

Digitized student: Accelerated research using a digital camera

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A researcher on a short trip to a foreign country, with little money, but a digital camera in hand has devised a novel approach to digitizing foreign archives that could speed up research.

Christopher Gennari is an Assistant Professor of History at Camden County College in Blackwood, New Jersey and a hobbyist photographer. His research into Swedish military history and the reign of Charles X of the seventeenth century took him to the Riksarkivet in Stockholm, Sweden. He details his visit in the inaugural issue of the International Journal of Digital Culture and Electronic Tourism.

"As a US university student I was constrained by factors of time, space, income and, unexpectedly, source material," Gennari says, "I only had the income and free time to support living in Sweden for about a month. Travel space restrictions on transatlantic flights limited my ability to perform massive photocopying; the sheer bulk weight (not to mention cost) of hundreds of photocopied pages made for a daunting endeavor." With this in mind, he planned to make very specific use of the Riksarkivet materials, reading only highly relevant letters and documents in the archives.

However, there was a major stumbling block in his research path. The letters, although expertly categorized and chronicled were incredibly difficult to read. "The 17th century handwriting was difficult to read, it was narrow, close together, and in many cases nearly the entire page is filled with script making it difficult to know where a sentence finished

or began." The archivists in Stockholm offered Gennari a magnifying glass and a handwriting decoder photocopy and wished him luck.

"Suddenly, in leafing through a series of folios," he says, "I realized why very few Swedes and not a single English language historian had done large scale, archival level work on the reign of Charles X."

His plan to efficiently glide through letters searching out significant keywords or authors lay in tatters. The idea of photocopying all the relevant documents was impossibility, because of cost, time and travel constraints. Gennari had traveled to Stockholm with few possessions, but his trusty digital camera was among them. An off-hand remark to one of the staff at the Riksarkivet revealed that they not only allowed non-flash photography of their collections, but they even had a camera stand setup for the occasional photographing of maps and images that could not be photocopied.

Gennari set about photographing 2,500 documents, producing some 25,000 images in total, which would have been the equivalent of \$15,000 worth of photocopying. If he had used a film camera, almost 700 rolls of film (about \$4,000) would have been required with the attendant costs of converting those to photo CDs adding \$30,000 to the total costs).

However, with the images safely stored on a handful of recordable DVDs Gennari was able to import the whole collection into Google's free Picasa image library software for cataloguing and study on his return to the US.

"Digital photography and computer technology allowed me to capture, transport, and manipulate a previously inconceivable amount of document at a tremendous cost saving," he says, "Additionally, my need for frequent return trips and long, expensive, stays in a foreign country to continue my research has been eliminated. I have a lifetime worth of

research documents at my fingers whenever I wish to conduct the research; 24 hours a day, 365 days a year."

"Digital photography allows for the collection of large amounts of archival documents in a short period of time," explains Gennari, "This has many benefits for the researcher including a greater convenience of time, a dramatic savings of money, and an increased flexibility in using the documents." Gennari has one additional piece of advice for other researchers hoping to exploit digital technology in this way: Take spare rechargeable batteries for your camera.

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