

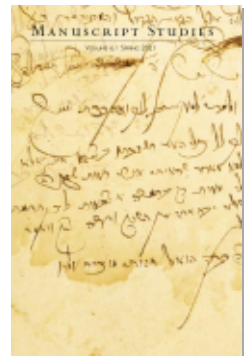


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*Among Digitized Manuscripts: Philology, Codicology,
Pale-ography in a Digital World* by L. W. C. van Lit (review)

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REVIEWS

L. W. C. van Lit. *Among Digitized Manuscripts: Philology, Codicology, Paleography in a Digital World*.

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L W. C. van Lit's latest book, *Among Digitized Manuscripts*, is a welcome addition to discussions of digitized manuscripts, which he calls "digital documents with a strong relationship with material manuscripts that interact in a complex way with print publications" (101). The first half of the book approaches digitized manuscripts from a theoretical point of view, providing some valuable context for thinking about the interactions of the manuscript, print, and digital worlds. In its second half, the book offers practical suggestions for ways of working with digitized images, with each chapter focusing on a classical aspect of manuscript research: paleography, philology, cataloging, and codicology.

The first chapter, "Manuscript World, Print World, Digital World," defines and explores the interactions of the three worlds of "manuscript material, paper publications and digital documents" (9). Van Lit analyzes these worlds using three lenses: surfaces, institutions, and habits, each of which has several subcategories. The first two subdivide between society-based and object- or individual-based, whereas the third category subdivides into "possession, engagement and product" (13). Three tables summarizing how each world works and highlighting the ways in which they are similar to and different from each other precede the discussions of each topic, but are best understood after having read the analyses. The chapter is quite theoretically dense. Since the author recognizes this, there follow, in the second half of the chapter, three short case studies that neatly demonstrate the ways in which the manuscript, print, and digital worlds overlap: manuscript and

print, then print and digital, and finally manuscript, print, and digital together. The first chapter complicates the relationship between manuscript, print, and digital and reminds the reader of the “vastly different world views these different worlds entail” and of the false assumptions or missed opportunities that may arise if those differences are not kept in mind when working with digital manuscripts (50).

Chapters 2 and 3, “The Digital Materiality of Digitized Manuscripts” and “Digitized Manuscripts and Their Repositories, an Ethnography,” form one conversation. The set begins by asking why, if one is using digital surrogates to do research, one does not usually admit this in one’s publications. This question leads to an in-depth discussion of the struggles to future-proof digital assets, to counteract the problem of siloed projects, and to encourage researchers’ admissions of use of digital assets. The chapter also probes the idea of “the intangible aura of material manuscripts,” which, van Lit argues, is “largely a projection of our own experience onto the manuscript” rather than any actual aspect of material manuscripts (61). The author convincingly denies claims that “this aural, ineffable experience of handling a real manuscript” is somehow necessary for research or superior to a digital manuscript experience (62). The experience of working with digital surrogates is simply a different experience, neither superior nor inferior. Once researchers know how to evaluate the quality of a digital surrogate, they can determine whether the work they want to do can be completed using it. If it can, and researchers do complete work using digital surrogates, then they should cite the surrogate rather than the material manuscript.

The author then leads the reader through ten aspects of assessing “digital materiality”: “(1) size of the collection; (2) online availability; (3) ability to download; (4) the portal; (5) the viewer; (6) indication of page numbers; (7) image resolution; (8) color balance; (9) lighting; and (10) how the image is cut” (70). Using these ten ways of evaluating digital materiality, van Lit uses the following chapter to evaluate twenty repositories that hold digital Islamic manuscripts. He discusses the various strengths and weaknesses of online repositories as well as listing desiderata for any online repository that is still in the making. This analysis of the state of affairs, though rapidly going out of date, provides one useful method of self-evaluation for those repositories that are at the beginning or in the middle of a project and are working to make themselves future stable and user-friendly.

The next four chapters dive into practical aspects of working with digital surrogates. In “Paleography: Between Erudition and Computation,” the author begins with a walk-through of what computer-supported research has been doing in the realm of paleography and the problems of grant-funded team projects. Grant-funded large team projects tend to suffer from poor communication between sections of the team, primarily those who develop the technological aspects of the project and those who are area specialists, leading to hampered efforts and subpar project results. Furthermore, the funding cycle means that projects either do not finish or are left in a state where no one is performing upkeep on the software the grant developed. “Software age[s] quickly and badly”; if a grant has failed to take into account continued maintenance, the end result is wasted money and a program that goes quickly obsolete (111). Throughout the book, the author returns to the problems that can occur when project teams separate technological specialists from area experts. It is largely for this reason that van Lit repeatedly suggests that scholars should also familiarize themselves with some digital humanities (DH) tools, such as learning XML markup and the basics of a programming language. The rest of the chapter explores how to do digital paleographic work with the assistance of a vector drawing tool like Adobe Illustrator, which can be used to reconstruct and enlarge mysterious symbols that appear in a text, make it easier to compare their differences, and speculate on their true form.

