Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme

Stewart, Columba, project dir. vHMML School. Other

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vHMML School. Other.
Collegeville, MN: Hill Museum and Manuscript Library, 2018. Accessed 30 January 2020.
vhmmlschool.org.

At a time when the formal study of paleography has all but disappeared from academic humanities departments, there has been a concerted effort to develop digital resources providing premodern scholars with this vital skill. For the most part, this work has been done by cultural institutions with rich collections of the very materials that require training in paleography to read—including the Folger Shakespeare Library (Dromio) and the Newberry Library (French Renaissance Paleography, Italian Paleography). Another prominent member of this list is the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library (HMML), an institution that has long supported the study of the premodern world with its impressive collection of manuscripts (both physical and digital) from Europe, Asia, and Africa.

HMML's efforts to make these sources available to scholars and the public continues with vHMML School, a website dedicated to introducing the study and practice of paleography for three different language traditions: Latin, Syriac, and Arabic. vHMML School serves, in a sense, as the practical component of the institution's flagship website, vHMML, insofar as it offers users tools and resources for reading the digitized images of manuscripts HMML has put online. A new version, more explicitly focused on paleography, was launched in November 2018, with "additional lessons and improved tools for transcription, according to the "About" page on the site. The site was built on Wix, a cloud-based development platform, and features numerous images of manuscripts (and some microfilms of manuscripts), which are hosted by Amazon Web Services and viewed using the OpenSeaDragon viewer. The online transcription exercises use CKEditor, with additional interactive content for Latin exercises that uses embedded code from H5P.org.

vHMML School is geared towards introducing users to "the sciences of codicology and paleography," and, to a somewhat lesser extent, manuscripts as cultural artifacts. The resource was clearly designed to be accessible to a general public; nothing on the homepage gives the impression that it is intended for

scholars only. The site is for anyone interested in learning about scripts or manuscripts in general (see Fig. 1).
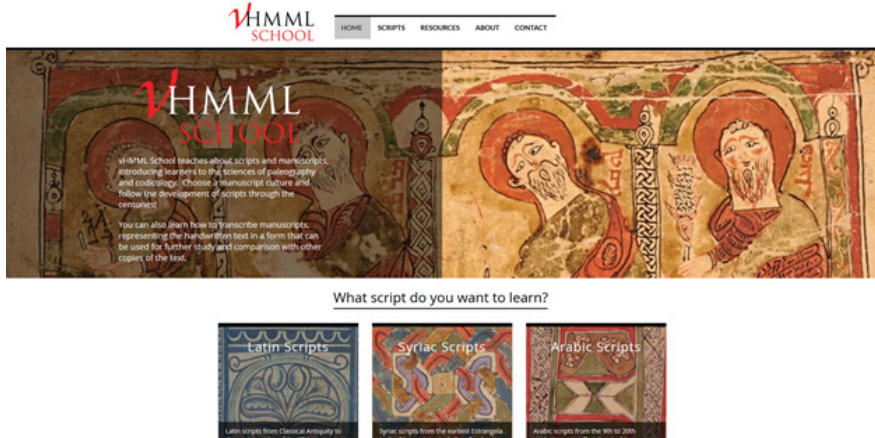

Figure 1. The *vHMML School* homepage.

The homepage links to other resources from vHMML—such as a dictionary of technical paleographical and codicological terms (vHMML Lexicon), a repository of manuscript images with accompanying metadata (vHMML Folio), and an online bibliography of printed materials related to paleography and codicology (vHMML Reference)—that would help novice users familiarize themselves with the content of the site.

Paleography training is unquestionably the centerpiece of vHMML School. The scripts available for study reflect HMML's collection strengths in manuscripts from across the world. The content for each language is subdivided into various categories of scripts from different historical periods, from classical antiquity through the twentieth century. After choosing a script category, users encounter up to three choices for engaging with them. Every script on the site is accompanied by a "lesson," which provides details about the particular characteristics of the script and its historical development. Many scripts are accompanied by "exercises": short quizzes (the longest one has three questions) on particular variants of a script described in the lesson. For example, exercise 1 on the Latin Gothic Textualis script asks the user to determine which of two

manuscripts shown is earlier, based on the lesson's description of the change in letter forms (see Fig. 2).

Exercise 1
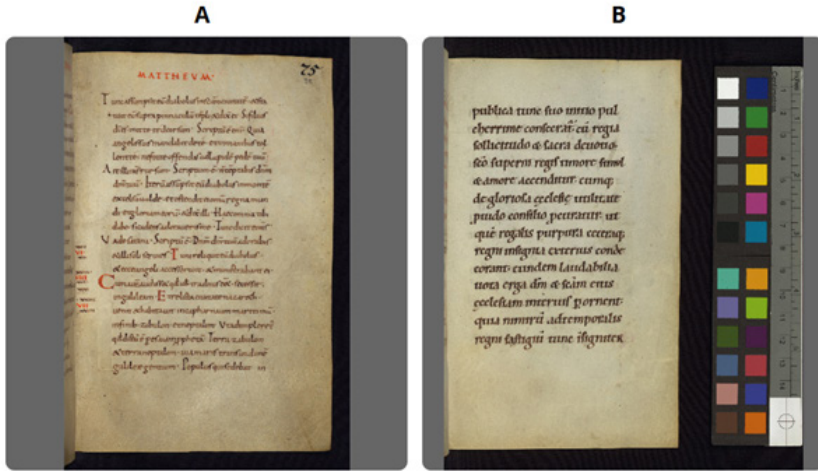
Figure 2. An exercise for the Latin Gothic Textualis script.

