

## Chapter XX

# Computer and Information Systems in Latin Paleography Between Research and Didactic Application

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## Abstract

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*In this chapter the authors describe how ICT changed the way of approaching research and teaching for today's paleographers. First of all they report how new technologies changed the cataloging, the studying, and the spreading of information concerning ancient manuscripts all over the world. Next, the results of the experiences they carried out at the Faculty of Humanities are described: the first one concerns the creation of Web resources for teaching paleography; the second one is a database collecting data on women copyists in the Middle Ages; the third one is the practical application of a more general project called by the authors "Open Catalog"; the fourth and last one is an information system concerning the bibliography of ancient manuscripts. Finally, the authors describe how ICT introduced new research methods in paleography and especially how they made possible the creation of learning communities (i.e., learning, studying, and research communities).*

## Introduction

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The experiences the authors describe in this chapter were borne from the lucky meeting of the different fields of study and research they are involved in. One author is a researcher in didactic and technologies of education; the other is a professor of paleography. This last discipline, while studying and analyzing ancient charters and manuscripts (i.e., those written in the Middle Ages) demands that scholars and scientists have good knowledge and skills, at least in ancient languages (i.e., Greek, Latin, or Romance) and history (i.e., Roman and Medieval). In today's high schools and universities, where students' backgrounds in the above disciplines are unfortunately not very deep and solid, the teaching of paleography offers many questions and problems, and sometimes, intensive work correcting students' misconceptions and wrong ideas must be planned.

In recent years ICT intervened more and more in changing the approach a paleographer must have with his/her disciplinary field, and ICT literacy became one of the essential elements of students' background. Furthermore, in the authors' opinion, teaching and research cannot be separated, and a special care in the analysis of problems, the suggestion of solutions, and the development of instruments to be adopted is needed. The above remarks induced the authors to plan special instruments for paleographic research and to introduce their use also in everyday teaching.

The authors agree on the following main conclusion: the use of the new technologies and especially of ICT produces relevant and positive effects on the management of paleographic research and on the teaching of the same discipline. These positive results agree with what we were taught some years ago by American researchers on learning communities and can be improved by the adoption of a systematic use of ICT in all fields of medieval studies.

## Background

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Borne as a scientific discipline about three centuries ago, paleography is based on comparison. Dating and localizing a medieval script, as well identifying a scribe, are the paleographer's essential tasks on which all historical speculations are founded. In other words a paleographer has to answer the following typical questions: who, when, where wrote a charter or a manuscript between late antiquity and the invention of printing?

Comparison is a relatively simple task when writing examples are kept in the same library, but in the overwhelming majority of cases, they are located in different places, so one needs images to be compared. Before the photographic era the only resources beyond memory were drawings and prints, by which paleographers tried to reproduce the distinctive features of a script. From the end of the nineteenth century onwards, photographs and microfilm made graphic analysis enormously easier. Recently, the increasing number of digital reproductions in CD-ROMs or the Internet represented a virtual repository of images easily available to scholars.

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