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Conference report: Ancient Manuscripts and Virtual Research Environments

Claire Clivaz, Garrick V. Allen

► To cite this version:

Claire Clivaz, Garrick V. Allen. Conference report: Ancient Manuscripts and Virtual Research Environments. *Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies Bulletin*, 2020, *Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies Bulletin*, 6 (2), 10.25592/uhhfdm.8477 . hal-03046392

HAL Id: hal-03046392

<https://hal.science/hal-03046392>

Submitted on 1 May 2021

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Conference reports

Ancient Manuscripts and Virtual Research Environments

Lausanne, 10–11 September 2020

In the framework of the five-year Swiss National Science Foundation project MARK16, an online conference was organized by Claire Clivaz, the Principal Investigator of the project, in collaboration with Mina Monier (post-doctoral researcher) and Sara Schulthess (DH Scientist), both members of the MARK16 team (DH+, SIB, Lausanne, CH), and Garrick Allen (now University of Glasgow).

One of the main methodological challenges of the MARK16 project is to build a Virtual Research Environment (VRE) focused on the last chapter of the Gospel according to Mark (<<https://mark16.sib.swiss>>). Consequently, the topic chosen for this first MARK16 conference was to understand what changes when research on ancient manuscripts occurs in a VRE, especially in early Jewish and Christian literature, New Testament, and Classical studies. Because VREs offer access to diverse information regardless of geographical location, they continue to define the research landscape of the humanities in more complex ways. They serve as the new ‘covers’ of scientific objects, replacing the paper covers of printed books as signs of knowledge territories. As some have suggested, VREs are likely to become the default location for critical research and other cultural activities in the very near future.¹

The organizers invited researchers to think about how VREs enlighten particular manuscripts or manuscript cultures, how they differ from or supplement traditional research models, and what critical benefits or difficulties arise from using VREs. As a baseline, we defined VREs by using the 2013 definition by Leonardo Candela et al.:²

Virtual Research Environment (VRE) is used with a comprehensive scope, i.e., it represents a concept overarching all the environments cited above and identifies a system with the following distinguishing features: (i) it is a web-based working environment; (ii) it is tailored to serve the needs of a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991); (iii) it is expected to provide a community of practice with the whole

- 1 For the theoretical framework of the conference, see C. Clivaz, ‘The Impact of Digital Research: Thinking about the MARK16 Project’, *Open Theology*, 5/1 (2019), 1–12, <<https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2019-0035>>; G. V. Allen, ‘Digital Tools for Working with New Testament Manuscripts’, *ibidem*, 13–28, <<https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2019-0002>>.
- 2 L. Candela, D. Castelli, and P. Pagano, ‘Virtual Research Environments: An Overview and a Research Agenda’, *Data Science Journal*, 12 (2013), 75–81, here 75.

array of commodities needed to accomplish the community's goal(s); (iv) it is open and flexible with respect to the overall service offering and lifetime; and (v) it promotes fine-grained controlled sharing of both intermediate and final research results by guaranteeing ownership, provenance and attribution.

The call for papers and subsequent conference proved successful, gathering around 80 contributors and participants in an online event based in Lausanne (CH) on 10–11 September 2020. The meeting was initially planned to take place on the Dorigny campus, but was transformed in an online conference whose benefits were obvious for all participants. In all likelihood, the online meeting greatly increased participation. MARK16 has consequently decided to organize its second conference as an online meeting in June 2022, regardless of the status of the global COVID-19 health crisis.

The conference included thirteen invited long papers, three selected short papers, and ten selected posters with lightning talks. Classics and New Testament (NT) were particularly highlighted in the invited papers. Thus, Greg Paulson (Institut für Neutestamentliche Textforschung, Münster, DE) opened the conference with a paper entitled 'The Nestle-Aland as Open Digital Edition', drawing the main lines of what a new model of digital edited Greek New Testament could be. Four NT digital projects were also presented as invited papers. Garrick Allen offered an overview of the digital tools related to his ERC Starting Grant (*TiNT: Examining Interpretations of the New Testament*) with a paper entitled 'The New Testament in Virtual Research Environments: Titles, Greek Manuscripts, Data Querying', in collaboration with his colleagues from Dublin City University and the ADAPT Centre Owen Conlan, Declan O'Sullivan, and Clare Conran. H. A. G. Houghton and Catherine J. Smith (Institute for Textual Scholarship and Electronic Editing, University of Birmingham, UK) presented '*Codex Zacynthius*: Editing a Virtual Manuscript in the Digital Research Environment'. Martin Wallraff (University of München, DE) presented 'Paratexts to the Four Gospels: How to Impose Order in a Disorderly Field'. Andrew Smith (Shepherds Theological Seminary, USA) presented on 'Mining Manuscript Data in the New Testament Virtual Manuscript Room'. Finally, Claire Clivaz, Mina Monier, and Jonathan Barda (DH+ & Core-IT, SIB, Lausanne, CH) spoke on 'MARK16 as a VRE: Challenges and Opportunities in New Testament Studies'.

