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Medieval manuscript studies in the digital age

Medieval manuscript studies as a field has always been highly interdisciplinary, but over the past ten years in particular it has undergone a wide-ranging transformation under the influence of computer-assisted and natural scientific methods. These methods include distant reading, natural language processing, multispectral imaging, and biocodicology, among others, and their use is supported and driven by a critical mass of digital images made available online, as well as machine learning tools. Such methods enable scholars to produce and model new manuscript-related data at unprecedented scales – both very small and very large. But they also widen the gap between the material and the immaterial, distancing us from the very objects we study. Through the lens of this challenge, the traditional disciplines of codicology and palaeography acquire new significance. They represent key historical skills that are increasingly important (and rare) in increasingly hands-off research environments that rely on digital images.

However, manuscript studies are also re-orienting themselves around digital technologies and the natural sciences. Materiality is viewable on a large scale, through computer-assisted analysis of quire structures, pricking and ruling, or binding, to give only a few examples; and materiality is viewable on a tiny scale, through endoscopic cameras, microscopic analysis of ink, and relief mapping of membrane surfaces. These new facets are driving a paradigm shift in palaeography and manuscript studies, which are increasingly essential components of new research, rather than simply assisting historians as auxiliary sciences or *Hilfswissenschaften*. This is because manuscript studies are becoming a gateway to understanding and studying the materiality of heritage objects in a way that has not been possible before. We are not only asking new questions, but transforming how we think about manuscripts and thereby making manuscripts accessible to investigation across the full spectrum of sciences. This raises many possibilities and opportunities for manuscript historians.
