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Introduction: Special Issue, Digital Paleography

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Introduction: Special Issue, Digital Paleography

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The ability to read, understand, and interpret primary sources has always been critical in all fields of medieval and early modern studies. Wider access to library archives and paleography training has increasingly facilitated investigation of otherwise incomprehensible manuscripts and handwritten documents, allowing students and scholars to perform more thorough research from a variety of textual, cultural, and historical perspectives. Paleography deals with the history of handwriting and scripts irrespective of where they appear: books, manuscripts, documents, and all types of objects including drawings, inscriptions, epigraphs, coins, vases, frames, and walls. A text (and its handwriting) is the socio-cultural product of a specific time and a specific space. Paleographic work also allows scholars to examine each document in its original historical and cultural contexts by studying the relationship between the containers, their scripts, and their contents. A paleographer is, therefore, a historian of written cultures.[1]

Students and researchers who lack the skills to understand original documents might shy away from archival work. Learning to decipher different historical scripts and mastering their numerous symbols and abbreviations require preliminary study of specialized manuals and reference sources. Even scholars with previous paleographic training often need to refresh their skills before traveling to a library for their archival research. As early modern historians, literary scholars, or art historians, we have all experienced, at least once, that feeling of sitting in front of a handwritten document, crucial to our work, wondering what it is "telling" us and wishing we could decipher what that particular scribe wrote, perhaps in a rush. Printed paleography manuals and

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1. See among others Armando Petrucci, *Prima Lezione di Paleografia* (Bari: Gius. Laterza & Figli, 2002) and Jean Mallon, *Paléographie romaine* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, Instituto Antonio de Nebrija, de Filología, 1952).

dictionaries of abbreviations, created to support paleographic work, quickly became inseparable companions, patiently paged through by researchers before and during their archival visits. The advent of the Internet and the increasing proliferation of online resources and digital humanities projects, especially in the field of manuscript studies, have slowly but steadily changed the way researchers perform their work. Since the late 1990s and the early 2000s, several digital projects related to the study of manuscripts and their scripts have offered increasing digitization of primary and secondary sources on paleography and codicology.[2] One of the earliest examples is *Medieval Paleography on the Web*, an online reference book for the study of medieval primary sources developed between 2001 and 2005 by University of Leicester Centre.[3] This website included course materials and other pedagogical resources.

While these early projects still maintained a lot of the characteristics of traditional printed volumes, online resources today are changing the way we teach and research in the fields of codicology, diplomatics, and paleography. Traditional paleography training is grounded on a methodology based on practice and exercise; to develop a "paleographic eye," researchers need to acquire knowledge of the history of scripts, allowing them to locate different hands in place and time, compare them, and finally memorize them. The visual and interactive nature of online paleography training and the digital possibility for simultaneously comparing hands of transcriptions and individual letter forms help this process of visual memorization.

2. Many of the first printed paleography manuals and dictionaries have been digitized and are at least partially available online. The Cappelli dictionary of Latin abbreviations (*Dizionario di abbreviature latine e italiane*), for example, was first published in print in 1899 and, after several re-prints and translations, was digitized by Google Books in 2015. An English translation of the Introduction is also available online: Adriano Cappelli, "The Elements of Abbreviation in Medieval Latin Paleography," trans. David Heimann and Richard Kay (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 1982), kuscholarworks.ku.edu/bitstream/handle/1808/1821/47cappelli.pdf. Digital-born searchable versions of the Cappelli dictionary are also available in different languages: the University of Zurich, for example, recently launched a website—Cappelli Online—in which they compiled and crowdsourced most of the Cappelli's information into a searchable database (adfontes.uzh.ch/en/ressourcen/abkuerzungen/cappelli-online).

3. Now discontinued, the original URL was paleo.anglo-norman.org. Archived versions of the site can be accessed through the Internet Archive WayBack Machine (e.g., the 2016 version of the "Objectives" page discussing goals and contexts of the project: web.archive.org/web/20061205192314/http://paleo.anglo-norman.org/medfram.html).

The reviews collected in this special issue cover a limited but representative number of digital paleographic resources: from completed projects paving the way to further developments in the field (DigiPal, Spanish Paleography, Thélème) to newly launched and still in progress websites and tools (Scripto, DASH, French Renaissance Paleography). These digital paleography projects contribute to the field, and in general to humanities pedagogy and research, in at least four different ways: they allow large-scale digitization of documents and manuscripts, providing access to historically relevant and previously undigitized materials (DASH, Thematic Pathways); they incentivize pedagogical training in reading, contextualizing, and understanding primary sources, both theoretically and practically (French Renaissance Paleography, Spanish Paleography, vHMML School, Thélème); they facilitate collaborations and crowd-sourcing initiatives to transcribe historical materials (EMMO, Scribes of the Cairo Geniza); and they create new paths in paleographic and codicological research through the use of established digital standards (such as IIIF image viewers) or the development of new digital tools and methods to study and compare scripts and graphs (DigiPal, Scripto).

