Palaeography and Diplomatics on the Digital Humanities route: pathways and proposals[1]

A Paleografia e a Diplomática na rota das Humanidades Digitais: percursos e propostas

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In May 2021, the Interdisciplinary Centre for History, Culture and Societies (CIDEHUS) – University of Évora, in partnership with the Center for History – University of Lisbon, organised the 1st International Congress of Palaeography and Diplomatics.

After considerable years with a few initiatives to bring together palaeographers, diplomatists, archivists, sigillographers, codicologists and other specialists in Information and Documentation Science, this would be the first international event organised with this aim. In addition to filling this void, there was also an urgent need to bring palaeography and diplomatics into the latest historiographical debates. CIDEHUS welcomed this idea and provided the necessary space to reflect on this choice of

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theme. This reflection led us to the field of "digital humanities": new technologies are already part of researchers' daily lives and methods of "doing history". Their impact is notorious and deserves to be shared and discussed. The theme and title of the 1st International Congress were thus defined: "Palaeography and Diplomacy on the Digital Humanities route: pathways and proposals".

This book brings together some of the papers presented during those days and presents us with the latest research and discussions in the fields of palaeography, diplomatics, archives, codicology and sigillography, with a special focus on their relationship with the digital tools at our disposal.

We have previously had the opportunity to briefly organise the contents presented at the congress, which we have organised into three main groups[2]:

1. Online research databases/catalogues;
2. Online digital images;
3. Working techniques and software.

In this publication we analysed a set of strengths and a set of recurring "concerns" when reflecting on the application of digital humanities to methods of "doing history". For example, we highlighted the ease of access to documentary sources and the time savings that the "digital world" allows for the historian's work, especially when dealing with large objects of study.

However, the ephemeral nature of the digital should be emphasised: according to Bresciano, few websites, software and applications produced as part of university projects are still online[3]. This ephemerality can be due not only to a lack of maintenance, but also to the software itself being out of date, for a variety of reasons.

However, the good use of technology in history is already undeniably a precious and necessary aid for researchers.

The response of the public - both national and international - to the congress, as well as the variety and excellence of the topics presented, immediately left us in no doubt as to the need to move forward with the publication of the conclusions and results of such fruitful days.

It was also decided, within the scope of the themes covered, to publish these conclusions in eBook format, which is more easily accessible and distributable by all researchers interested in digital humanities applied to history.

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[2] FERREIRA, A. P. "As Humanidades Digitais aplicadas à Paleografia e Diplomática: contributos internacionais". Renata Vieira e Ana Paula Banza (coord.). *Jornadas de Humanidades Digitais do CIDEHUS*. Évora: Imprensa da Universidade de Évora, 2022, p. 33-40.

[3] BRESCIANO, J. A. *Ciencias Auxiliares de la Historia. Guía crítica de recursos electrónicos.* [s.l.]: Maat Libros Editorial, 2010.

This is how this book came about, which we can briefly introduce with an analysis of the impact that digital humanities have on the field of diplomatics: the use of databases, digitised images, metadata and countless working techniques that allow valuable synthesis and organisation of information that would otherwise be more difficult to examine.

Digital photography/multi-spectrum imaging, the use of ultraviolet light or X-rays are just some of the advantages of digital technology applied to diplomacy. In this context, let's consider Laura Esposito's article, which demonstrates how it has been possible to detect writing on palimpsests that would otherwise be unfeasible.

The research of Tomás Lacerda and Israel Aquino also led to the creation of a database – NACAOB – which gathers parish records and organises them using a set of filters specially designed for the purpose, making it possible to compare and analyse information more quickly and proficiently.

In the field of palaeography, digital technology has brought about a revolution in resources and methods in recent years. Michela Galli demonstrates how the use of a digital textual recognition tool (eScriptorium[4]) enhances work on a 13th century French cartulary. Once again, she demonstrates the usefulness of this type of software for large-scale projects that depend on analysing hundreds of folios and documents.

In the field of sigillography, databases or online catalogues and techniques for processing and preserving stamps are discussed. For example, the Portuguese project Sigillvm[5], DigiSig[6], Sigilla[7], among others. These are databases that allow stamps to be identified and catalogued, thus allowing the original to be preserved, but also detailed observation of the images, so that analysis of the stamps is not hindered.

The congress also sought to discuss the relevance of digital humanities in universities, i.e. in teaching itself, and not just in research projects. In this regard, the databases that are available to students today stand out as true repositories of scientific information, free of charge and accessible from anywhere in the world (Academia.edu, Dialnet, JStor, etc.).

The teaching of palaeography and diplomatics is also benefiting from the "digital revolution", thanks to the free online access that various archives now provide, through high-definition and colour images of documents, which can be easily manipulated and analysed together with the students.

Finally, the congress also included a session on archives. In this area too, databases bring benefits. Also noteworthy are the latest digital techniques, such as X-rays and what they do for historical documents: the information they make possible

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[4] https://www.escriptorium.uk/

[5] http://portugal-sigillvm.net/

[6] http://www.digisig.org/

[7] http://www.sigilla.org/

that would otherwise be hopelessly hidden and inaccessible. Likewise the use of photogrammetry and multi-spectrum, which are essential for understanding and preserving supports and seals.

The 1st International Congress of Palaeography and Diplomatics, which has now resulted in this book, has shown us the undeniable relevance of digital media, whether for remote access to sources and information, for their preservation and perpetuation, or even to enhance the work of the historian.

Today we no longer discuss the relevance of the Digital Humanities. We now know that they play a fundamental role in the future of the social sciences, which is why scientists need to be constantly updated and trained. Getting on the "digital train" is a necessity if we want it to move forward with us and in our favour.