

UCLA team creates virtual library of medieval manuscripts

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Google "Edward the Confessor" and you'll get page after page of links to biographies of this 11th-century English king, to Westminster Abbey, which he founded and where he is buried, and to the Magna Carta, which was partly inspired by laws enacted during his 24-year reign.

But a completely digitized manuscript of the oldest surviving Anglo-Norman history of the king does not turn up — at least on the first 20 search pages — even though Cambridge University painstakingly scanned the sumptuously illustrated manuscript in 2003.

That history, "The Life of King Edward the Confessor," probably written by a Benedictine monk named Matthew Paris sometime between 1250 and 1260, is not alone. Somewhere between 5,000 and 10,000 rare and precious medieval manuscripts have been scanned over the past decade into formats that could be studied over the Internet if only scholars knew they existed and knew where to find them.

"Searching for medieval manuscripts gets you millions of hits, most of which have nothing to do with manuscripts, and when they do, they usually feature only images of a single page rather than the entire book," said Matthew Fisher, an assistant professor of English at UCLA. "Since finding these great projects is so tough, they're functionally invisible."

Fisher set out two years ago to remedy the situation. With the assistance of two graduate students in English, a computer developer from UCLA's Center for Digital Humanities and Christopher Baswell, a former UCLA

professor of English, Fisher decided to collect links to every manuscript from the eighth to the 15th century that had been fully digitized by any library, archive, institute or private owner anywhere in the world.

In December 2008, the group launched the initial results. The UCLA-based Catalogue of Digitized Medieval Manuscripts now links to nearly 1,000 manuscripts by 193 authors in 20 languages from 59 libraries around the world, allowing users to flit from England to France to Switzerland to the United States — to name the locations of just a few of the featured repositories — with the click of a mouse.

Highlights of the virtual holdings include:

- The largest surviving collection of the works of Christine de Pizan, one of the first women in Europe to earn a living as a writer. The manuscript was commissioned by Queen Isabeau of France in 1414 and is now held by the British Library.
- An Irish copy of the Gospel of John, bound in ivory and presented to Charlemagne sometime around 800, now in the library of the monastery of St. Gall in Switzerland.
- The Junius manuscript, one of only four major manuscripts preserving poetry in Old English. Dated to around 1000, the book is now among the holdings of Oxford's Bodleian Library.

"Because these manuscripts are so old and fragile, libraries are digitizing them, but you can't find them," Fisher said. "We're completing the step of making them accessible to the world."

Employing a Web application designed by the Center for Digital Humanities, which promotes the use of computer technology in humanities research and instruction, the Catalogue of Digitized Medieval Manuscripts allows users to search for manuscripts according to their author, title, language and archiving institution.

In its first three weeks of operation, the site had almost 5,000 visitors from Australia, England, France, Italy, Germany, Spain, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, Austria, Canada and all over the United States. In addition to librarians and academics, the site has been visited by hobbyists from such groups as the Society for Creative Anachronism.

"The chorus of response has been, 'Thank you,'" said Fisher, who joined UCLA's faculty in 2006. "'We needed this.'"

That's music to Fisher's ears. A member of a new generation of scholars who cut their teeth in the San Francisco Bay Area during the dot-com era, the Los Angeles native is motivated by a commitment to democratize access to some of the world's most exclusive repositories.

"The price of admission shouldn't be a plane ticket to a library in Europe or even Australia," he said. "These documents are part of the world's cultural patrimony. Everybody should have access."

So far, the effort has been funded by UCLA's Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies and the University of California's Humanities Research Institute, a multicampus center designed to promote collaborative and interdisciplinary humanities research. But Fisher hopes eventually to get outside funding to speed up the process. He also hopes that libraries will start taking notice of the effort and revamp their cataloging procedures to make it easier to ferret out and link to newly digitized manuscripts.

"Now that UCLA has delivered the solution, it's time to get everybody involved," Fisher said.

Ultimately, he envisions including every medieval manuscript that has been digitized in its entirety.

"We'll never replace the joy of sitting down with an 800-year-old book," he said, "but we will bring the wonder of these manuscripts to people who might never experience them otherwise."

To view the e-catalogue, visit manuscripts.cmrs.ucla.edu .

Source: University of California Los Angeles

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