

Medium-evo
Gli studi medievali e il mutamento digitale
I workshop nazionale di studi medievali e cultura digitale
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The Florentine workshop was one of the very first meetings in which Italian medievalists started considering how recent developments in computational and telematic techniques have deeply affected the nature of their work. The event, organised by the 'Coordinamento delle iniziative on line per la medievistica italiana' and the University of Florence, was divided in four sections, each exploring one main area of interest: documentary sources, academic journals, essays, and reference works. Each session started with a paper presenting the main issues and was followed by a long and articulated discussion.

After the welcome by Jean-Claude Maire Vigueur (Università di Firenze), chairman of the first session, and Andrea Zorzi (Università di Firenze), organiser of the workshop, Michele Ansani (Università di Pavia) opened the meeting with a paper on the issues arising from the new practice of electronic editing of documentary sources. Ansani presented an excursus on the Italian diplomatic tradition, focusing his attention on the principal recent trends in digital editing. He described and examined various projects, both national and international, highlighting a few problems. On the one hand, he noticed that some projects tend to pay more attention to the problems posed by the use of IT and to propose very elaborate software solutions, sometimes overlooking the specificity of the sources to be edited. On the other hand, some other projects simply tend to imitate paper editions or transfer them straight onto the web, without taking into account the problems or the advantages arising from the use of a different medium. Consequently, Ansani pointed out the responsibility of the academic community, who should carefully follow and participate into the transition through a direct involvement in the evaluation of the new resources and their employment in teaching methods. He also stressed the ways in which medieval documentary sources, given their structured format, can be better edited on the web than other typologies of texts, without betraying the most consolidated and refined editing methodologies. Ansani finally added that scholars should not try to create and use one only definite and international standard. On the contrary, each "codification model" should be created in order to accommodate the historical and territorial features of the sources, as well as the specific needs of each critical edition. The objective should still be the search for technologies which can improve the quality of research and its results.

The animated discussion which followed was opened by Silio Scalfati (Università di Pisa). Several diplomatists intervened to present their views, and some of them were particularly keen on defending strenuously the methodology of diplomatic and the need for preserving its rules against the possible dangers brought about by certain indiscriminate and not very thoughtful web editing choices.

The second session started with a paper by Andrea Zorzi (Università di Firenze) on the transition investing the world of academic journals. He provided the audience with a brief presentation on the history of journals from the seventeenth century onwards. He then focused on the typical contents that they have acquired since the second half of the nineteenth century; that is, articles, book reviews, bibliographical news, and professional

information. Following up with the most recent developments, Zorzi hinted at a crisis which journals seem to have been experiencing: they would have been loosing their cultural function of knowledge promotion to turn increasingly into mere archives of academic publications. This is mainly due to their immense proliferation, to the increasing segmentation of the subject matter, and to the decline in the quality of publishing procedures. However, as soon as academic journals were starting appreciating the need for a new definition of their nature and role, they were invested by a much deeper revolution inducted by new communication technologies. As Zorzi pointed out, and as Andrea Barlucchi (Università di Firenze) showed in his brief presentation, which followed the paper, medieval history journals are experiencing this transition in different ways. In some cases publishers simply put on their web site a brief report on the printed journal; in some other cases information about their contents can be found in on-line catalogues (OPAC). Some other journals can have a detailed presentation on the web together with lists of contents and article abstracts. On a further level there are those journals which publish on the web the full text of some or all the articles. Finally, there are the so-called e-journals, which can only be read on the web.

Zorzi then turned to an evaluation of the consequences of the transition. In the first place, he pointed out that among all the historians' research tools, the journal tradition can most easily be transferred on the web, without loosing its identity or nature. On the other hand, however, possible drawbacks can be foreseen in the contribution to an even further dispersion of knowledge, due to the proliferation of media and the creation of brand new journals. The transfer to digitalisation could easily lead to the construction of huge databases, so that the management of these colossal "containers" might become more important than the fruition of their contents.

Among the main uncertainties of the process, Zorzi highlighted the issues arising from the still scarce academic credit that scholars are generally given when publishing on the web. On the other hand, however, he also underlined several advantages of digital publication, such as the speed of the process, the massive reduction of costs, and the ubiquity of the distribution. Finally, hinting at the ways in which the process of writing itself has necessarily changed, Zorzi introduced the concepts of hypertext, multimedia, and interactivity in order to point out some of the new possibilities offered by digital communication.

The discussion that followed, opened by Giorgio Chittolini (Università Statale di Milano), centred on the features of e-journals as opposed to traditional printed publications. It was suggested that scholars should not simply transfer onto the web the material which normally used to be printed; on the contrary, they should appreciate the completely new nature of the material on line, as well as the new broader meaning acquired by the term 'journal' (*rivista* in Italian).

On the following day the paper by Pietro Corrao (Università di Palermo) examined and discussed the nature of digital historical essays. After analysing the basic characteristics of academic historical articles, Corrao proposed an appreciation of what he called "their current crisis". He pointed at the extreme specialisation and the thematic fragmentation of medieval studies, mainly due to the great variety of research fields and the consequent dissolution of a basic "canonical" shared knowledge. The introduction of electronic publications has invested the functions and structure of academic essays, generating both positive and negative consequences. On the one hand, the employment of internal links (either between various parts of the text or between text and notes, indexes, appendices, etc.) favours a wider and easier use of the text itself. On the other hand, the text can become more fluid and unstable. Opinions vary noticeably in this respect: some scholars

believe that a hypertext can not reproduce the argumentative nature of a historical essay; some others think that, on the contrary, it could be used to generate multiple argumentative lines. Special attention was given to the so-called 'Darnton's model' (R. Darnton, *The New Age of the Book*, <http://www.nybooks.com/nyrev/WWWarchdisplay.cgi?19990318005F>). Darnton has suggested the hypothesis of a text which does not give up any of the consolidated characteristics of historical production, but which, at the same time, contains multiple reading levels: from a concise account to various essays linked to sources, reference works, comments or reports. Corrao concluded his paper praising various aspects of this hypothesis and underlining that it could act as a powerful stimulus towards the reconstruction of a shared historical language and some forms of communication which should be understood also by those who do not share the same level of specialisation.

The discussion was opened by Giuseppe Sergi (Università di Torino) and focused on various issues: the new writing and reading skills required by digital texts, the risk of decay in the quality of electronic essays, as opposed to traditional publications, and the responsibilities of the academic community in participating to the creation and the evaluation of digital tools.

In the last session of the workshop Roberto Delle Donne (Università di Napoli "Federico II") presented a paper on electronic reference works. He concentrated on the fact that the web dissemination of a large amount of reference tools can often be disorienting, as the user might find it difficult to distinguish between academic and amateur sites. Consequently this might lead well-established academics to condemn the web *in toto*. He then proposed an excursus on the typologies of resources currently available in an electronic format, concentrating mainly on bibliographical databases, showing relevant web sites, and providing the audience with a great deal of useful information. Paolo Delogu (Università di Roma "La Sapienza") introduced the discussion through an appreciation of the possibilities offered by new information technologies, stressing especially their unparalleled contribution to communication and dissemination.