

# Bryn Mawr Classical Review

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**Nicola Reggiani, *Digital Papyrology I: Methods, Tools and Trends*. Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter, 2017. Pp. 318. ISBN 9783110538519. €89,95.**

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[Open access De Gruyter.](#)

Papyrology has always been at the forefront of digital humanities and this monograph is no exception to this practice. The book under review is one of the outcomes of the European Research Council (ERC)-project “Online Humanities Scholarship: A Digital Medical Library Based on Ancient Texts” (DIGMEDTEXT), led by the late Isabella Andorlini. It provides an overview of the development of electronic resources in papyrological research from the sixties until today, analysing a wide range of digital practices in the study of (mainly) Greek and Latin literary, paraliterary and documentary papyri.

Chapter 1 “Tablets of the Mind (An Introduction)” outlines the advantages offered by electronic resources, especially within the field of papyrology. Electronic resources help scholars cope with the overwhelming amount of textual artefacts, scattered among collections worldwide, and support fruitful collaboration among scholars, often referred to as *amicitia papyrologorum*. The historical approach in chapter 2 “Digital Bibliographies and Bibliographical Standards” effectively explains the origins of the current situation of different bibliographical standards in important papyrological resources, e.g. in the [Bibliographie Papyrologique](#), [Checklist of Editions of Greek, Latin, Demotic, and Coptic Papyri, Ostraca, and Tablets](#), [Heidelberger Gesamtverzeichnis der griechischen Papyrusurkunden Ägyptens](#), [Trismegistos](#), [WörterListen](#) and the [Berichtigungsliste](#). Chapter 3 “Cataloguing Metadata” discusses catalogues that store contextual information, such as the [Heidelberger Gesamtverzeichnis](#) for documentary papyri and the [Mertens-Pack](#)<sup>3</sup> and [Leuven Database of Ancient Books](#) for literary papyri. A large part of the chapter is dedicated to [Trismegistos](#), which acts as the main connector between databases by providing a stable identifier to individual texts and by integrating metadata of documentary, literary, papyrological and epigraphic material in various languages. Chapter 4 “Indexing Words” discusses briefly collections of various kinds of ‘words’, such as the [WörterListen](#), online dictionaries and glossaries, prosopographies and onomastica and the [Berichtigungsliste](#). Another side of digital papyrology is presented in chapter 5 “Virtual Papyrology”. As Reggiani argues, digital collections of images and new digital imaging techniques allow for a virtual papyrus or even a virtual papyrological corpus to become the object of digital scholarship. Chapter 6 “Papyrological Mass Media” conveniently rounds up most of the remaining types of digital dissemination in the form of websites, online exhibitions, blogs and venues for online publication.

The final chapters 7 to 9 focus on recent trends and directions for future research. Chapter 7 discusses several “New Trends in Digital Papyrology”, such as the quantitative analysis of linguistic features (7.1) and metadata (7.2). Collaboration is not exactly a new trend in papyrology, but “integrated scholarly workspaces” (7.3) can be seen as a promising way to advance digital collaboration. In chapter 8 “From Textual Databases to Digital Scholarship,” Reggiani describes the historical development of textual databases, such as the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* and the *Duke Databank of Documentary Papyri*, in order to explain some of the limitations of our current textual databases as well as the advances offered by digital editing. This is one of the strengths of the approach taken throughout this book. Reggiani shows time and again how historical choices, even those originating in pre-digital standardization procedures, have determined our current options and working methods.

The book comes with two appendices, one about Clarysse’s software and one on the DIGMEDTEXT project. A bibliography and indices to individuals, digital resources, abbreviations and keywords are provided at the end. The list of abbreviations is a useful addition, but unfortunately does not cover all abbreviations mentioned in the book (a few more can be found in the preceding section on digital resources).