A number of invited papers focused on classical traditions beyond NT. Greek tradition was the main topic in the presentations by Ariane Jambé (University of Lausanne, CH), 'Digital Tools to Read an Homeric Manuscript'; Patrick Andrist (University of Munich, DE), 'Goals and Strategies for Developing a Manuscript Database with a Focus on Comparative Codicology'; Isabelle Marthot-Santaniello (University of Basel, CH), '*D-scribes* Project and Beyond—Building a VRE for Digital Paleography of Ancient Greek and Cop-

tic'. Greek literature was also the starting point for developing VREs and related methodologies presented in papers such as those by Thomas Köntges (University of Leipzig, DE), 'Livin' on the Hyperedge: Using Brucheion to Produce Digital Scholarly Editions as Hypergraphs'; Anna Foka, Kyriaki Konstantinidou, and Elton Barker (Uppsala University, Sweden), 'A Digital Periegesis—Annotating, Mapping and Linking Pausanias's *Description of Greece*'; Elpida Perdiki and Maria Konstantinidou (Democritus University of Thrace), 'Handling Big Manuscript Data'; Sara Schulthess (SIB, Lausanne, CH), 'The VRE of the Research Project HumaReC, some Lessons Learned'.

Latin literature in the context of VREs was also examined by multiple presenters: Francesca Galli and Elena Nieddu (Università della Svizzera italiana & Roma 3, IT), '*In Codice Ratio*: Using VREs in the Study of the Medieval Vatican Registers'; Marie-Agnès Lucas-Avenel and Marie Bisson (University of Caen, France), 'Why Do the Digital Critical Edition of a Latin Source? The Example of the *De Rebus Gestis Rogerii comitis* by Gaufrédus Malaterra' and Riccardo Macchioro (Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen, NL), '*Patristic Sermons in the Middle Ages* (PASSIM Radboud University): towards a Virtual Research Environment for the Study of Patristic Homiliaries'.

Antonio Loprieno, Kathrin Gabler, Elena Hertel, und Stephan Unter (University of Basel, CH) presented on 'Crossing Boundaries between Humanities and Informatics: the Case of Egyptian papyri'.

Four papers focused explicitly on the Digital Humanities from European and Swiss points of view. The emergent European Research Infrastructure OPERAS was represented by Suzanne Dumouchel (Huma-Num & OPERAS) and Yoann Moranville (DARIAH-EU & OPERAS) with a talk on 'Increasing impact of SSH research: Use cases of OPERAS services in the EOSC'. Erzsébet Tóth-Czifra (DARIAH-EU) also presented a contribution along these lines, entitled 'Rethinking Text, Techné and Tenure—VREs as an Evaluation and Peer-review Challenge in Humanities'. The Swiss Research Infrastructures in Humanities were represented by Ann Harding (Switch, University of Zurich, CH), 'Safe and Easy Storage for All Kinds of Data Artifacts', and by Lukas Rosenthaler, Vera Chiquet, Olga Serbaeva Saraogi, and Jan Clemens Stoffregen (DaSCH, University of Basel, CH), 'The DaSCH, a Swiss Research Infrastructure in Humanities and a Study Case: Ineri as Potential VRE for Manuscripts-Related Academic Projects'.

Some of the short papers and posters turned their attention to Hebrew literature in the context of VREs. Bronson Brown-deVost (Georg-August-Universität, DE) presented 'Editing Dead Sea Scrolls in the Scripta Qumranica Electronica VRE' and Moshe Lavee (University of Haifa, IL) presented 'Digital Research

Library for Multi-hierarchical Interrelated Texts: From ‘Tikkoun Sofrim’ Text Production to Text Modeling’.

Finally, three short poster presentations presented larger overarching perspectives on VREs and ancient manuscripts: Peter A. Stokes, Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra, Benjamin Kiessling, Robin Tissot, and El Hassane Gargem (EPHE/PSL, FR), ‘The *eScriptorium* VRE for Manuscript Cultures’; Elisa Nury (University of Geneva, CH) and Elena Spadini (University of Lausanne, CH), ‘Manuscripts and Digital Tools: the Long History of Machine-assisted *Collatio*’; and Simone Zenzaro (University of Lausanne, CH) ‘Towards Better VREs: Key Concepts and Basic Challenges’.

Overall, the conference provided a broad overview of the various methodological and content areas relevant for VREs and ancient manuscript. It is clear that VREs will continue to develop for the study of ancient manuscripts in their many cultures, languages, and materials, leading to a greater need for cross-disciplinary discussion between philologists of all stripes, computer scientists, and holding institutions. The place of VREs in critical scholarships remains nascent; ongoing discussion is a requirement.

Because all paper abstracts will remain available on the conference website,³ we chose not to record presentations to facilitate an open discussion space. As of early December 2020, several long and short articles from this conference have been submitted to Harvard’s Center of Hellenic Studies online journal *Classics@*.⁴ A special issue will be open for publication until spring 2021.

*Claire Clivaz, DH+, Swiss Institute of Bioinformatics, Lausanne,
and Garrick V. Allen, University of Glasgow*

3 <<https://claireclivaz.hypotheses.org/930>>.

4 <<https://chs.harvard.edu/CHS/article/display/1167.classics-introduction-to-journal>>.