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Published on H-Sci-Med-Tech (January, 2023)

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To be clear from the outset, this book will not lead to the Holy Grail nor does it intend to do so. Rather, it takes the reader on a journey tracing the history of technology through the curation and indexing of a medieval manuscript. As with the search for the Holy Grail, the goal is not always entirely tangible, but the journey itself is very enlightening—and, in this case, also entertaining.

MS 80, which is held at Parker Library at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, serves as an exemplary object here and provides a common thread for the book, vividly tracing the impact of infrastructure and technology on cultural heritage and literary history. More precisely, author Michelle R. Warren argues that “literary history is co-authored by the technology platforms that produce and preserve texts” (p. 6). In retrospect, the concept of “search” emerges as an underlying and overarching topic of the book. While the journey is not straightforward, it leaves room for side stories along the road, which are both interesting and anecdotal.

The example is cleverly chosen in several respects. Not only is MS 80 “a prime example of the many functions of annotations, notes, and other marks in manuscripts,” but, as a medieval source, the manuscript can also be considered both interdisciplinary and multimodal and has culturally significant potential—aspects that play a role in technological progress and the practice of preservation (p. 114). The specific manuscript offers the opportunity to shed light on both its history and that of its cataloging diachronically since the fifteenth century. This includes the history of its creation, its social context, which in this case offers insights into the skinner guild, and the role of users who have left traces in the form of annotations and thus contribute to the history of the manuscript. The various annotation layers and analog cataloging were also followed by digital cataloging as part of Parker Library on the web (first in version 1.0 and subsequently 2.0). They offer an example of how electronic cataloging must reflect and make visible the previous classification without reproducing any errors, biases, and other
issues. The digital transformation also offers the chance of a methodological revision, which at the same time implies the remaking of the manuscript.

Furthermore, MS 80 not only is a physical object but also offers a variety of connecting points in terms of content: it contains Henry Lovelich's English versions of The History of the Holy Grail and Merlin (ca. 1450-75), whose literary reception has been controversial and has changed over the course of time. Thus, it is possible to shed light on, for example, the history of the manuscript's creation and its early use, the role of criticism, annotation, and metadata for literary history and to draw thematic parallels with regard to “the epistemological stakes of search” (p. 274).

As the title of Warren's book implies, the author makes clever use of metaphor throughout the text that both connects the areas covered and proves a productive catalyst for reflection on cataloging procedures, the use of the computer, and literary history. In this respect, the “grail,” “vellum,” and the “digital dark ages” serve as key metaphors. Here, the author provides a number of vivid examples of technological initiatives and innovative projects that have the term “grail” in their name or whose introduction was expected to bring disruptive progress, so that they were referred to as “the holy grail of X.” These include a development of a tablet prototype from the 1960s by the RAND Corporation whose interface was called GRAIL: Graphical Input Language, a more recent software by Oracle named “GraalVM” that enables simultaneous use of different programming languages, and a reference to the introduction of the PDF (portable document format) that was referred to as “The Camelot Project” (see pp. 12-13). The grail metaphor functions in such a way that it “mystifies computing—and defines computing as a mystification” (p. 12). “Vellum” may be understood as a generic synonym for parchment with its metaphoric quality focusing on “the material aspects of digital preservation by alluding to a medieval material that combines storage, interface, and format” (p. 20). The productivity of the vellum metaphor also proves itself by the fact that cultural practices, such as interaction with interfaces, can be thought of here as well as, for example, a transfer of the idea of skin as interface, which plays a role both in literature and in virtual worlds. The metaphorical trio is completed by the “digital dark ages,” which allude to losses of the data stock in the past, present, and future and thereby methodically bring them together.

In Holy Digital Grail, Warren draws an impressive picture around MS 80. With the manuscript at its center, the book follows various paths that bring to light interesting facts about the environment of the manuscript and its use. Above all, however, the example illustrates how catalogs and digital infrastructures contribute to the history of the book. While these technologies make the material object accessible in the first place, the object only acquires its relevance by having its history made visible. Overall, therefore, the book is about much more than merely tracing the history of the records of one manuscript. The book addresses key questions about interactions between digital infrastructure and book history as well as the making and remaking of books. Ultimately, one could also see behind this a reflection of research data in the humanities, which results from the source, its digitization, and the multilayered enrichment over time.

Against this background, it proves to be very productive to adopt the medievalist perspective as it provides a necessary historical scope. The reader is taken on a quest with various side paths, at the end of which no sacred vessel awaits but that provides important insights and holds many enlightening findings.
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