



David Hamidović, Claire Clivaz, and Sarah Bowen Savant, eds.

Ancient Manuscripts in Digital Culture: Visualization, Data Mining, Communication

Digital Biblical Studies 3

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Clark R. Bates
University of Birmingham

For scholars of the humanities, the technology of the last decade has revealed an increasing change in the rules by which research is to be conducted. As John Shaw noted in *Harvard Magazine*, “Scholars traditionally begin projects by figuring out what the good research questions are in a given field, and connecting them with others interested in the same topics; they then gather and organize data; then analyse it; and finally, disseminate their findings through teaching or publication.”¹ Yet with the creation of “digital” humanities—the growing use of digital technology, graphic imaging, and computing software to gather, access, and distribute information—the unwritten rules that govern the traditional approach to research are facing changes of order, compass, and reach. The practice of digitally imaging manuscripts, once left to research centers in Germany and the United Kingdom, has become a widespread phenomenon to the extent that one might be rightly bewildered if unable to find a particular manuscript available online. The advent and increase of open-access publishing and peer sharing of collation tools has circumvented the standard form of publication by sharing research to the community while it is in progress and without hope of financial gain. Whether welcomingly or begrudgingly, academics in the modern age must face this change head on if they are to evolve with the times.

1. John Shaw, “Humanities, Digitized: Reconceiving the Study of Culture,” *Harvard Magazine* (May–June 2012): 42.

It is the recognition of these advancements that the Digital Biblical Studies series seeks to address, particularly with an eye on their impact in the studies of the ancient Near East and its material culture. This third volume of that series gathers twelve chapters of contributions, each unique in content but aligned in the shared theme of using digital technology to explore “the effect of the digital turn on the practices, epistemologies and paradigms of Humanities scholarship” (5, 17). These chapters are wisely divided in three parts, organizing the chapters by shared themes. In part 1, “Visualising the Manuscripts,” authors presents their methodologies for using digital imaging tools in the capturing, preserving, and researching of manuscripts. Part 2, “Data Mining and Visualisation,” addresses the larger theme of digital culture upon ancient manuscripts from the lens of language processing and transcription. Lastly, part 3, “Communication,” emphasizes the pedagogical use of digital tools in learning about material culture. Dividing the text in this way provides an ease of access to a desired category, enabling the selective reader to prioritize the work by discipline rather than gleaning what can be known from chapter title or abstracts.²

Those acquainted with other volumes in this series will find a thème familier in the contribution of Liv Ingeborg Lied, which emphasizes the media shift from tangible, material studies to digital and visual agencies. While the essay is admittedly “forward-gazing” and “does not provide fixed conclusions” (17), Lied rightly acknowledges the great benefit of digitization practices in bringing the physical manuscript to the researcher, rather than having to rely on a printed critical edition or, worse yet, a mere siglum in an apparatus. This alone is enough to heap praises on the technological advancements discussed in this volume; however, Lied stretches this benefit beyond the tangible in an effort to broach philosophical queries about how future apparatuses might include features such as the *scriptio continua* of Greek papyri or the paratextual features seen in the abundance of medieval manuscripts. While these questions may be intellectually stimulating in the abstract, they contradict the raison d’être for current critical apparatuses. If the goal of the apparatus is to provide supplemental information from the witnesses used in creating a critical edition of the primary text, then one fails to see how citing manuscript features unrelated to the main text would be of value. Of course, one could suggest changing the present methodology, but this would require redefining what is meant by the term *critical apparatus*.

In the second part of this volume Paul Robertson presents a polythetic analysis of Pauline Epistles compared with other classical works in his chapter. Rather than classifying certain texts on the basis of ethnicity, genre, or other “essentialized categories of literature” (155), Robertson attempts to show textual affinity through methods that are quantifiable, transparent, and more valuable for the visualization of the results (154). In calling this approach “polythetism” (157), what is meant is the foregoing of traditional literary classifications for a smaller set of essentialized criteria. This

2. Editor note: The book under review is open access. For a list of, and access to, all the chapters within it, see <https://brill.com/view/title/34930>.

approach finds relevance in all research governing categories wherein definite boundary lines may be unclear—society, history, and literature being primary here. Robertson selects the eight accepted Pauline Epistles, Seneca’s *Natural Questions*, the New Testament Epistle to the Hebrews, 4 Maccabees, Epictetus’s *Discourses*, and Philodemus’s *On Death* and *On Piety*. Given that these texts have no “direct textual influence” (159), Robertson is able to assemble a list of nineteen essential categories based on literary style (e.g., the use of hyperbole, irony, pathos [160–61]). The results of this comparison are visualized graphically, revealing the various areas of overlap across historical classifications that would have prevented such considerations. Robertson’s work should be commended on its forward thinking and presentation, as it exposes the reader to new methods of literary relationship not typically considered, but a question still remains as to whether such overlap is ultimately helpful, given that the broader the syntactical categories are made, the greater the overlap becomes. Without any direct connection between texts, it remains difficult to fathom how this form of relationship might be more beneficial than those already in use. Nevertheless, it is an avenue that deserves deeper exploration and contributes to the discussion of the categorization of ancient texts.

In the volume’s third section, authors Heather Dana Davis and Christopher A. Rollston expound upon the pedagogical benefits digital technology has brought to the field of epigraphy. In a particularly encouraging and educational chapter they briefly recount the history of the field and the various hurdles to classroom training, especially in those environments where access to physical artifacts is an impossibility. As with the closely related study of palaeography, for centuries, students of ancient materiality have had to rely on publications that included drawings or facsimiles of texts rather than seeing the actual artifact. This left learners beholden to the accuracy of the copyist and the quality of the publication (192–93). Many readers will be familiar of the all-too-common illegibility of such representations, whether from poor photography or poor reproduction on the page. With the advent of digital imaging, these afflictions are quickly becoming a plague of the past.

Digital images can be manipulated with ease, enlarging desired sections of inscriptions for closer examination, while photographic techniques such as Multi-Spectral Imaging and Reflectance Transformation Imaging enable viewers to see writing that is no longer visible to the naked eye (195). Even more intriguing is the use of software such as Adobe Illustrator to not only enhance the image being used but to enable students with a stylus to trace the inscription and create their own reproductions. In so doing, students also acquire a higher proficiency with the script itself. Many examples are provided, with exemplary color images to explain the procedures used by the authors. While it is recognized that a singular course in epigraphy, even with these added resources, cannot create a skilled epigrapher, the benefit of this technology in teaching the foundational principles essential to that expertise cannot be denied. There is much to be lauded about this approach and its potential use in other areas, particularly the palaeography of all eras and regions.

Reviewing an edited volume is fraught with limitations, not the least of which is accurately—or even adequately—representing the multiple contributions contained within. By selecting three examples from the three sections of this text, the breadth of the material has only been glanced over; however, I have also attempted to provide representatives that effectively convey the nature of their companion pieces. In like manner, it is difficult to widely recommend an edited volume, as the quality and content of each benefaction necessarily varies. The greatest contribution of this volume, and the Digital Biblical Studies series as a whole, is its sagacity of the present digital age. While researchers, students, and scholars of the humanities will likely only be drawn to those chapters that reflect their particular, individual interests, what Hamidović, Clivaz, and Savant offer to all readers is a robust introduction to the topography of digital humanities with multiple examples of its practical application, which is a welcome shift from the largely philosophical and theoretical methodology of other volumes in the series.