

Table ronde

APPLICATIONS ACTUELLES DE L'INFORMATIQUE À LA PALÉOGRAPHIE :

QUELLES MÉTHODES POUR QUELLES FINALITÉS ?

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Intervenants

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(Les intervenants marqués d'un astérisque ont présenté un projet de recherche à l'occasion de cette journée. Voir ci-après, p. 131.)

M. MANIACI :

Agli organizzatori di questo incontro parigino va il merito di aver voluto abbinare, in un unico evento, la giornata conclusiva del programma GRAPHEM e il quinto appuntamento annuale del *Seminario permanente sulla corsività*. La giustapposizione fra l'approccio "tradizionale" e quello "sperimentale", da molti ancora percepita come una contrapposizione epocale assume in questa cornice una funzione di stimolo a riflettere sul passato, sul presente e sul futuro della paleografia, da una prospettiva – quella della progressiva, e direi inevitabile, diffusione delle tecnologie digitali – portatrice di stimoli e opportunità nuove, ma anche di interrogativi ancora largamente irrisolti, a volte neppure chiaramente focalizzati e formulati. Vale la pena di riassumere i principali, per introdurre il dibattito.

des informaticiens. Pourtant, la volonté initiale des équipes d'informaticiens, cherchant d'abord à appliquer leurs méthodes, n'a été tournée au profit d'une méthode plus strictement paléographique que dans la dernière partie du projet. À ce point, deux remarques doivent être faites. Primo, même dans le projet Graphem, l'illusion d'une possible objectivation du fait historique à travers l'analyse d'image par ordinateur n'était pas absente, et il y avait bien l'espoir d'arriver à une classification « objective » des écritures, qui a fait refuser pendant longtemps de fournir une table des types d'écriture aux équipes STIC. C'est sans doute l'un des apports importants du projet Graphem à la communauté paléographique : l'écriture à travers les âges est un phénomène trop complexe et trop variant pour qu'une analyse assistée par ordinateur puisse, de soi-même, sans analyse supervisée et sur un ensemble d'échantillons, fournir une classification pertinente historiquement. Secundo, l'obtention de subvention doit être regardée plus largement : ce n'est pas seulement une différence générationnelle, c'est le produit même de la science paléographique telle qu'elle s'est construite, comme savoir-faire et expertise. Les projets en paléographie dite « traditionnelle » nécessitent une expertise développée sur le long terme, alors que les financements concernent des projets de court terme. Aussi y a-t-il inadéquation entre les projets de paléographie et les modes de financement. Bien plus, même si les organismes nationaux ou européens accordaient des montants équivalents aux projets de paléographie sans le volet numérique, l'on peut affirmer qu'il y aurait trop peu de paléographes formés pour pouvoir utiliser utilement ces financements.

V. ATANASIU :

I wish to highlight some critical aspects of the collaboration between palaeographers and computer scientists for those who engage in the common enterprise of digital palaeography.

Don't blame the computer. — We often hear that “the computer can't do this” as an excuse to not using informatics for palaeography, but in a sense the computer doesn't exist, the computer is just an algorithm conceived by a human and its inability to perform certain tasks related to the individual's ingenuity.

The professional gap. — Computer scientists deride the lack of scientific method in palaeographic expertise and palaeographers complain that they don't understand what computer scientists are talking about. Clearly one side has to shed its subjectivity and adopt an analytical and quantitative vision, while the other has to become pedagogically more approachable, be willing to learn more about palaeography and see if its software products really address the needs of palaeography.

Avoiding the asymmetric handshake. — For a successful collaboration to happen a lot of talk between palaeographers and computer scientists has to take place, in the process of which each will be transformed a little bit into the other. The basic requirement for this are regular meetings, best – and in this case maybe only – through physical meetings. In my experience, barring such interaction, nobody will be happy at the end of

the collaboration. Palaeographers have also to understand that to solve their problems, there is a lot of research to be done, which implies the availability of adequate financial resources. Conversely computer scientists have to make clear the limitations of their products, understand that they will work with ill-defined problems, and that features not present in the initial specifications will pop up all along the project and will need to be implemented, making the software design challenging.

Conflicting expectations. — Most computer scientists see the collaboration with palaeographers as an opportunity to advance the state of the art in handwriting processing, and their main output, to which their professional branch is pushing them, are publications rather than practical software. They are doing research. Palaeographers however expect computer scientists to produce functioning tools, which is development activity. In this respect digital palaeography projects would be better served by partnering palaeographers and companies instead of research labs.

Different interests. — Related to the previous paragraph is where the primary interest of the partners lies: palaeographers are more interested in the data and computer scientists in methods for processing it. Evidently a solid cross-domain understanding (and interest) is expected for successful products.

Technical aspects. — Digital palaeography can exist only if the necessary software is available, which is not the case today. Except for a handful of software, most of the digital palaeography work is performed with research level software, that is with minimal interfaces (ergonomy is artistic make-up anyway, isn't it?) and documentation (but we know what the software does!), usually not compiled (let the palaeographer compile the source code), rickety interoperability (on line mash-up's anybody?), and short life-span (who remembers yesterday's software?). Besides software issues there is also the ground-truthed datasets problem, datasets which are difficult to obtain given that there are no two palaeographers that will agree on the exact interpretation of a document (a possible definition of humans).

Financial aspects. — Opportunities to finance digital palaeography projects are rare to say the least, so one way forward is to get the field out of its ivory tower and design products that appeal to a wider public. Where's the Photoshop of handwriting?

G. VOGELER :

I'm sometimes a bit puzzled that the computer engineers seem to have an advantage in the communication between palaeographers and computer engineers. Is it really the case that they can decide what can be done and what can't be done? Isn't it the other way around, that only the palaeographer can decide which method is fruitful and which should be altered or abandoned because it didn't produce any useful results? But certainly the main issue is that it is wrong to oppose traditional palaeography to digital palaeography. The question, as I stated earlier is: Where can we apply digital technologies to palaeographic research interests and where should we not?