vHMML School is a website developed by the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library. In his review of the project, Christopher Fletcher underlines how the strongest aspects of the project are its pedagogical materials and tools, combining theory and practice around a variety of scripts: Latin, Syriac, and Arabic. The main potential improvement the reviewer sees is implementation of materials and resources geared towards users unfamiliar with manuscripts and paleography. French Renaissance Paleography is a project edited by the Center for Renaissance Studies at the Newberry Library. In her analysis, Elizabeth Hebbard underlines the quantity and quality of newly digitized French primary sources provided by the site, searchable by time period, place of production, and script type. The reviewer also highlights the pedagogical potentials of the implementation of the T-Pen transcription software and contextual paleographical materials: this pedagogical potential could be further developed, as the reviewer suggests, by a re-organization of the website's design and the integration of additional content. The École Nationale des Chartes' Thélème: Techniques pour l'Historien en Ligne; Études, Manuels, Exercices, Bibliographies is another example of a digital pedagogical resource for the study of French scripts. Laura Morreale discusses the invaluable content in terms of historical and paleographical introductions written by experts in

French vernacular paleography. Precisely on account of the high quality of its content and its significant potential in the teaching of paleography and diplomatics, the reviewer suggests that a second edition of the project would profit from the implementation of technological and design updates.

Focusing on another romance language, the Spanish Paleography Digital Teaching and Learning Tool was developed by the Dominican Studies Institute at CUNY. In her review of the project, Susanna Allés-Torrent shows how the website focuses on pedagogical goals, proposing a number of examples of Spanish historical documents and scripts, greatly complemented by contextual information. A future improvement mentioned by the reviewer is the possibility of updating the technical side of the site: adding, for example, the possibility of manipulating and annotating images. Switching to non-Latin scripts, Digital Analysis of Syriac Handwriting (DASH) is a website developed by the Center for Interdisciplinary Digital Research at Stanford Libraries. In reviewing the DASH project, David Calabro positions it among newly developed digital resources for the study of Syriac manuscripts and scripts. DASH has the advantage of providing access to the world's largest database of Syriac manuscripts and of integrating commonly used digital standards like the IIIF framework and the Mirador image viewer. Calabro suggests the potential for increasing its searchability by expanding the mostly diachronic search options. A multi-script resource, Thematic Pathways on the Web: IIIF Annotations of Manuscripts from the Vatican Collections was newly launched in late 2019 thanks to an international collaboration between the Vatican Library and Stanford Libraries. The most valuable features recognized by Alberto Campagnolo are the access to thousands of newly digitized manuscripts from the Vatican Library's archives available on the BAV's Digital Library, the use of standards like IIIF framework and Mirador image viewer, and extensive introductions and historical contextualization written by experts in the fields of Latin and Greek paleography.

Scribes of the Cairo Geniza is a crowdsourcing project developed by the University of Pennsylvania Libraries and the Zooniverse team. Gary Rendsburg underlines how this project has the merit of engaging "ordinary people" in the transcription of the vast Cairo Geniza documents collection. The website in its Zooniverse environment provides a set of tools and documents to aid the readers (and transcribers), facilitating a highly collaborative environment with the option to switch between English, Hebrew, and Arabic as the main languages of

the site. Another crowdsourcing initiative, Early Modern Manuscripts Online, is part of a series of websites developed by the Folger Shakespeare Library regarding the transcription of primary sources. Whitney Sperrazza explains how the project provides access to hundreds of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century documents and books, as well as transcriptions and rich metadata, using the Folger's Dromio transcription platform. Intended for expert and non-expert audiences, the project also aims to create "digital communities" of users who take full advantage of the site's materials and potentially produce "new work" using its resources.

DigiPal was a project developed between 2010 and 2014 at Kings College in London. In my review of the project, I recognize its groundbreaking role in developing the field of digital paleography, and its two-fold goal: providing a reusable framework of software tools for the study of medieval handwriting (later developed into Archetype) and using this framework to provide access to highly annotated and contextualized images of eleventh-century English vernacular scripts. The last review in this special issue is dedicated to Scripto, a paleographic tool for the transcription of historical documents, recently updated by a team of developers at George Mason University. In his review of the tool, Anthony Guidone shows how its interface is designed to facilitate users' transcriptions with options to manipulate the images and customize screen layouts. The core principle of the software is crowdsourcing: its Omeka plug-ins facilitate large- and small-scale transcription projects allowing users to create profiles and actively collaborate.

The projects reviewed in this special issue masterfully showcase state-of-the-art resources currently available for teaching and researching historical scripts and their material and textual contexts. While providing a window into the current state of the field of digital paleography, they also shed a light on future possibilities: from advancements in character recognition and the potential to computationally recognize documents transcribed by the same hand, to improvements in digital environments enabling users to perform in-depth analysis of high-resolution images in highly collaborative settings. As the field continues to grow with the advancement of technology and the increasing uses of tablets and mobile devices, digital paleography continues to provide support for traditional face-to-face instruction, to assist scholars visiting archives, and, ultimately, to allow new discoveries in terms of historical scripts, scribes, and scribal contexts.