Perhaps unavoidable in such a novel attempt to capture a wide range of tools in continuous development, the distribution of the topics across the chapters and sections is not always intuitive. Many of the tools under discussion are suited for multiple purposes and the websites and platforms hosting them may have several functions as well. For example, the resources and methods covered in “Digital Catalogues of Papyrological Collections” (3.6) and “Envisaging Virtual *Corpora* of Papyri” (3.7) connect closely to the new ways of doing research envisioned in chapter 5 “Virtual Papyrology” as well as to the sections on “Websites of Institutions” (6.1) and “Online exhibitions” (6.3). The part on “overcoming cultural boundaries” by extending to new types of audiences (6.5) would perhaps fit better with the crowdsourcing initiatives already mentioned in 6.2 than sharing a section with “purchasing papyri online.” It is not always easy to predict where to find a specific topic, such as the development of date converters (not exactly a most recent trend) which is discussed in section 7.3 to illustrate the desirable integration of tools into scholarly workspaces. The categorization into sections is complicated by the recurrent tension between the original functions of the earlier (printed) tools and the extended possibilities of their modern electronic equivalents. While one could argue for a theoretical difference between collecting contextual data in Chapter 3 and “Indexing words” in Chapter 4, collections of prosopographica (4.4) and especially geographica tend to interact closely with the contextual metadata of the documents in which they are attested. The inclusion of the *Berichtigungsliste* (4.5) in this chapter is even more doubtful, as it lists a much wider range of new interpretations, including new editions, translations and changes to metadata, than corrections to words only.

The slightly erratic distribution of tools across the chapters in fact perfectly illustrates the main argument, born out in chapters 8 and 9, that digital resources do not simply provide an electronic continuation of previously printed tools. In the words of Reggiani: “Electronic tools, in conclusion, are not substitutes nor evil twins of more ‘traditional’ *instrumenta*, but just different companions.” (p. 263). As much as I agree with his encouragement to exploit the full potential of the digital resources besides and beyond the possibilities of traditionally printed materials, I think the decision to regard electronic resources as supplements rather than substitutes to the printed ones is entirely our own and not necessarily an attribute of the field. The developers of earlier databases have chosen not to replicate the printed editions, but to copy only *part* of the information and to make changes to it. Continuing this practice means that scholars will remain dependent on both printed and digital resources. In fact, Reggiani’s thorough exposition on the rich variety of possibilities within digital papyrology shows that electronic resources are both able to store, display and publish work online in a stable way (comparable to printed data) as well as creating the fluid

digital environment for the exchange of virtual materials and new insights. I would add to this, therefore, that we could at least consider how to make the information still stored in printed resources part of “that longed utopia of universal integration and international collaboration in Papyrology” (p. 256) in order to make them accessible to a larger group of scholars worldwide.

Perhaps due to the short time frame in which the book was conceived (see acknowledgements), there are several typos and other small editorial flaws, such as “a Belgian papyrologists” (p. 131), a superfluous “and” at the end of the sentence (p. 251), images not outlined to the text boxes on the even pages (pp. 16 and 20) and images at the top and bottom of the pages positioned wrong way round (pp. 64 and 239), to give a few examples. On the other hand, the author’s apologies for his supposedly “Italianized” English (p. vi) are unnecessary. The book is written in very readable English and any shortcomings are easily compensated for by the major advantage of making this rich resource accessible to a wider audience.

This book provides a useful introduction to digital papyrology for scholars interested in digital humanities and papyrologists looking to extend their knowledge of our digital tools. Apart from offering an overview of the state of the art within the field and a start to the epistemology of a new discipline, Reggiani’s main contribution to the future of digital papyrology lies in highlighting the fortunate and unfortunate detours of history and the methodological challenges and interesting opportunities ahead.

This is a field that moves too fast to produce a monograph with lasting accuracy. As Reggiani admits “I am quite sure that within one year, if the world still exists, many of the links I recorded here will be broken” (p. 170), but this is not the point. Once one is aware of the existence of these resources, there are other ways to find them. The main pitfall of increasing digitalization in the field is that people are not aware of existing projects and things are done twice rather than in collaboration. Although the form of a printed book may seem odd for a survey of a digital field, a monograph in open access could be a fitting compromise for making a wide range of resources and methodologies known and accessible to all.

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