

Creating and Questioning Research-Oriented Digital Outputs to Manuscript Metadata: A Case-Based Methodological Investigation

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Abstract : The transition of traditional manuscript studies into the digital framework closely affects the methodological premises upon which manuscript descriptions are modeled, created, and questioned for the purpose of research. This paper intends to explore the issue by presenting a methodological investigation into the process of modeling, creating, and questioning manuscript metadata. The investigation is founded on a close observation of the Polonsky Greek Manuscripts Project, a collaboration between the Universities of Cambridge and Heidelberg. More than just providing a realistic ground for methodological exploration, along with a complete metadata set for computational demonstration, the case study also contributes to a broader purpose: outlining general methodological principles for making the most out of manuscript metadata by means of research-oriented digital outputs. The analysis mainly focuses on the scholarly approach to manuscript descriptions, in the specific instance where the act of metadata recording does not have a programmatic research purpose. Close attention is paid to the encounter of 'traditional' practices in manuscript studies with the formal constraints of the digital framework: does the shift in practices (especially from the straight narrative of free writing towards the hierarchical constraints of the TEI encoding model) impact the structure of metadata and its capability to respond specific research questions? It is argued that flexible structure of TEI and traditional approaches to manuscript description lead to a proliferation of markup: does an 'encyclopedic' descriptive approach ensure the epistemological relevance of the digital outputs to metadata? To provide further insight on the computational approach to manuscript metadata, the metadata of the Polonsky project are processed with techniques of distant reading and data networking, thus resulting in a new group of digital outputs (relational graphs, geographic maps). The computational process and the digital outputs are thoroughly illustrated and discussed. Eventually, a retrospective analysis evaluates how the digital outputs respond to the scientific expectations of research, and the other way round, how the requirements of research questions feed back into the creation and enrichment of metadata in an iterative loop.

Keywords : digital manuscript studies, digital outputs to manuscripts metadata, metadata interoperability, methodological issues

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