

AHRC ICT Methods Network Workshop

LARGE SCALE MANUSCRIPT DIGITIZATION

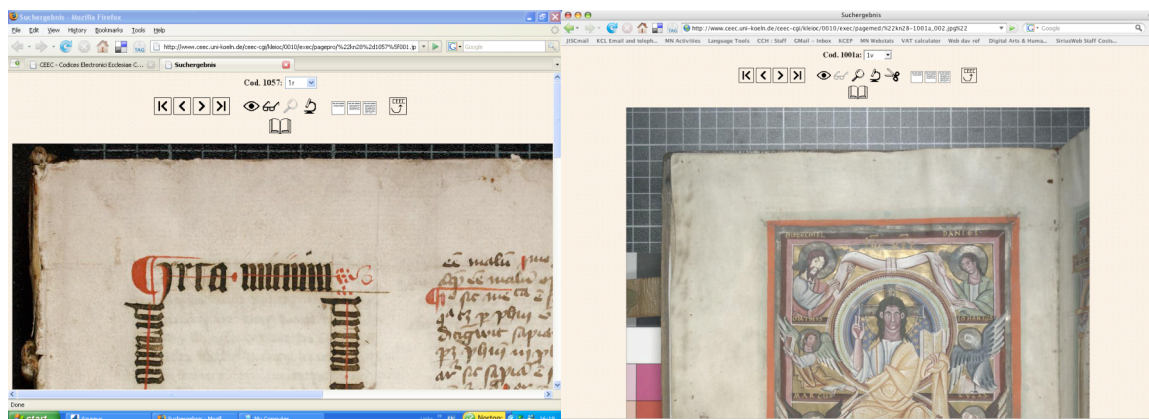
CENTRE FOR COMPUTING IN THE HUMANITIES, KING'S COLLEGE LONDON, 5 JUNE 2006

Advances in digital photographic technology, mass data store and networking capacity have in the last years reached the point where it is now possible to contemplate large scale digital photography of manuscript materials. However, such projects must be rigorously examined, as any programme would need to ensure that it could deliver the quality required while protecting the originals from any degradation through the digitization process. This one-day symposium examined the current situation in the UK with regard to the digitization of historical and literary manuscripts. This seminar invited experts from digitization projects in Europe who have worked on large-scale manuscript digitization initiatives, representatives of UK manuscript holding institutions, interested academic experts and digital humanities specialists to discuss the possibilities and implications of large-scale manuscript digitization. Presentations and discussions examined different methods of how to best achieve a high volume of digitization in a timescale that makes conservation safe, financially viable and academically useful.

Tools and Processes for Digitization

In terms of tools used for the digitization process, digital photography was the main focus of this workshop. The main issues for any large-scale digitization project are the standards and quality of the images and the speed at which they can be produced. Another issue examined was the cataloguing and metadata that is part of any large digitization project and which must be carried out in conjunction with the digital photography.

Methodologically, discussions were about library process and how this could work in the UK context of nationally-funded public libraries, university libraries, and a range of other types of public and private institutions which hold large collections of manuscripts.



A medieval manuscript from the Episcopal and Cathedral Library Cologne digitized as part of the Codices Electronici Ecclesiae Coloniensis (CEEC) project. Members of the CEEC project team participated in the workshop. <http://www.ceec.uni-koeln.de>

The Way Forward?

The event aimed to tackle contentious questions head on by bringing together both those committed to digitization as well as skeptics. There are some significant debates and issues to be ironed out before

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moving forward with mass digitization projects in the UK, but this seminar helped to bring key issues to the fore.

Digitization Leads to Historical Discoveries

There are some very exciting developments in historical and literary studies as the result of digitization of manuscripts. One of the most significant medieval studies discoveries of recent years has been the identification of Chaucer's scribe – Adam Pinkhurst, about whom we now know a great deal – by Professor Linne Mooney. This discovery would have been impossible without access to high quality digital images, which allowed Mooney to identify individual hands that worked on different manuscripts. Mooney's project, presented at the event, is also an example of how digitization can lead to new forms of collaboration. Having the detailed high quality digital images allowed for collaboration with other experts through the sharing of images via e-mail and post, making the discoveries with which she is credited possible.