

What can Digital Humanities do for a neglected field in Humanities?

A project about the Arabic Pauline manuscripts

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This short paper presents the epistemological implications and results of a Swiss National Fund project 2013-2016: “Les manuscrits arabes des Lettres de Paul de Tarse: un champ de recherche négligé” (research blog: <http://www.unil.ch/nt-arabe>). It was prepared in 2011-2012, and started in 2013. The time span between 2011 and 2016 corresponds to the arrival and the development of the label “Digital Humanities” in Switzerland. Our hypothesis in this short paper is to demonstrate that such a project, focused on a very small and neglected field in Humanities – the Arabic manuscripts of the letters of Paul of Tarsus –, was born, conceived and developed thanks to the digital culture. In this process, the digital aspect was an actor with different roles depending on the steps.

Our sensitivity to the topic itself was born notably thanks to Islamic websites paying attention to Greek as well as Arabic New Testament manuscripts. These websites provide reference material for the discipline of New Testament textual criticism¹ and use images of manuscripts, which are today more and more accessible online, to underline the variants and scribal interventions.² Their purpose is mostly polemical and evokes a long tradition of Islamic polemic approach: the concept of the falsification of the Scriptures (*at-tahrif*). On the other side, several Christian evangelical websites attempt to answer the

¹ E.g. <http://www.islamic-awareness.org/Bible/Text/Mss/>;
<http://blog.decouvrirelislam.net/Home/christianisme/bible/la-falsification-des-manuscrits-du-nouveau-testament/les-modifications-intentionnelles>; last accessed on 04/18/16.

² E.g. http://koogak.blogspot.de/p/blog-page_611.html;
<http://www.kalimasawaa.com/vb/showthread.php?t=23097>; last accessed on 04/18/16.

accusations of *tahrif* and we can observe interactions between apologists from both communities³. Interestingly, Arabic New Testament manuscripts are also used in these discussions (Schulthess 2013; about the general issue, see Clivaz 2013).

This last aspect is not obvious in regard to the situation of the research about the New Testament in Arabic. In fact, Western scholars first took interest in this tradition, but then basically stopped at the end of the 19th century (Vollandt 2013) with very few exceptions (e.g. Graf 1944 which still is the reference work today). In our case, digital media have made worlds visible which had so far been totally ignored by our Western circles of research. Since we started to prepare the project, we were able to observe a global renewed interest, with numerous new publications and projects (e.g. Kashouh 2012; Arbache 2012; Moawad 2014; project <http://www.biblia-arabica.com>).

The starting point of the project were the intercultural dimensions of this pluralistic field such as visible online. The digital junction between contemporary identity issues and ancient New Testament manuscripts was an important argument for demonstrating to potential sponsors of the project the impact of this neglected field, now again active. We have chosen to study the Arabic manuscripts of Pauline letters, especially the *Vaticanus Arabicus 13*, a manuscript playing an important role in the controversial question of the existence of pre-Islamic biblical translations into Arabic. According to the rules still in use in the Humanities, the PhD resulting from this project will be presented in autumn 2016 under the form of a paper book, printed at the moment of the defense, and so a digital edition was not included in the accepted submission of the project.

However, for us it was a logical final supplementary step to initiate a digital scholarly edition of the *1st Letter to the Corinthians* in the Vat. Ar. 13. The acquisition of encoding skills should today be one of the duties of a Humanist PhD student working on texts, a step integrated as new element into the project. It was then a great opportunity to be welcomed at the Swiss Institute of Bioinformatics (VITAL-IT group), where we have begun to develop a digital edition (<http://tarsian.vital-it.ch>). We took advantage of the open source Edition Visualization Tool (EVT) successfully used to build the *Vercelli Book Digitale* project. It enables multi-layers text visualization of XML-encoded text⁴ (Clivaz et al. 2016), facilitating the spread of researcher's work through an easy to deploy and user-friendly online edition interface. We will show a large part of this edition in this short paper's presentation. The edition is progressively completed and should be finished at latest at the end of August.

Beyond all the questions of access and open science, it is all the more necessary to produce an open edition of this manuscript, considered that this neglected field is often misused as a weapon for identities battles. Intercultural meetings and confrontations of diverse perspectives can only occur online, since these worlds are still not joined in the academic sphere. This reason motivates us particularly to apply for the continuation of this fund. We want to further explore the impact of the online research for this field.

³ E.g. http://www.answering-islam.org/authors/wildcat/nt_variants.html; last accessed on 04/18/16. See Schulthess forthcoming.

⁴ We used the first beta version. A new version was released in March 2016. <http://vbd.humnet.unipi.it>; last accessed on 04/18/16.

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