Finally, in many cases users may try "transcriptions," which offer the opportunity to transcribe selected passages and check their work against an "answer key" provided by HMML staff.

By far, the Latin script has the most robust presence on the website, with eight different script categories (some, such as Visigothic and Beneventan, include more than one script), each one complete with exercises and transcriptions. The lessons here are quite detailed and richly interspersed with manuscript images, with attention paid to writing supports, the historical context behind each stage of Latin paleography, and the ways in which the

scripts developed into different forms over time. There is less detail to be found in the Syriac lessons, and still less in the Arabic, although that is not necessarily an oversight. For instance, most of the Arabic examples show the Naskh script, which has been fairly stable over the centuries and remains very similar in appearance to printed Arabic, so there is less ground to cover in an overview.

The site is, in general, easy to use. The images of the manuscripts are all presented with an interactive interface, allowing the user to zoom in and out and to rotate the images as needed (see Fig. 3).
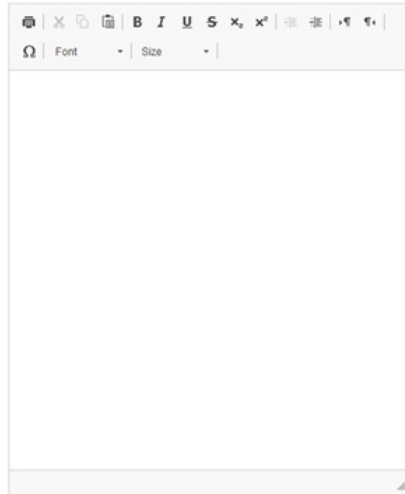

Figure 3. A transcription exercise for the Estrangela script of Syriac.

Users accessing the site on laptops or desktops, however, can sometimes find themselves manipulating the images without meaning to if they use a scroll wheel, but the manuscript image can always be restored by clicking on the

"home" icon. The transcriptions are completed in a text box immediately next to the image; usefully, the text box is equipped with the ability to manipulate fonts, create paragraphs, and insert special characters to make the transcribed text match the manuscript as much as possible. Perhaps most importantly, the transcription can also be printed for future reference.

Although the site has been designed to welcome anyone interested in these historical scripts (and non-scholars certainly have much to learn from it), it is clear that the content is best suited for more advanced scholars who are looking to do primary research with historical materials, either in physical or digital archives. The basic introduction to the Syriac script, for example, states that "It is assumed that users are familiar with the basic ductus of Syriac letter shapes"; the site itself does not supply that information if a user is lacking it. Moreover, the lessons can be very lengthy, so users without any pre-existing knowledge would have to work through a fair amount of material to find the information they needed. Non-specialist users could also have benefited from the presence of more detailed metadata for each manuscript image within the resource (although that information is available in vHMML Folio). In other words, vHMML School remains a tool most effectively used by scholars with pre-existing knowledge of premodern manuscript culture who are looking to hone their paleography skills.

That said, the need for precisely this kind of training is dire indeed, and it seems clear that future scholars of premodern studies will increasingly rely on digital resources to prepare themselves for archival work. Without question, vHMML School fulfills this need quite well. Thanks in large part to its integration with the other resources on vHMML, the website offers what amounts to a digital paleography seminar, combining technical knowledge with practical experience transcribing historic scripts. On its own, the site goes a long way in supplying students without any other institutional support with the training necessary to approach working with historical documents in the Latin, Syriac, and Arabic traditions with a measure of confidence. At the same time, the website could easily be integrated into actual paleography courses, offering examples of important scripts that are not widely available elsewhere. As with many similar digital resources, vHMML School allows access to paleography resources that may not be available in all institutions. Indeed, as a free and open website, scholars can access the site anywhere and at any time, including in special collection reading rooms. While it remains true that there is no

substitute for expert-led, hands-on training in paleography, vHMML School and its fellow digital paleography resources will play a major role in providing the technical training required to keep the many fields of premodern studies thriving in the future.

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Newberry Library

Zecher, Carla, project dir.
French Renaissance Paleography. Other.
Chicago: Newberry Library, 2016. Accessed 1 January 2020.
paleography.library.utoronto.ca.

French Renaissance Paleography unites recently digitized medieval and Renaissance manuscripts with tried and tested tools for manuscript study. A collaborative effort among four partner institutions—the Newberry Library, the University of Toronto Libraries, the Center for Digital Humanities at Saint Louis University, and ITER: Gateway to the Middle Ages and Renaissance— the development of the site was supported by a Mellon grant. The site features an archive of research and study materials comprising high-quality images and descriptions of 107 manuscripts in Old and Middle French dating from 1300 to 1700, but this count does not include additional items, like maps and calligraphy manuals also presented among the site resources, that bring the total of digitized objects to 125. The manuscripts are evenly divided across three difficulty levels for paleographers and cover a broad range of document genres and subjects. Most were copied in France, which the project team divides into three large regions, each of which is represented equally in the materials. The vast majority of the documents come from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with about a quarter of them having been copied before 1500. Most of the digitized materials are held in the Newberry Library, but collections from ten different North American institutions are represented. The site identifies a broad intended audience of students, researchers, librarians, calligraphers, and designers. In fact, given the date range of documents made available via this project, the audience could be even larger than the title suggests. Indeed, the manuscripts and their contents are of genuine interest to all who study