“Philology: Standards for Digital Editing” talks about different types of standards and programs that can be used in transcribing, editing, analyzing, and publishing a philological study. The chapter questions whether a digital critical edition can really exist. It concludes that an edition can be digital or it can be critical, but for now, it cannot truly be both at once. The chapter also presents snippets of TEI-XML markup and a IIIF manifest, each of which the author explains so that readers will recognize what they are looking at when they encounter examples elsewhere. The snippets of code and markup presented throughout this and the following chapters are useful, though they are perhaps insufficient for those readers who came to the text with more knowledge and were seeking a more robust tutorial. On the other hand, van Lit spends time in each chapter taking a novice through what we might think of as DH basics, such as the importance of archiving and why one should not use a traditional word processing program for

writing code. It is a tricky balance to maintain, and for the most part van Lit succeeds in not alienating DH novices while at the same time presenting new takes on working with digital images for the more experienced digital humanists.

Chapter 6, “Cataloging: From a Dusty Back Room to the World Wide Web,” demonstrates how to compile a catalog of a collection and then make it publicly viewable online. The chapter touches on using an application such as Evernote to keep the catalog organized while collecting data. It also presents brief introductions to HTML, JSON, CSS, and JavaScript with snippets of markup and code showing how the catalog was created. Rather than spending research time learning all of this markup and code, the author suggests learning it in one’s free time, reiterating his suggestion that it is better if the computing and the area-specialized knowledge for a given project are not separate, but are instead combined in one team or one person. This is a reasonable suggestion for those who enjoy learning computer tools. For those scholars who do not, however, it may seem like a large ask. For them, it is probably better simply to think of the process of learning DH tools as, itself, an integral part of research. As digital research and publication become more common, the advancement of scholarly discovery comes to entail more than the simple publication of traditional articles or books.

The last of the practical chapters, “Codicology: Automated Analysis Using Python and OpenCV,” takes a deeper dive into coding with a case study of how the author measured the angles of the fore-edge cover and flap (*lisān*), commonly found on Islamic manuscripts, using digital images. For readers lacking some prior knowledge of Python, this chapter may seem over one’s head. Nonetheless, it gives a good example of what one might do, were one to learn a coding language. This and the previous chapter read a bit like lessons that could have appeared on *The Programming Historian* (<https://programminghistorian.org>) or a similar site. As in all of the previous practical chapters, this chapter lists tools, predominately geared toward Mac users, that the author finds most useful.

The book concludes with two short chapters. Chapter 8 mentions the *Digital Orientalist* blog (<https://digitalorientalist.com/>), which the author started. The blog offers articles, suggestions, and experiments related to working with non-Western digital assets. A postscript of nine short anecdotes

relating to the author's experiences with digital manuscripts closes the book. Generally quite charming, the anecdotes range from recounting the giddiness of being "in the zone" while working away with manuscript images in the middle of the night, to the bureaucratic frustrations of trying to see not a material manuscript, mind, but simply the images of a manuscript held in the Topkapı palace in Istanbul.

Among Digitized Manuscripts is well worth a read. The four practical chapters and the digital appendix are a resource that students and scholars wishing to work more effectively with digital manuscripts will return to as a reference. Although this work is published in the Handbook of Oriental Studies series from Brill, it is applicable to manuscript studies broadly construed and will profitably be read by anyone interested in digital manuscripts. The theoretical analysis of the three worlds of print, manuscript, and digital will undoubtedly be influential as discussions of those three worlds and of our framing of digital asset presentation and archiving continue to develop. As the author says, DH exists on a spectrum; for anyone who works, dabbles, or wishes to improve their knowledge of DH, this book is an encouragement to keep learning and experimenting. Most appealing to anyone considering this book, however, is the fact that it is open-source and freely available to download (<https://brill.com/view/title/56196>), as is the digital appendix with sources, references, and code (<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3371200>).

Beatrice Alai. *Le miniature italiane del Kupferstichkabinett di Berlino*. Florence: Edizioni Polistampa, 2019. 365 pp. (softcover) + 168 color illustrations and 96 black and white illustrations. \$140. ISBN: 978-88-596-2009-9.

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BEATRICE ALAI'S MASTERFUL STUDY of the remarkable collection of Italian illuminations at the Kupferstichkabinett in Berlin allows scholars