

Medieval writers' plagiarism resurrected by technology

May 11 2021



Folio 5r from the Codex Amiatinus (Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, MS Amiatinus 1). Credit: Ezra the scribe.

Medieval authors have had their work brought back to life with 21st century technology in an unexpected collaboration at the University of St

Andrews.

An archive of the works of medieval English authors, which revealed an unanticipated international outlook in medieval writers, had fallen into disuse.

Created in the 1990s, the loss of the ground-breaking [Fontes Anglo-Saxonici database](#) in 2018 made it virtually impossible once again to trace the precise borrowings within the early medieval literary heritage of the British Isles.

However, in a multi-disciplinary project involving medieval scholars and [computer scientists](#), researchers and enthusiasts of the period can once again cross-reference medieval authors with their global counterparts from whom they often 'borrowed' long passages in pre-plagiarism times.

Thanks to St Andrews MSc student Bryan Yick who has cross-disciplinary interests in both Computer Science and History, the database has been redesigned and republished and will hopefully even be expanded and potentially reveal even more about this period.

Dr. Christine Rauer of the School of English said: "It's sometimes forgotten that earlier times were just as interconnected and internationally organized, not just the Middle Ages, but also prehistoric times.

"Humanity has always been outward looking and interested in innovating from outside influences, in learning new things from elsewhere.

"So it seems particularly apt that it is thanks to the most up-to-date technology that we have been able to resurrect this invaluable repository of medieval literature for future posterity.

"Our project presents all the evidence that shows that early medieval literature is a fascinating blend of all sorts of traditions, homegrown as well as international."

That medieval English authors had an international outlook in compiling their reading lists has long been known, but the precise evidence was only systematically collected in the 1990s.

The original Fontes Anglo-Saxonici project ran from 1984-2007 and consisted of academic staff at a number of British and Irish universities.

Publicly funded by the AHRC and the British Academy it produced a publicly available internet database (then based at the University of Oxford) which linked around 1100 early medieval English texts (written in Old English and Latin) to around 1000 source texts (written in Old English and Latin) from England, Europe, the Middle East and Northern Africa.

In these pre-copyright times, early medieval writers quoted their source texts allowing researchers to trace these 'borrowed' quotations and discover what they had read and what texts they were interested in.

Unfortunately, the database became dysfunctional for technical reasons, and had to be taken offline by Oxford in 2018 because it constituted a security risk due to the obsolete software it was produced with to the dismay of scholars across the globe.

Dr. Rauer was able to recruit the technical expertise of Bryan Yick who was studying for an MSc in Human Computer Interaction at the University, and his MSc project supervisor, Dr. Mark-Jan Nederhof, to help. Due to the COVID pandemic the three researchers had to work remotely in three different countries across two different continents to complete the project successfully.

Dr. Rauer added: "The project also shows that the University of St Andrews similarly managed to bring together specialists from different academic disciplines, different countries and especially different generations to construct something that is highly technical and complex yet useful and user-friendly for scholars all over the world."

More information: Fontes Anglo-Saxonici database: arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/fontes/search

Provided by University of St Andrews

Citation: Medieval writers' plagiarism resurrected by technology (2021, May 11) retrieved 24 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-05-medieval-writers-plagiarism-resurrected-technology.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--