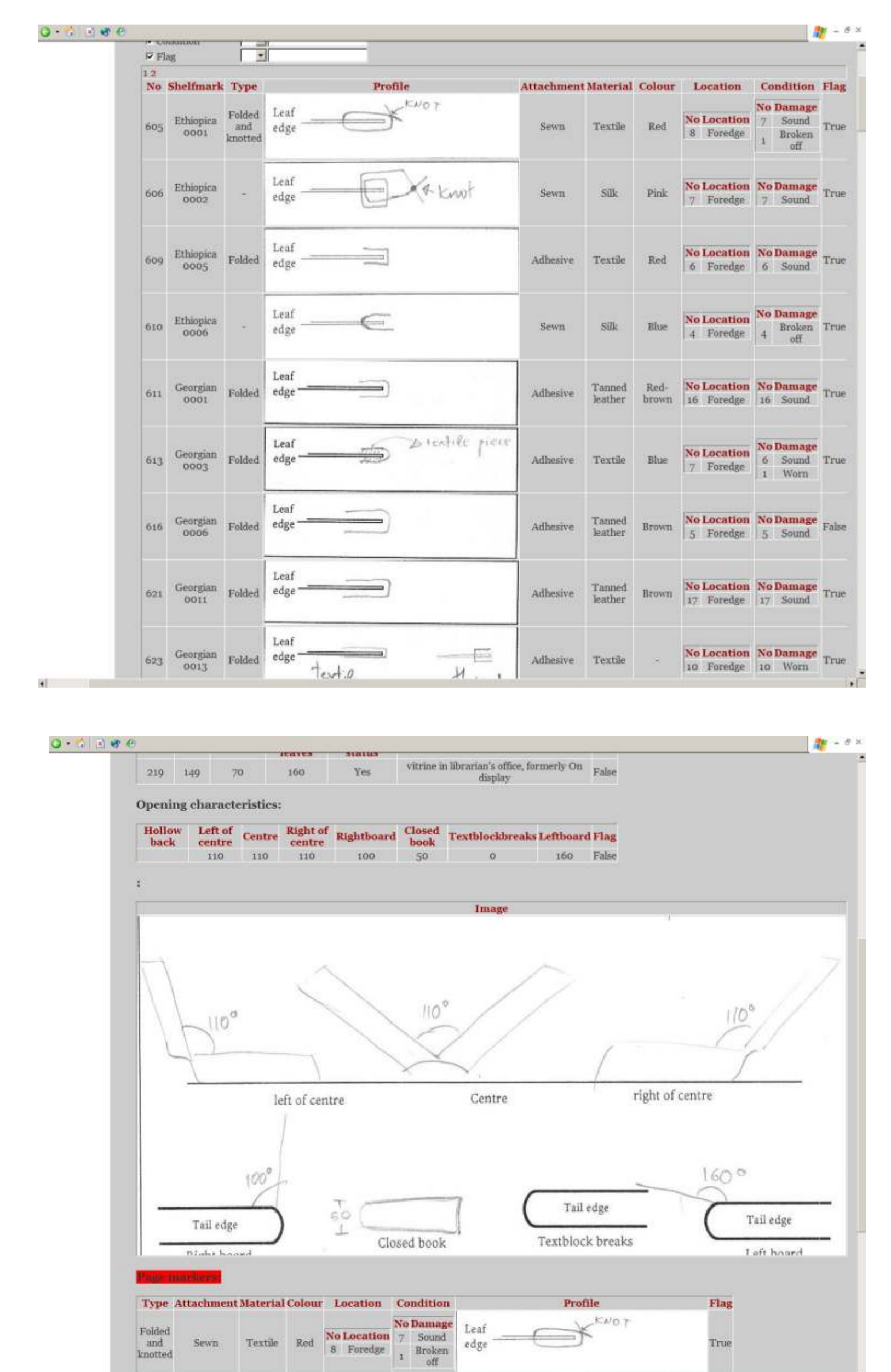
researchers categorise the recorded book-binding structures and materials which have so far been undocumented - this will identify objects in need of similar conservation treatment,

researchers also study the mechanical properties of the different book-binding structures and the data related to damage for each one - this will allow the prioritisation of the books according to damage.

Conservation data analysis:

researchers develop a database which can be expanded as the type of data develops - this will allow the recording of any undocumented type of book-binding (or type of damage) which might be observed in the future; also such a database can be remotely accessible but centrally administered,

researchers analyse the database records (picture 3) and quantify the results - this will allow more accurate estimation of cost and resources needed.



Picture 3: Screenshots of the conservation database.